

A HERO SAVES A DAMSEL

Years ago, Netta and Ig would sneak out-fence every night once Ig smelled sunset coming—Netta would follow with her crossbow while Ig, ahead in his muffle-clothes, sniffed for antlers. They'd dash to the old elm, which was at least six doe-leaps east, and climb in a frenzy of hushed giggles. They'd squeeze onto the bench in the narrow deer blind Brit had built before either of them were even born; and Ig would whisper scent drills to Netta while the eagle, who still had all her talons then, snatched bats from the purpling sky.

Now, Netta is sitting still and alone—but no, don't think of Ig—in the blind. She inhales through her uncovered nose, then exhales into the handkerchief tied over her mouth. She'll smell anything coming, but the handkerchief hides track of her breath.

They still call this *keeping watch*, which Brit says is left over from when people sensed most with their eyes. Once, Ig tried to call it *keeping smell*. Brit tucked the quilt tight under his chin and that made it sound like he was trying not to shit his pants. And then Netta said that was about accurate anyway, and though they all laughed—even Ig, sheepishly—Netta had felt guilty for saying it out loud. Or maybe the guilt is new now that Ig's gone, even though Brit says guilt smells like humans, and smelling human leaves you starving or eaten.

Netta shifts her boot to let her mom's Sig Sauer settle. The Sig, like Ig's Ruger and Brit's bullpup, is impractical for its noise and acrid smoke, only good for warning others when there's no chance for yourself. But the gun makes a good show for travelers, especially men who came up in the old world and still think of safety as power and power as detonation. Even

when Brit explains that a gunshot might save them from one antler but bring ten more, those men prefer to hunker deeper into what they know.

That kind refuse to believe a woman has it in her DNA to survive what makes a man literally lose bits of himself until he's nothing but a head muttering in the mud; the kind who sit rifle-straight on their bedrolls, monitoring Netta and Brit while other travelers sleep; who whisper to each other that wild feminists made the Chronic in a lab to rid the world of human males. These rumors sound crazy; problem being, they're so crazy that lesser rumors—forest women who kill travelers to steal and stockpile gold for when the old markets return—seem too plausible by comparison.

When the weather's clear enough for a signal, Brit listens to conspiracy streams with a mug of apple whiskey, chuckling at her imaginary piles of gold. "Yeah," she mutters, "Nothing I love more than soft, impractical metal."

Today, the blind is humid. A mosquito wanders across Netta's bowhand. The eagle looks in Netta's direction and, Netta feels, makes eye contact, as if she wants Netta to know she disapproves of her sitting in the safety of the treetop while Brit is exposed on the ground and Ig—well, Ig is wherever Ig is.

When Ig and Netta were kids—young enough to still share the same small bedroom—each would crawl into their own bunk, and Brit would sit on the knotty rag rug and tell them movies.

Movies were from the old world; people traded paper money to sit in padded chairs and watch stories in large, dark rooms full of strangers. Brit said she'd hire something called a babysitter almost every week and go to a movie. She'd hold her husband's hand—the most Brit ever said of a husband—while they drank sugar water and ate puffed corn, pretending the moving pictures made of light and sound were real, which made her husband's cool hand and the salted corn in her mouth feel all the more real.

Brit told Netta and Ig a dozen movies and retold the ones they asked to hear again and again. Brit's movies all ended the same: A hero saved a damsel. A villain fell.

Netta's forehead tickles with sweat. She dabs it with a muffle-scented handkerchief to keep the tang of her worry from the air.

To still her mind, Netta will often tell herself movies. Whatever's waiting in the forest—antlers drooling Chronic ooze but also Ig, also Netta's shame at sending him there—has nothing to do with whether the Pretty Woman manages to buy a dress from those boutique bitches, nothing to do with how beautiful the Pretty Woman looks eating dinner with Richardgear indoors at a machine-made table.

Netta shifts her weight as much as the bench will tolerate without creaking, squeezes the familiar soreness of her back muscles. She's noticed that in Brit's movies, women usually get themselves into danger and then go limp until it's time to be rescued. She once said as much to Ig, who agreed—but with an eager lilt in his voice that Netta found grating.

