

The sun shone bright and clear over the hillside. A gentle fog hung in the air, snaking around the trunks of the trees and leaving delicate droplets of dew upon their branches. The air was cold, but still. Not a single breeze disturbed the quiet serenity of the forest.

Grot padded quietly through the undergrowth, rifle gripped loosely in his hands. His steps were cautious and careful, skillfully avoiding any twigs or branches that might snap and give away his position. Sweat ran down his brow and his legs were sore from the hiking. He was tired, sticky, uncomfortable and frustrated from a long and unfruitful hunt.

Until now.

He smiled as he saw the beast up ahead, and felt his pulse quicken in anticipation. It was bigger than he'd ever imagined from the tracks and droppings it had left behind. A massive bear, its thick, shiny brown fur glistening in the sunlight. Healthy, fierce, and strong.

It was digging through the roots of a tree, its powerful claws ripping up the earth as it searched for tubers and mushrooms to eat. Its labored breaths were audible even at a distance, and Grot could *feel* the tremors of the ground underneath it. Its teeth were sharp and white, thick as swords and its jaw strong enough to rip a man in half.

It was beautiful.

The wind shifted suddenly, and Grot was upwind of the beast in a second. The bear stopped its rooting, sniffing around as the sweat and stench from Grot reached it on the breeze. It stood back from the tree, looking in his direction, and locked eyes with him.

Its eyes were wide, thick, and black like the depths of space. It stared back at him for a moment, absolutely still as Grot slowly lowered himself down onto his knee, bringing his rifle up in a single, steady motion. It stood up on two feet, grunting and roaring so fierce that the Trandoshan could feel the leaves shake. It spread out its arms threateningly, both a challenge and a promise.

As Grot peered down the scope he felt a rapid thumping in his heart, a sudden stirring, queasy anxiety he could not place. It was not fear, no, for he could not imagine a single place he would rather be. It was not nervousness, for he had done this many times before. It was a warm satisfaction that spread throughout his entire body.

With a sudden roar, the beast charged him. The ground thundered like a rainstorm as it broke through the branches, the wood snapping like thunder. Grot's heart swelled as the beast came closer, his mind sharpened, and he realized what he felt for the beast now, and every creature whose life he had ever taken.

It was love.

He grinned with wild savagery as he realized it. His heart soared as the beast came ever closer, its muscles pumping and shaking as it made its last, heroic charge. He did not fault the bear for trying to kill him, and he did not think it would fault him for hunting it. It was a circle, it was a cycle, it was life, and death, and love, and hate, and everything in between.

Here, in this moment, as they prepared to kill each other.

CRACK!