

Chapter 1

Gwyndolin—present day

The cool, damp early morning breeze blows through the open window above my head while the sound of songbirds fills my ears. The melodies blast into me, coming without break from the trees directly outside my window. The muffled, methodic rumblings of waves hitting the rocky shore fills any amount of silence in between notes.

The breeze pushing its way through the window chills the parts of me that are not hidden under the heavy quilt that so comfortingly weighs me down. The air floats the bitter smell of coffee into the room as my sleep drains from me. The scent presses in on my senses and wakes me further. I fight against gravity to pull the quilt higher over my body, encasing everything under my chin in a warm caress.

The weight of the sun's brightness threatens to slice into my eyelids; daggers on my senses as I lie there, refusing to open my eyes just yet. The velvety sheets slip across my body as I turn over in the bed, moving closer to the warmth radiating from beside me. My hands graze skin, rough yet soft all at once. A subtle, musky scent tickles my nose as I force my lids up, spying long brown curls lying beside me. The light reflects off each twist as it spirals down ever so ungracefully, splayed out across the pillow at odd angles. The attaching head turns in my direction, slowly opening lash-rimmed eyes. Vibrant blue water strikes my vision as thick, smooth lips spread into a slow smile. Warm, calloused fingers brush stray crimson tendrils from my face.

Wood paneling crafted from pine lines every inch of the walls, the ceiling, the floor. The lightness of the surroundings makes the sun's ever invading rays that much more powerful. I pull on my thick, oversized shirt as I toss back the quilt, stepping onto the cool wood below. The chill now assaulting my warm soles

races through my legs, pulling my skin into taut bumps under my thick nightclothes. The unpleasantness of it makes me shudder. I hear covers rustling behind me, gravity pulling that heavy quilt onto the floor with a muffled thud. Footsteps follow me as I head out of the bedroom, turning left to take in the morning's view.

Blue. Bright, vibrant, assaulting blue from the sea before me invades my every sense through the picture windows. Enormous pine trees encircle us. Waves peaked with white roll onto the shore, crashing with an almighty roar. The smell of salt water entangles with the bitterness of the coffee simmering in the fireplace. A sense of calm sweeps over me, blanketing me in such an overwhelming sense of security that my mind is nothing but silence. Warm hands wrap around my middle and arms begin to squeeze tightly, lovingly, as a wall of solid warmth presses into my back.

My heavy lids slide their weight over my pupils. The darkness now before me sends my mind back to another time, another world altogether. Phantom grass prickles every part of me as the canopy of trees once again sways above me. The changing leaves overhead dance out a melody of their own, swaying in the autumn breeze. My mind silences in this place. Peace and serenity are not what hush my thoughts here, but the sheer terror of knowing what lurks out there in the forest, waiting.

My body jolts from the dangers of this place. Terror seizes me, causing my limbs to stiffen, their weight so heavy and trembling. My ragged breathing causes short pants to rack my body, drawing small spurts of life-giving breath into me. My heart hammers in my chest, a thundering drum beneath my flesh, pounding the blood through my veins. At least I live. That's more than I can say for the rest of them.

"Gwyn?" A soft rumbling vibrates my back making me snap back from the memory. Blue. Graceful, reassuring blue sweeps before me. Home. I am in my home, not in the forest, not anymore. I twist around, slowly sliding my own hands around that warmth encasing me, squeezing my arms tightly. I nestle into the soft fabric and breathe deeply into that scent of musk and salt. The scent so different from that of long ago.

Auburn flashes across my vision for just a moment before I push the thought back down. My chest tightens as an overwhelming gratefulness washes over me. If it wasn't for this person holding me, caressing me, I don't know where I would be today. Even after three years, I feel as if I live a stolen life.

Loosing a breath, my arms slacken to my sides. They are heavy, so heavy in the early morning. I say nothing as I pad my way back into that bedroom, climbing once more onto the firm mattress and bringing

that heavy quilt back over me from the floor where it had landed. I close my eyes against those blinding rays, draping an arm across them as another barrier of protection.

A moment passes before uneven footfalls trail after me, the bitter aroma of that coffee growing stronger as the thudding of the floor reverberates beneath the bed. I peek out from under my arm, thankful for the steaming mug extended towards me, vapor dancing over its opening. I sit up just enough to stretch out my hand and wrap my fingers around the cup. I pull it to my face, breathing deeply that scent, allowing it to further awaken my mind. He must have risen early to make it for me.