Before the Chronic, men died, but almost never from a deer attack; and they certainly never came back as mumbling, flesh-starved versions of themselves. Back then, if you felled a buck, he didn't rise back up to spear you with his antlers. Back then people would sit in blinds, not to avoid deer, but to shoot and eat them. Deer were easy kills if you could catch them standing still, but they could smell as easy as wildfire spreads. If they caught even a whiff of soap, they'd bolt, and you'd have to make do with something called hot dogs.

A branch shifts at the eastern edge of the clearing. With her right hand, Netta squeezes her binoc until the spot comes into focus but sees nothing, smells no new creatures. Brit should be back already. So far this morning, Netta has smelled a few rabbits (grass breath and pellet shit); plus a hawk (feather musk, mouse-blood breath); even a doe (mud-and-shit-laced hooves, dew-wet hide) who inched toward the clearing, nose lifted, then backed away.

No antlers, though, which makes Netta's hands itch. By now, she should have smelled at least one. The smell of antlers—black Chronic ooze, plus whatever's left of who they've eaten—tells her which direction to face. Now Netta finds herself remembering antler smell to clear her mind and settle her belly. Better than remembering how soft and safe she felt listening to Ig tell his own versions of Brit's movies in the flannel-scented darkness of their room.

She catches a whiff of mint and fat and lye. If Netta stood up, she could see the soap pile to the south; but even sitting, she finds its wintergreen-and-cream scent: hundreds of soap bars heaped and melted over years into a swirl of graying pinks and greens; plus whole bars where Brit scatters new ones to keep the track strong. She and Netta's mother made the soap pile to draw antlers away from the home fence and toward the humans they thought soap signified. Brit, ever strategically pessimistic, cut underbranches from a large cottonwood to create climbing lattices in case any woman was nearby when a full herd arrived; and Netta's mother, ever believing in whatever Brit found impossible, dug a pit three-foot deep for the antlers to fall into.

When Netta was small, she would nestle high in the cottonwood and watch her mother lure antlers into the pit and burn them on the spot, tidy as tea cakes (whatever those were). But this many generations of deer later, it seems bucks and the antlers they become have begun to learn that soap is more likely decoy than person.

Still, the rule remains: men steer clear of the soap pile without female protection. The only place men roam unescorted is inside the fence that rings Brit's property.

Netta loves sitting inside the fence—the fence that means she can relax her watch, that keeps the house and garden and shed and all three of them safe but also makes—made—Ig furious. Netta can't remember the house she lived in with her parents before the city wall fell, but she was old enough to sense

the structure of this fence as it was being built, her mother's reluctant resignation rubbing up against Brit's eager resolve over it. Netta remembers clearly Ig's angry bewilderment when Brit told him not to leave the fence without a woman. Netta and Ig still snuck out to the blind for a time after that. After Netta's mother died, though, Netta refused to go with Ig; and Ig, whether for fear or loyalty, stayed in-fence too. From then on, Ig fixated on the fence—testing the steel of the girders, replacing split slats, mixing muffle for its scent capsules. He'd spend hours breathing deep and staring at the light-dappled surface of the fence as if it was a window to everything happening in the forest.

Netta touches the Sig, finger-counts the arrows in her quiver, and tries to picture Pretty Woman strutting down Rodeo Drive Baby in a new dress and wide-brimmed hat, but the movie won't stick. Richardgear's smile melts into a rotting version of the pained expression on Ig's face the last time Netta saw him whole.

Netta notices a muted waft of sandalwood. She clicks the binoc into focus.

Brit emerges at the northeast end of the clearing. Netta exhales relief even as she feels her heart quiver.

Two men stumble after Brit—the balding one is pink-faced, the other has all but his chin shaded by a brimmed cap. The pinkish man is elder—more years even than Brit—and wears an old-timey, button-down shirt under a ragged suit jacket. This is the kind of clothing Brit says Richardgear wore in the movies—the kind men all wore—with a deep V to show the sheen of the tapered, knotted cloth that hung from their necks; and deep pockets to hold pens and thick folds of paper money, which was the old-world version of the gold his type think Netta and Brit and forest women like them will kill him for.

