

Running

Acrid, black smoke curves into talons which lash at her delicate muzzle as she pounds across the barren expanse. Scorched strands of meadow grass paint steaks across her coppery pelt, transforming the hind into some strange exotic creature. Blackness hangs in the air; blackness fills her lungs and stings her eyes. Its toxicity slows her, hauling her ever closer to the jaws of the danger which stalks behind. The hounds bawl as she gasps for air, dodging the ragged rocks that indicate the coast is approaching. A different kind of barking and growling resonates around the dying landscape and a final fleeting glimpse backwards induces crippling panic. A blurred blaze of orange light with a crown of thick, churning clouds dances in her terrified gaze. Over the baying maws the crackle of the old pines snapping in the heat makes her wince. The inferno is spreading. It is catching up.

Digging her battered hooves into the loose, gritty soil, the hind forces herself to gallop even faster. Each stride is like being shot in the leg, each gulp of air inhaled like swallowing acid, each stumble another death threat. Three crying voices among the pack of forty-eight legs have come close enough for her strained ears to hear them individually. They must be young dogs, their calls ripe with aggression and pride. They are able to outrun their pack mates, but the hind still has the edge over them.

The sea is nearing. She has to reach it.

Sweet, salty whispers usher her onwards and the wet breeze licks at the deer's coat, like a mother doe would clean her fawn. Pain wells in her throat as air is drawn in through scarred, pink nares. Thoughts of her own calf, tucked up in his thicket well beyond the boundary of the furnace's appetite, throb ceaselessly in her head. She runs and runs and runs, never slowing, nimbly navigating over the crags. To call out for her baby would be an exercise in futility. He is clear of the radar of the hounds, not an inch from where she left him before going off to graze. She thinks of the little snowy spots on his back rising and falling as he dreams. She thinks of his scent and his bleat, his bright, soft eyes and spindly legs. She thinks of his utter helplessness and she runs faster.

That assaulting reek, the panting, the howling, it is closer. A leaden sky soon meets navy sea up ahead. Terror freezes the hind. Cloven hooves plough through the soil before shaking to a halt. The earth ends here. Nothing more than emptiness lies before her. Displaced dirt dives through oblivion, disappearing into the blue, sixty feet below. Screaming legs carry her slender frame

erratically from A and to B and back again along the infinite edge. A low, throaty snarl shakes her to the core. It is joined by a choir of sick voices. She spins about on her back legs and beholds twenty four crazed white eyes glowering into her large, hazel orbs. Auburn fans of ears flatten against her neck while all around her thrashing jaws steadily advance. Foam bubbles at the base of the vertical cliff, the rabid sea joining the opera of barks and wailing. A blink in time passes. She turns as the dogs lunge for her. She leaps.

Damp air rushes through her every strand of fur. The serrated limestone wall rips past her. A limp russet body is then engulfed by the white teeth of the hissing sea. Frustrated, lamenting whines float into the blank sky before fading away altogether. One remaining dog pads up to the drop and cranes his ash-flecked neck to survey the seething liquid. Tan ears flap in the soundless breeze and his coal tipped snout twitches with anguish. Docked tail drooping pitifully, he changes his direction and trudges away.

The cooling, gentle coils of the blue encase her body, carefully embalming her meagre form. She sinks without noise or struggle but somewhere inside her a fire burns. Legs kick out furiously and a bedraggled head breaks the glassy surface. Water spills from her gaping mouth and flared nostrils as she splashes forwards against the chop, choking for oxygen while frantically struggling to make it to dry land. Hooves find purchase in the silt. A narrow sandy track ascends the distant undulating dunes. Tresses of yellowed emerald Marram grass cradle the twisting pathway that her gaze rapidly climbs and descends. Her head shifts from side to side and her drenched ears swivel, soaking up only the clatter of the waves. With haste she glances at the towering ledge of the cliff above to confirm that her pursuers have relented.

Moisture dribbles down her legs and heaving flanks before she shakes her heavy down free of the chilling liquid. Battered and strained, her elegant, swan-like neck hangs weightily from her bony shoulders. Burns smart and lacerations bleed. Her entire being aches with exhaustion. The cold bites at her soaked flesh. Shivering, she closes her eyes and in the darkness, sees him: she sees his perfect chocolate-brown nose tucked up under his tiny, white belly, she feels his warmth and hears his meek little whimpers as he rests, she senses his loneliness and his fragility.

She opens her eyes and begins to run.