

pigeon is a reason to rest, to let Bear sort it all out. The fire. The bird carcass. He hands me small tender strips of meat. Like I'm a little child.

The throbbing in my foot is worse now. Last night, though I desperately wanted to shut my eyes and escape from it all, I'd forced myself to take off the bandage. I did it when Bear was asleep. He'd already seen enough. I had to look though, at the deep gash, the torn, ragged flesh. I'm sure the trap's teeth made it right down to the bone. I knew I should somehow be cleaning out the wound, but when I tried it started bleeding again. I smothered it with our antiseptic balm instead and bandaged it back up.

We should be moving on. We shouldn't be in one place too long, so near water. That's been our strategy for days, to stay clear of drones, and it's worked. But my foot doesn't feel like it can take any weight at all now. When Bear points out a thicket and suggests staying here for the rest of the day, I nod, grateful.

"You're hot, Ju!" Bear says in the night, waking me.

I stare at him. "What do you mean? I'm freezing."

"You're not," he says, insistent. "You're really hot. You're sweating."

I'm about to say that that's impossible, but it's not. My body's wet with sweat and when I touch my forehead I can feel it – the heat coming off me. I'm burning up.

"Is it the disease?" Bear asks, his bottom lip wobbling.

"No." I know what it is. It's the trap – I saw the dirt and the rust. You couldn't not get an infection from that.

"You need more medicine!"

"I'll take more. Don't worry." I'm already on the maximum dose of the antibiotics, but I take more anyway. A couple of tablets, washed down by all the water we have left, then I'm pulled back down to sleep.

When it's light, Bear feeds me more tablets and water too, even though I thought we'd run out, and then somehow he gets me walking – right foot, dragging my left foot after. I feel strangely light, dangerously light, like there's nothing to weigh me down.

"My bag," I mutter. "Why are you carrying my bag? You're too little."

"I'm not, Ju," Bear says and we stumble on, and my blood, for all its disease resistance, is thick and slow and slushes around my head.

I keep having to stop. One time, after a little while, I realize Bear's gone. Gone from sight, though all the bags are still here.

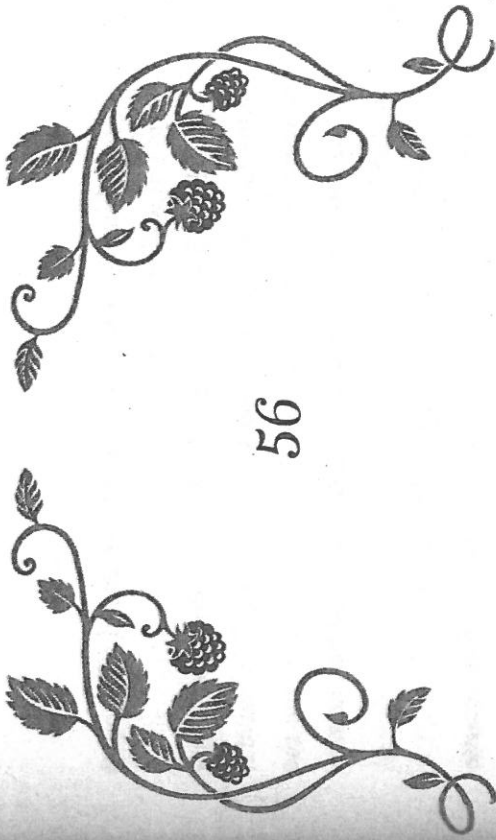
It's the clatter of metal that wakes me. Bear's putting both rucksacks on, one back, one front, with the pans hanging from them. *My little tin man*. I hear Annie Rose's voice, back in our Palm House, as clear as day.

Bear's face is flushed. "I found a cave! I saw it on the GPS and I went to find it. It's just up there, Ju. Can you walk?"

"A cave?"

"A shelter," he says. "A cavern," and I know I'm meant to continue, find some new word to carry on the game, only everything is muddled and I think we've got there already because the ground is hard and rocky and it's dark.

Somewhere ahead there's an opening. The mouth of the cave. This round circle of light that's drawing me in.



In my head, we're still walking. The pulse of each footfall, one after another. In my head it's still going, still beating on, and Bear's voice too. *How many miles, Juniper?*

When I open my eyes, in a moment of lucidity, the scene is still the same. Stuck. We haven't moved on. The rocky ceiling, the slate floor like our kitchen back home. The dark pool of water from which Ghost drinks and the disc of light behind. We found our lair and Emily is here. My beautiful rag doll, Emily. Her dress like a meadow. How can that be? "I brought her for you," Bear says shyly. "I had her in my rucksack. She was a present. For when we got to Ennerdale. I thought you'd want her."

"I would. I do," I murmur.

Ennerdale. For when we got there.

The lucidity of all this. Is that the right word? The clarity. The clearness. The stillness.

Everything is so still. The beat has stopped. Of course we're not walking any more.