The suited man surveys the clearing with an appraising squint. The younger man—Netta decides to call him the Hat—tilts his head to look at the sky, and Netta sees that he

is younger than her. Ig's age, maybe: done growing but still slender, like a new pine. Strips of sweaty hair run palely down the Hat's cheeks. Brit is squinting in Netta's direction, waiting.

Netta holds her palm up—all clear—and Brit, nodding once with her chin, steps into the clearing.

Netta nocks an arrow. Antlers are trigger-quick. No scent doesn't prove none nearby.

Trotting ahead of the Hat and the Suit, Brit sweeps the bullpup at her shoulder left, right. Brit and the Hat cross swiftly despite their bulging packs; the Suit lumbers behind. Netta can see a dusky stain of muffle scent—moss mud, wood ash, pulped leaves and grass, plus a touch of whatever stink Brit finds handy (a smear of rot-dead squirrel, maybe bear scat)—darkening everyone's backs, necks and armpits. It takes time for city people to get used to the smell; Brit no doubt had to get stern for them to go along with it.

Ig took to scent early and was always better at it than Netta. Even as her sense of smell got stronger with each antler bite, Ig remained better at the nuance of it. Ig mixed his own muffle, experimenting with ingredients, aging techniques, and application methods. He begged Netta to wear his muffle on the walk and watch and asked her detailed questions when she returned, scribbling notes with a pencil nib in an ancient, pink diary he scavenged from Brit's trunk. Netta seldom managed to hide her annoyance at his questions. It was enough to spend days chopping antlers into bits and burning their heads to save clumsy men one end of the forest to the other—she didn't want to come home and linger in it.

When Brit and the men cross the clearing's three-quarter mark, Netta stows her arrow, shoulders her bow, and slides down the exit rope. She lands carefully, toes-first and silent on the grass. She inhales—and smells an antler's rot-hot, wet breath. She whirls, machete out.

Brit has told her about slow-motion movie shots, when the camera slows and what should take but a second expands across the screen in lithe detail. That's how Netta sees the

antler now: The deer he was is still apparent in his silhouette, but the smell of him, the blackened edges of his torn hide, reveal a new creature: Strips of flesh and tendon swing like lazy ribbons from his rack. He has one nostril left, and it flares. His teeth, blunt and yellow, sneer where his upper lip used to be. He lurches forward, snapping. Netta stabs her machete as he thrashes his head. His pupils lock on her, roll back, lock again. The antler's eye-whites are embroidered with blood, but his oblong pupils are huge and black.

When Netta and Ig were young and she woke from nightmares too shaken to go back to sleep, Ig would tie a cord around his neck in something called a half-windsor and act out his own version of *Pretty Woman* in the gray light of their bedroom. Netta watched him sign imaginary papers with his short pencil and then, with a magnanimous sweep of his arm, offer *Pretty Woman* (a birch branch Ig draped fashionably in a curtain) a new dress. In her slumbery stupor, Netta almost forgot the forest was full of gurgling antlers and muttering, infected men. Ig's voice was a crackling whisper as he grabbed birch-branch *Pretty Woman* around the waist. His eye in the dark had been mostly pupil. When Ig ran away from Netta into the forest last week, it was the same.

But now, she must stop thinking of Ig because she's beneath the blind's maple with Brit, and no matter how her stomach flips at how Brit refuses to meet her eye, it's Netta's job to convey these two men safely to the big lake.

The antler, pinned by his neck to the maple, wheezes and gnaws what's left of his lower lip. Netta's machete is dark with tar-thick Chronic ooze. The Hat is on his knees, hand clamped over his wrist, blood bubbling between his fingers. Netta looks him in the eye and sets her face in a smile light as mercy.

Richardgear worked with his evil lawyer to buy other men's businesses, chop them apart, and sell them to still more men's businesses. But the *Pretty Woman* was a business of one. When the lawyer tried to break her into pieces, Richardgear became a hero by firing him before he could cut her into pieces. Netta

imagined the hole in lawyer's neck and his blood seeping tarry, thick, and slow.