I press cold stone to my lips and pull in small sips, letting the liquid burn my tongue. Acid coats my taste buds as I swallow, reminiscent of the ash once coating my mouth. Phantom flames dance before me, engulfing everything in their path. Just as they did when I had once run towards them long ago, ignoring that heat clawing at the skin on my face.

Sweat blooms all over my body with just the thought of that night. I push back the quilt enough to let some of that morning chill wash over me once again. The bed dips down as a seat is taken next to me, the disturbance jarring me into attention. It pushes me back into reality, and I focus on the steam swirling up into the air above me. I turn my head into a sea of blue. A heavy arm wraps around my shoulders and pulls me in closer.

Zale.

My eyes squeeze shut so tightly it hurts. His lips press firmly to the crown of my head. I feel him breathing me in; savoring my scent, the way I savor his. The silence around us is peaceful as I slowly drink my coffee. Soon we'll need to head out — Zale going by water to see what he may catch there, and me trekking into the forest for today's hunt. Provisions are low, as they always are lately. Living day to day is not the life I had planned for myself. But such was the way of life now.

I groan and hand my now empty mug back to Zale as I stretch out my entire body across the bed. Snickering and sliding to his feet, Zale takes the mug from the room as I roll off the bed and head for the closet. I slide open the pine door with a bit too much force. The door thunders against the wall, agitating the clothes within.

I watch the different fabrics sway for a moment, then select my black tunic and black trousers. I change as swiftly as I can, not wanting the cold air on my skin. Once dressed, I pull on my wool socks then slide

my boots over top, securely lacing them into place. After strapping the belt of knives over my hips, I give the end a good tug to ensure they won't go anywhere.

My boots weigh me down, causing me to stomp from the room — a good reflection of my current mood. Zale waits in the chair by the windows, somehow already dressed for the water, hair pulled back and secured behind his head. He stands, falling into step behind me as I walk through the room and out the side door. The brightness is so overpowering I can't keep from squinting against the weight of it. At least the sun warms me a bit. I turn towards Zale as he steps from the doorway of our cabin.

"I'll see you tonight," he says as he grasps my hand in a firm caress. His callouses scrape over my palm as he pulls me closer, kissing my brow in farewell. "Come back to me."

I tilt my chin up, meeting his broad lips with mine. Their softness presses into me, parting slightly with a low sigh.

"Be safe," I whisper onto his breath as I slowly pull back to gaze into those deep blue depths. A wicked grin spreads across his face, dancing in his eyes as he drops my hand and takes a faltering step back towards his ramshackle boat. I return his smile, praying it meets my own eyes as I turn on my heel and head towards the mouth of trees just to the right of our home.

The early spring grass squelches beneath my boots as I tread towards the forest opening, passing the vibrant patch of wildflowers that grows in our little clearing. I pause for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the ancient darkness that looms from the forest.

Silence. Nothing but pure silence radiates from the opening in the trees, as if even the animals living within can sense the menacing presence it holds. I draw in a final, stabilizing breath as I lift my boot and extend it forward over the imaginary line separating me from my past. An old, harrowing chill washes over me as I silently make my way deeper into the wood.

Memory takes me where I need to go to find prey. Deeper and deeper, winding into the enormity of the trees. Ancient, dark, cruel things that they are. The sun never seems to move while I'm under their canopy. Time warps here. It's hard to tell if it's been a few hours or a few minutes. Therefore, I must be swift.

Zale didn't understand this past winter when I left on a hunt, then didn't return for a few days. He thought I was either lost or dead. Then suddenly, I emerged from the trees over the snow-covered ground. I was carrying my kill across my back, a slight bounce in my step from such luck in the dead of winter.

When his blue seas met my green ones, I knew something had gone wrong. What felt like hours to me had truly been days of agonizing despair for him. He had come searching for me and left empty-handed, like the forest had swallowed me up without a trace. Since then, I'd made it a point to leave the forest as quickly as possible, taking whatever prey I could find down within the first few minutes to an hour, breaking into the clearing by dinnertime.

Rustling from behind draws me from thought and I instinctively pull a dagger from its place at my side. On catlike feet I dart behind the closest tree, concealing myself from whatever was trailing me. I hope for a deer, something to last us a few weeks at least.