"Ju, drink. You need to drink." Bear's holding up a bottle to my lips and the liquid pours down my throat, clean and reviving. This isn't cave water. He dutifully feeds me the tablets too, and more strips of meat and little fish he says are minnow.

"I made a spear, Ju. Like I said I would. It worked."

He's so pleased and proud. I try to eat the fish because I want Bear to smile again, but really it's just the water I want.

Outside the cave, there's a tree. It's got brown leaves on but I watch them fall. Each time it gets light, I watch them fall and then one day the tree is bare. It's right down to the bone and the branches are white.

"Snow, Juniper. Like in the globe. In the Emporium." Bear's holding my hand, squeezing it tight.

"Snow?"

"I'm cold, Ju." He's crying.

I don't know what to say because I've forgotten what cold is. It feels like my whole body's on fire.

"We're like real bears. Hibernating." Bear says and I pull him up against me.

Maybe that's what we're doing, Hibernating. In our cave. Our cavern. Our den.

"Bear," I say in a sudden wakefulness. "You mustn't

forget the GPS. When you carry on." I should have let him use it. Practise.

"Don't, Ju! Don't say that."

"And the rifle. You have to keep the rifle ready. It's important."

"It's not important. I'm staying with you," Bear says fiercely and he presses his fists over his ears.

Ghost sleeps right up against us, keeping us warm. Sometimes she purrs. It's meant to mean a cat's happy, but I don't think it means happy. It's just reassurance.

Our hunting cat. She's keeping Bear alive. That was my job but I can't do it any more.

Once, long ago, long before, in a country called Italy, two baby brothers were abandoned by a river. They were left to die. A she-wolf found them. She carried them to a cave like they were her own cubs. Looked after them. Saved them. But when they grew up, they must have turned their back on her as their one desire was to build a city.

Outside our cave there are wolves. I hear them. And sometimes I see them too. Grey shadows at the entrance. "Don't go outside, Bear!" I scream, though it comes out more of a whisper.

Bear's voice is defiant. "I'm six, Ju." Six years old. Like that will save him.

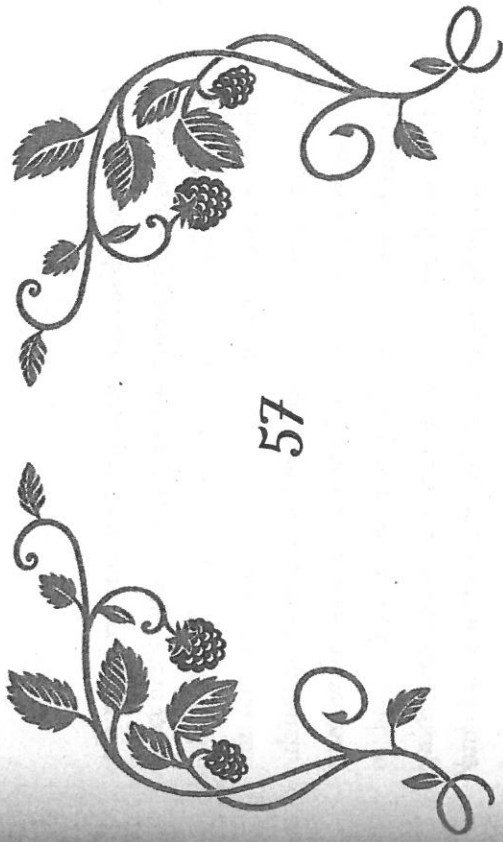
Maybe the wolves wouldn't hurt us anyway. That she-wolf suckled those two babies she found. Romulus and Remus.

I think one of them died in the end. It must have been Remus because the city they built was called Rome.

Ghost will look after us. She'll keep the wolves away. It's winter that's the real predator. The season that, like all seasons, the city kept from us. The cold at its core.

It's coming, with numbing fingers and icy breath. It's reaching out for us.

We're children of the Wild and we came back to it. We offered ourselves up for the taking. I dream of two bodies of bone, still intertwined. Stripped back, stripped bare, like fine porcelain. And in the future, far, far ahead, when the disease has burned itself out and humans can come here again, maybe someone will find us. And just like in the past, when fossilized bones in a cave showed elephants and hippopotamuses once roamed through England, so too will people know there were children here. A girl and boy who never quite made it home.



The mouth of the cave is lit and there is a new sound. People.

"Bear, be careful!" Be careful of people most of all. They could have gone bad. They might have had to.

Even that woman, Violet, probably wasn't bad in the beginning.

Bear's not here to listen to me. He's already gone and Ghost's gone too. The cave's empty.

When Bear's back, someone is with him. A woman. She's wearing animal skin. I think it might even be lynx. She smells of the earth and her hair stretches down her back in one long plait.

But all this I notice later. When she comes into the mouth of the cave, I think she's an angel.

She places her palm on my forehead and her brow pleats as Bear lifts up the blanket and shows her my swollen,