The blood between the Hat's fingers now is pouring out its red scent, fast and hot. The Hat looks confused. "It couldn't've bit me. We paid for protection." It's not a question, but he sounds like he's asking.

Netta's grateful she won't have time to answer. From behind, Brit grips the Hat, chin in one palm and temple in the other, and snaps his neck. She tilts her head toward Netta, which means she wants Netta to see to the Suit. Travelers never react well when Brit takes an infected man out. One or two travelers go crazy with gold-lust or paranoia—sometimes both—every season, threaten Netta with a stolen knife or foraged arrow. Brit has a scar under her ear from a decade back when one tried to slit her throat while she was taking a shit.

The Suit, hands on his knees, reeks of fear-sweat. If he vomits, he'll attract every antler in the forest before they lift their packs. Netta hands him her canteen. "Just one swallow." She whispers it: No voices outside the fence. She rubs his shoulder—"You're fine, man"—and feels the wet heat of his thin cotton shirt.

So that's what attracted the antler. The Suit got winded and hot carrying nothing, peeled off his jacket—and with it, Brit's muffle scent. Netta yanks the jacket from his fist. She drapes it across his shoulders.

A week ago—could it be only a week?—Netta returned from the watch. She'd sustained four bites killing two antlers. It was daybreak by the time she got in-fence. She dropped her bow and quiver in the dirt and sat down in the garden with a squirrel she'd found in her snare trap. While Netta pierced the dead squirrel at his groin with her knife-tip, Ig emerged from his shed. He'd mounted an antler rack to a hat that strapped under his chin—a 10-pointer marbled with Chronic ooze and dirt. He scraped the tines against the columns of the fence—a better layer of muffle, he'd said. Netta would have to do the outside, he'd said. Only once a month or so, he'd said. And

she'd told him she'd cut him like the squirrel if he tried to make her put on that stupid hat, and though she knew she should regret it, the Chronic was new in her blood—it had to be the Chronic—so the words felt right.

Ig kept at her, voice rising, and she grabbed a spent shell casing from the ground and lobbed it at the rack. It was a casual throw, something she'd done in a teasing, almost friendly way a thousand times. But the shell missed, ricocheted off the fence, sped up and hit Ig square in the eye.

He didn't yell. He covered the eye with the flat of his palm, stared at her with his other eye for a long, lip-twitching breath. And then he ran—through the gate, still in his antler hat, pausing only to call her a name Brit would have clocked him for but Netta now feels certain she deserved. Netta took a second to get up—it couldn't have been more than that, could it?—but she did chase after him. She did.

Ig was gone by the time she got out-fence. She left the gate swinging and hadn't realized she had no weapon but the Sig in her boot until she saw an antler not four doe-leaps up the trail. Rather than summon every antler in the forest, she'd turned her back even as the antler trained his rack in the direction Ig must have run. By the time she returned with her bow, he was gone. She found Ig an hour later near the soap pile, high in the cottonwood tree. The bite on his leg was already purpling.

The antler Netta's pinned to the tree is shrieking, thundering his hooves futilely against the ground. Brit shoots an arrow through his red eye into his brain, and his legs go still. His gnashing slows but doesn't stop. She ties a strip of cloth tight around his snout for good measure. The Suit is still doubled over, but at least he's breathing through his nose.

Netta inhales deep. It's been three full days since she cut Ig's ropes while Brit was in back sharpening her machete, and yet the world still smells of ooze and mud and sweat with a trace of soap; the eagle is still in her elm. When Netta glances up at her, she flies away.

The movies Brit tells are all self-contained worlds, each

with its own rules: No kissing on the mouth. Don't fall asleep. Don't cross the streams. Don't feed them after midnight. The rules are clear. The hero breaks them.

Brit has rules of her own: Don't wash with soap. Don't go out-fence in clothes that are too clean or too dirty. Don't mix anything an antler might hunger for in your muffle. Brit says rules are the reason she survived when all but a few cities crumpled.

