

## **TW: Asphyxiation, death**

The day hangs heavy with soot-colored clouds. It is difficult to tell how long it has been like this, as they make a blindfold over both the moon and sun. Despite the air being moist and pervaded with tiny, suspended droplets, it has not rained. I used to gaze for hours at the white fluff of clouds or the twinkling of stars, but now looking up is always the same.

The crops are withered and dry. Like everything else, their dead leaves are gray. My family has led our clan for generations, so we have been able to grow less frail and sickly, but these times are dire for all. Hopefully we will not have to be like this for long, but I am not planning to sit around and wait for better fortune.

It is the early morning, not that there is much difference between this time and the dead of night. I slip on my shoes and my brother's fur coat, then carefully take my father's iron spear. It is cold and hard and steady, and it feels right in my pale hands. I softly step outside and across the dew-sprinkled, faded grass. I am making my way through the forest, dead leaves crunching like bones under my boots. A plump beaver scampers into a swampy gray-green bog when it sees me, but I do not pursue it. Bogs are not quite land and not quite lake but a muddy in-between. My mother always says that they are borders, not just between clans but between our realm and the next. I have never liked them; they feel as if they are attempting to lure me in. Like a trap a hunter would set.

I spend an hour or so lurking. An hour or so of grim tiredness, dirt-caked boots, and fast fleeing prey. Then, my spear strikes true into a rabbit whose feet were not quick enough. The life drains from it as crimson matts brown fur. I close my eyes and let my words of thanks carry on the breeze to the gods. Carefully I lift it into my game bag, its blood staining the pale fabric.

When I return to my village, they are all assembled out of their houses. My mother, my father, my brother, the butcher, the tailor, the ferrier, all of them. Their somber, sickly eyes are all fixed on me. I try to show them the rabbit I have caught. My mother takes it from me with a hollow thank you. Dread as heavy as a stone at the bottom of a river fills up my chest.

"Mother, what is happening?" I say. She looks away.

My father steps forward. "You know what has befallen our clan." He is diligently holding back tears. "The gods are unhappy. We must not- *can* not go on like this."

One rabbit cannot sustain us. We both know what I have to do. Others have undertaken this duty before, but I never thought it would be me.

"I am sorry, daughter," he says, and I know he means it.

The villagers' eyes are still fixed on me as my mother braids my hair into elaborate knots. I am given finely prepared meat of which I have no appetite for. I eat it anyway. Rope is tied loosely around my wrists.

Then, I take the same path as I did when the morning was new. This time, I am accompanied by a solemn procession of people I have known all my life but who will not say a word to me.

Soon, we are at the bog. It sheds a shimmering light and I see something move just beneath the surface. My trembling fear is mixed with a strange anticipation. My feet are heavy as stones as I walk, agonizingly slow. I am caught off guard when I stumble into the murky water, my foot no longer supported by the comforting solidity of the mossy ground. I keep walking though, sinking deeper into my fate. The warmth embraces me in a way I have never felt before. Before my eyes slip below the surface, I look back. A hint of sun is peeking from behind a gray cloud. As I smile, water fills my mouth with the taste of earth. It seeps into my lungs, and I want to hack it up but it is everywhere, it is all I can see and feel. The swamp is filling me, claiming me. My very veins are bursting with it. My chest burns with scorching pain that grows the more I am without air. There is no up, no down, only the clutch of the bog.

With my last strained, painful gasp of breath, I whisper a prayer for my people. The hazy browns and greens and flashes of light fade. My vision is not black, it is the absence of any light or presence. And then even the lack of vision fades as my life is washed away.

Goodbye.