Slowly, I peer around the peeling bark, scanning my surroundings for the cause of the disturbance. There. Roughly fifty yards away from where I hide, something is moving about the forest. Even in the dense woods, I can tell it is no deer. Its tall height alone says that much.

My hand inches towards the second dagger hanging from my belt. Grasping it, I remove it as quietly as I can, bringing it up so I can be ready to strike. Pressing my back into the ancient white pine, I draw in some calming breaths. I let the cool air flow into me, focusing all my senses on the figure that I know grows ever closer. I can feel its life essence encroaching on me. It feels... familiar. A forgotten memory just out of my grasp, dancing on the edges of my mind, but I can't place it.

Footfalls begin to grow louder, entangling with the throbbing of my heart as adrenaline bursts through my veins. I concentrate on my breathing, keeping it as deep and silent as possible. My body tenses, my fingers straining to keep ahold of the blades in my hands, my back pushing harder into the bark behind me. Dread washes over me as I discern that the steps coming closer are indeed human.

A crunch sounds behind me, causing my breathing to hitch as I realize it's the bark breaking loose from the tree I'm too firmly pressed against. The stray piece hits the rock by my feet, as my luck would have it, causing that small crack to become more noteworthy to the oncoming stranger. I squeeze my eyes shut and send up a prayer to whoever may be listening.

I hear silence in return.

A quiet that is too quiet. A beat passes before the understanding clicks into place. The footfalls have stopped. Whoever travels in my direction has paused, listening just like me. I stop breathing, willing my heart and blood to silence their thunderous roar. Daggers still raised, I lift my foot, slowly moving from my

position behind the trunk. The dense trees cover me as I silently dart around them and the person closing in on me. I'm behind them in a flash, my knife pressed to the nape of their neck.

"Gwyndolin."

My body locks up with a mix of shock and disbelief. I loosen the grip on my daggers as I process who my near victim is, the use of my name. That voice... The voice I now only get to hear when I sleep, in my dreams. The voice of long ago, another lifetime. The voice that once meant more to me than my own entire being.

My heart shatters as he turns to me, and I take in golden eyes and auburn tresses. My knees buckle — made weak by years of yearning. I feel no pain as I slam into the sodden ground, rocks tearing my pants and cutting into my flesh. My daggers fall from my palms as a deep-throated sob racks through me.

"Silas."

The former sea captain lets out a sigh as he stands, slowly balancing his weight so as not to overturn his small craft. The wood is worn and scarred, but it gets the job done. He moves starboard, grabbing the ropes that secure his net to the buoy he's made. He pulls the net into his vessel, untangling the contents. Three fish. A pitiful haul, given that he had been out here for hours already, baking in the spring sun. Enough food for today, maybe the next. The sea wasn't as plentiful as it had once been.

Another sigh escapes his broad lips as he accepts defeat, tosses his fish into a bucket with a splash, and slowly takes a seat. Lifting the oars one at a time, he winds his way back to the shore, back to his home to await his love, hoping she found something more worthwhile today.

My head is spinning and light. The ground feels as if it's swaying from side to side. My vision becomes so blurry, like everything in front of me is under the surface of water. I realize the water is leaking without control from my eyes. Its salt dries trails down my cheeks as my chest constricts, feeling as if it will snap from the stress of it. The ground below me shakes so forcefully it rattles my teeth.

Sturdy hands grab my shoulders, thrashing me backwards, then forward again. I hear my name being called somewhere far away as I try to focus on the scene in front of me. My chest tightens so much that I can't pull in breaths. I start to gag, unable to choke down any of the thick air suffocating me.

Something stings across my face, the force of it knocks my teeth together and snaps my head to the side. My lungs expand with a whoosh and suddenly I'm panting, unable to quench my desire for the crisp air forcing its way down my throat. I hunch forward onto my hands, steadying myself as the shaking slowly subsides. My fingers dig into the moist dirt beneath me, caking its filth under my nails. The earth becomes still, and I realize it wasn't the ground that was shaking at all, but my body reacting to the apparition before me.