It isn't until Netta feels the strip of soft cotton Brit wraps around her arm that she realizes The Hat wasn't the only one bitten. Netta winces as Brit tightens a knot right over the wound. When Brit pulls a can from her pack and scoops muffle across the bandage, she doesn't check Netta's expression for pain as she usually would. She hasn't forgiven Netta yet. Netta doesn't want her to.

Netta tries to not remember the days after Ig got bitten—still, the memories come like slow motion: Roast rabbit and stewed apples sprinkled with the last of Brit's cinnamon; Ig's face purpling. Netta hadn't been able to bring herself to speak, even to say she was sorry. Ig, like all infected men, started forgetting words within the day—soon after, nothing but a few of his most-spoken phrases were left. When Netta brought him a bowl of apple mush, Ig mumbled “Look, Brit – Look, Brit – Look, Brit” and hand-scooped the sticky mess into his mouth. At least Ig still smelled like the constructed world, so Netta sat close to him and kept the Sig in pieces, cleaning it more thoroughly than even her mother had. She tilted her head toward Ig but didn't touch him. She inhaled.

Brit, for her part, mostly shrunk from them. When she did come close, she touched Ig more than she had since he and Netta were kids, ruffled his hair or touched his shoulder when she walked by—then drew her hand away as from a fire. She kept his leg clean and salved, ignoring his repetitive cursing as she wrapped and rewrapped his leg as if it had a chance of healing.

Brit hasn't said more than three words to Netta since. Now,

she only stares for a beat into Netta's eyes, brows raised, which means they have to hurry now because more antlers will come leaping for this smelly townie.

Brit swings her machete through the antler's neck below Netta's blade. His body drops free, and when Netta retrieves her machete, his head falls. She cleans her blade on the grass and sheathes it. The antler works his mouth against the tape, pokes a moon-sliver of tongue between rotting teeth but manages only a muted growl. Brit loops a cord around the antler's rack and holds it toward Netta, but Netta instead drops to her knees beside the Hat—or the lump of silent meat that used to be the Hat. She ties a muffle cloth over his hands and another around his face, then hoists his body across her shoulders and stands up. He's heavy.

Netta, taking the rear flank, studies the back of the Suit's pink head. Her limbs, alight with the antler's Chronic, twitch: she could unsheathe her machete and slice the Suit to his spinal cord without so much as upsetting the Hat from her shoulders. But Netta's been bitten enough that with a single bite's-worth of Chronic fresh in her blood, she'll take more than her share at supper, sure, and if Ig were there to tease, her teasing would twist a bit mean, but she has a trick to hold the full-on frenzy still: She imagines herself as the Pretty Woman near the end of the movie, after Richardgear offered her apartments, dresses, pancakes with butter and fruit. The Pretty Woman ached to say yes. Who wouldn't? (If Netta closes her eyes and holds very still, she thinks she can remember the taste of pineapple.) Brit said that Pretty Woman's hair was the color of maple leaves before they fall to winter, that she wore shiny boots that went over her knees. Netta's pictures the Pretty Woman swinging a pack full of carefully wrapped pineapples and machine-stitched dresses over her shoulder and walking weaponless in the open air toward whatever the hell she wants.

Netta feels the rage in her limbs soften some. She focuses on the wind. She skips over Brit's scent—trail muffle hiding doe jerky and the sandalwood soap Brit refuses to give up—to

concentrate on the Suit: sweat and morels and something high-pitched and bitter. If Ig were there, he'd know what. But it's just Netta and Brit, which feels, now, like being alone. The Hat's dead hands bounce against Netta's butt. She inhales again. The Suit has bread in his pocket; he's pissed himself.

Netta has always been best at catching smells that can scent her position to an antler: shoe rubber, sawdust, soap. Anything blade-cut or cooked. Ig, inside the fence, is best at anything that gives track of antlers approaching—rotting muscle; thickened blood; exposed bone. But in truth Ig can identify just about anything, even scents from before: toothpaste, deodorant, coins. Glue and machined sugar and something called vinyl—a leather that melts in fire, what *Pretty Woman's* boots were made of. Ig can even smell things a human shouldn't, like the difference between fear and yearning so old it hurts. At least that's what he says. Ig is also good at making bullshit sound real. Or he used to be.

The Suit inhales, Netta can tell, just for the air of it. Brit inhales too, and Netta sees by her frown that she's also noticed the Suit's bread-and-piss-and-fear scent bellowing their location to anything sniffing. Brit stops the Suit with a raised hand and motions for Netta to go on without them. She'll probably make the Suit eat the bread and slap mud over the wet of his pants.

The soap pile, and the burn pit next to it, sits ten doe-leaps north-northeast. When Netta arrives, three vultures are kettling overhead. Netta's shoulders relax at the sight of them teetering up the thermal winds, their beaks clever enough to discern from a great height which of the dead are likely to rise back up biting. They favor the soap pile, full as it is of the dead that are dead enough to be eaten.

Squatting as low as she can, Netta releases the Hat's body into the burn pit, which is laced with carbon-black ash and fallen leaves. The burst corpse of a fox lolls on its side, one eye gone, the other trailing out on a tangle of nerve and muscle.

When Brit arrives, they'll add the antler head and set fire to all three bodies, then walk The Suit the fifty-odd miles to the boatwoman who'll ferry him across Superior. With a good wind and no bandits, he'll be inside Toronto in two days. As usual, Netta wonders briefly what it's like to live inside thick walls with no antlers, where men walk unescorted, where even cows are protected from infection—but Brit says there's no use wondering when they couldn't afford a pass to enter—much less to live inside—unless they actually did kill travelers for their nonexistent gold.

Netta shuts her eyes and inhales, searching for what's keeping three vultures from a true-dead fox. She tracks the fox's blood and bile first, and beyond it she finds the same cedar and yellow birch. Then doe droppings and something made but use-worn: shoe rubber. And then her eyes snap open: Chronic ooze. She reaches for the Sig in her boot—stupid, but the Chronic will leave you stupid—and finds it missing. She pulls her bow. Trying to nock an arrow, her hands threaten tremble, so she does as Brit taught her: a breath for a fear and then one step forward. Inhale: An antler, rack dripping with blood and torn flesh. Exhale and nock. Inhale: Her father, oozing and purpled, repeating *Hey beautiful—Hey beautiful—Hey beautiful* as he snatched their dog by the rough. Exhale and rise, slowly, back against a house-thick maple. Inhale: Her mother, dish soap dripping down her hair as she runs toward three antlers, yelling, *Netta, climb!* Exhale and draw the bowstring back. Inhale: Ig when she last saw him, cut ropes falling from his wrists, cheek torn and flapping near his nose, one eye sunk into his skull.

Netta smells a musky, wood-split scent. She knows she shouldn't lean on anything unreliable as hearing; still, she listens around her own, speedy heart, and catches a short, lung-wet wheeze followed by a jangling scrape. It's coming from the other side of the maple. Wheeze/scrape. Wheeze/scrape. Closer.

Netta rounds the maple in one swift motion, bow up.

It's Ig.

Or an Ig-shaped thing, its arm twisted in a string of cans that long-ago Ig wound around the maple both to entangle and to warn of approaching antlers. The Ig-thing is facing Netta. His jaw splays to the side in what could be a lopsided grin. Netta shuffles toward him until she could touch the space where his nose used to be with the tip of her arrow. She feels the bowstring brush her lip.

The Ig-thing is whispering. They all keep talking after they change, keep talking right up until the fire crumbles them into ash: phrases they used most when they were still men. The whisper is a surprise, though, Brit's rules so rutted into Ig's brain that even this Ig-thing can't speak with his full voice outence. Netta remembers that last thing Ig said to her before he ran off, and she's glad she can't make out what the Ig-thing is saying now.

Ig-thing swipes his free hand toward her breasts, but she hollows back. The wire holds him. He yanks against it. Something in his shoulder snaps. His face registers no pain. But the eye he has left is still Ig's: the green-brown of a duckweed-burdened pond.

Under the ooze, he still smells like dried apples and sawdust and flannel.

"Igs." It isn't even a whisper. Calling the Ig-thing by Ig's name feels off, like trying to aim an arrow in a nightmare.

Netta dreamed once that the damsel Pretty Woman wanted to buy a crossbow from the Rodeo Drive Baby bitches, but when she tried to pay with Richardgear's credit card, her hands turned into machetes. Everything she touched, she chopped in two. She tried to caress Richardgear's heroic jaw but instead sawed him into two children with knives for hands. When they tried to hug Pretty Woman, they sliced through her flimsy dress, her flimsy skin. Netta had woken grateful to return to the real world what to kill and what to keep was always clear.

The Ig-thing continues to whisper. Netta lets the bowstring go slack but keeps her bow raised, holding the arrow in place

with her bow hand. She uses her free hand to pull her machete and leans toward him, afraid of what she'll hear when she gets close enough to understand his whispers. Netta cuts the mangled arm from The Ig-thing's body. He lurches toward, then away from Netta's bow. She lets the bow drop to her side. No blood in the Ig-Thing's wound, only a trail of black ooze that creeps down his torso. The Ig-Thing inhales wetly, takes a step toward the arm dangling from the can trap.

Netta inhales slow. She smells ooze like rotting fruit and burnt tar. She closes her eyes, lifts her head and inhales again: Ig's apples and wood-dust and flannel mixed with vegetation and antler ooze. Plus soap: lye and tallow in mint and lavender; acrid, antique chemicals. She tilts her nose a quarter-inch higher and finds bark, live leaves—and clouds growing heavy with snow. Netta stands very still, chin up, neck stretched and exposed.

The Ig-thing crushes scrub-bush and ferns with its rickety step. The Chronic-ooze Ig scent moves closer. The Chronic won't kill Netta, but nothing alive can survive an artery bite. She can hear the Ig-thing's ragged breath. "Good shot, Net—Good shot, Net" Ig whispers. Netta barely lets her lungs expand on the inhale; she centers on the apples-and-cloth Ig scent. She waits to feel the Ig-thing's teeth on her skin.

Ground leaves crackle. A dry twig splints. Netta stiffens her legs against their instinct to break for the safety of a treetop; she takes a longer breath in. The Ig scent, and the Ig-thing scent too, is fainter. She opens her eyes. Ferns close around the Ig-thing as he shambles away.

Netta could probably explain, if she let herself think about Ig's last day as himself, why she took him outside when she was supposed to stay locked in the shed with him. Brit was off sharpening her machete, gathering herself for the goodbye, and Netta was tasked with riling the monster in Ig enough that it would be as much as possible like killing any Chronic-addled antler.

Every night since, when Netta closes her eyes, she sees her

own hands repeating what they did then: opening the fence gate, spearing an arrow through a bloody rabbit carcass. Even when she dreams of it, Netta focuses only on her hands, her blood-darkened nailbeds, the antler tooth-shaped scabs on her knuckles—anything to avoid seeing how the Ig-thing didn't even look at her before lumbering after that rabbit flying like a ragged bird into the forest.

Here at the burn pit, the smell of death-ash is getting stronger as the day heats. Still, Netta catches a new, muffled whiff of sandalwood followed by mud, piss and mildewing wool.

Brit and the Suit step into the clearing. The Suit is carrying the antler head, which still growls through its bound teeth.

Brit closes the space between her and Netta in two long strides, one hand flared toward the Ig-thing's abandoned arm still twitching against the maple trunk. Brit's whisper quivers in the wind: "You let him run again." It isn't a question. Her mouth is no more than a pistol-length from Netta's face.

The Suit, at the edge of the burn pit, drops the antler head next to the Hat and the fox. He wrinkles his nose at the smell of them.

Brit has her flint poised to spark when Netta realizes the Suit is tapping her mother's Sig against his thigh. He shakes his head like he's trying to get water out of his ear but speaks with a casual lilt. Netta hates it when the crazy ones get calm.

"He was a good kid," The Suit says and lifts the Sig to Brit's temple. "You're not going to burn him." His index finger is shaking on the trigger. Brit lifts both hands toward her ears, still holding her flint and tinder.

The Suit juts his chin toward Netta and says "The bow if you please, young lady."

Netta bends at the hip, eyes locked on Brit, and lets her bow drop into the burn pit. She couldn't draw fast enough against the Sig anyway. The main thing is to keep the Suit from firing. Netta could climb fast enough to escape the swarm of antlers a gunshot would bring, but Brit would likely get shot or

bit—not that she'd admit it. Netta takes two steps back. Brit's face is calm, but sweat glistens her upper lip.

"He'll wake up any second," Netta whispers, gesturing at the faceless Hat, "and we'll have to take him out again."

The Suit doesn't look at her, and his voice is quiet: "Murder him again, you mean." He coughs a little laugh. "Double homicide."

He kicks a mound of dirt. "You killed my boy. You owe me." His stance is loose, but the knuckles gripping the Sig are white. "I know about the gold," he says, "so dig."

Netta squints a question at Brit—to the Suit, she hopes, it looks like she's trying not to cry. Brit smiles her customer service smile. "Go ahead, Net. Dig it up." Kneeling, Netta plunges her fingers into dirt that covers nothing but burnt rabbit bones, maybe some old soap slivers. She hopes this particular spot hasn't been a latrine.

The Suit grabs Brit by the chin and pushes the Sig's muzzle into her cheek. He doesn't look angry. His eyelids are relaxed, and he's smirking.

In another of Netta's dreams, after Richardgear cut the lawyer out of his business, the damsel Pretty Woman threw her crossbow at Richardgear's head. She threw her arrows, threatened him with fire on a stick. Leave me alone, she said. But Richardgear had a duty to save the damsel, so he kept saving her and saving her. Even when she begged him to stop he saved her because that's how movies were supposed to end.

Netta pulls handful after handful of dirt and dead leaves and bone fragments from the ground. She checks the Suit from the corner of her eye. At some point, he'll loosen his grip. They most always do.

The quicks of her fingernails ache from being pierced by seeds and sticks. She sits back into her heels and risks a full-on look at the Suit. He's still holding Brit by the chin when Netta smells a new, familiar smell.

What happens next, Netta feels she's watching from outside of her body, like a movie. She hears a growl.

Tearing.

In slow motion, Brit bites the Suit's gun hand, and the Sig spins a leisurely, tight circle through the air until it thunks into a tumble of soap. The Suit's eyes bulge, his mouth yelps. Brit falls to the ground between Netta and the Suit; Netta's own hand grabs the Sig. Why doesn't the Suit dive for the pistol? Why won't he stop caterwauling? Why can she hear the Ig-thing's voice, louder now—"Good shot, Net - Good shot, Net, - Good Shot, Net."—so clear it's like he's standing in the clearing with them. Netta watches herself aim the Sig at the Suit's head. Then she sees what's got the Suit screaming.

Ig.

Netta closes her eyes.

She forces herself to think only of one winter when she and Ig were barely teenagers when it had been so cold the antlers froze where they stood, which allowed Netta and Brit and even Ig to walk freely, beheading each one like trees that shrieked against the ax. Netta remembers Ig in the snow, leaps and leaps away but still safe. He looked, she thought, like a strong little bird: body taut and eyes alert, taking long breaths of cold sky.

Netta opens her eyes. The Ig-thing has latched itself onto the Suit's back, clamped its remaining arm around the Suit's chest, wrapped both legs around the Suit's waist. One fleshless kneecap glows through torn trousers. The Ig-thing is gnawing on the Suit's neck. Blood spurts around its head, puddles in the grass. The Suit has seconds.

Netta checks the Sig chamber: bullet. She looks to Brit. A pale line of dried tears stripes each of her cheeks. Brit moves only her eyes to look at the Ig-thing, then to the gun, then to the cottonwood swaying it's high, safe branches just seconds to the left. Brit nods the smallest nod. She thinks they'll be able to make it. She thinks Ig is worth the risk of the gun.

Netta grabs Brit's hand, and Brit squeezes back. The Suit crumples at the knees, eyes open and motionless. Netta lifts the Sig shoulder-high and centers it on Ig's face. She leans into Brit's grip and crouches, gun arm steady. She can hold this

position until Ig finishes the Suit and looks up. She ignores all other scents and inhales only apples and flannel and sawdust. She waits for Ig to smell her.