Dragging my hands towards my lap, I wipe my palms on my pants to clean them. I remain bowed over the ground as I watch tanned, broad hands slowly come toward me. Tender, warm fingers brush the water from my skin. My breath catches at the realness of the touch. My vision clears enough to make out my surroundings once more. With fingertips still gently grazing my cheeks, I spy knees mere inches from my own. Mind silent, I raise my eyes from the ground.

Brown pants cover his legs, a knife strapped around his left thigh. A sword is secured to his back with a leather scabbard, wrapped around a shirt of the darkest forest. Tousled auburn hair grazes his shoulders, almost mane-like around his beautiful face. Those golden irises stare right into mine, his soft lips slightly parted in a confused expression. He furrows his strong brow, concern written across every part of him.

He looks the same as the last moment we had been together.

"I've been searching for you for weeks. Had I not already known you'd left the village, I would have thought you died with the rest of them. Where have you been?" The texture of each word floats into my ears, deep and hypnotic. His hands have lowered to my forearms now, gently caressing them with small strokes of his fingers. The heat from them sinks into my skin.

Not dead. He was not dead.

"How..." I breathe, so low I almost don't hear it. I can feel the mess of dried salt water and bewilderment on my face. The scenarios play out, but none stick. I cannot process the man kneeling in front of me. The man I thought to be dead long ago, burned in the fire that engulfed our village.

Not dead.

"Gwyn? What's going on?" The concern in the words brings me back to attention. This was real. He was real. He was here with me. He was touching my arms and looking at me as if the past three years had never happened.

Then again, maybe they hadn't. At least, not for him. Silas was in the forest. He lived here; we both had. My mind jumps back to this past winter when what felt like a few hours in here to me had been passing days for Zale.

"Silas, how long did you say you've been looking for me?" I ask, voice quiet and trembling.

Eeriness crowds the words as he says, "Weeks. Just over two weeks now." His lips stay parted, and I see confusion flick across his face as I process.

"I've been gone for three years." The words leave me on nothing more than a breath. I focus on him, willing him to see the agony within me, to see the truth in my words. Unbelievable as they may be, they are the truth. I have been out of these woods for three years and a winter now. I have been without Silas for so long and have felt every agonizing moment of that separation.

Silas stares at me, unblinking and face clear of emotion — assessing. He notices my attire, the knives laying on the ground beside us; both different from anything either of us had before. His eyes meet mine once more and surprise shines in them. He reaches his hand up, fingers shaking slightly as he runs them through my crimson hair; hair that is much longer than it had been the last time we were this close.

"I've heard tell of this happening. I didn't believe it," Silas says, astonished, but his hand never leaves my hair. A breeze begins blowing through the forest, wrapping itself around us. I shiver with the chill of it, the eeriness taunting me.

I take in a steadying breath, filling my lungs to almost bursting. Calm overruns me as Silas's scent lodges within my mind. He smells of smoke and pine, with undertones of leather dancing about, and more I cannot place. My memory could never do it justice, nothing else in this world could ever compare.

A shuddering choked noise escapes me. I bring my hands to my chest, clutching at the overwhelming ache within. Strong arms slide around my shoulders, pulling me into rough linen stretched across a broad chest. His scent overpowers me from this distance, and I hold back my tears as I breathe him in. My hands dig into his shirt, steadying, clawing at the memories now swarming me.

After cleaning and smoking the fish, there wasn't anything else for the former sea captain to do but sit and wait. The evening draws to a close, but still there is no sign of his love. Worry gnaws at the edges of

his mind, so the captain stands and begins to slowly pace the floors of their home. The floorboards creak as he moves, another reminder of how silent this place becomes without her.

He was beside himself with worry, fear that something in that ancient forest had finally gotten its way with her. There had always been a strong connection she had with that place. Something always called her back, even after everything that had happened to her there. Even after her insistence of despising that place.

The clock hanging outside their bedroom won't stop its incessant ticking. With each pass of the hand, his anxiety rises higher and higher. A few more paces across the living space and he finally couldn't stand it anymore. With determined hands, he grabs his jacket from its resting place beside the door. Shrugging it onto his shoulders, he pulls the door open and steps out and around the cabin, making his way to the mouth of the forest.

He stops at its entrance, allowing time for his eyes to adjust to the ancient darkness looming out from within. It feels colder here. The captain buttons his jacket to the top, sending up a silent prayer for his and his love's safe return. He lifts his foot over the invisible line separating him from whatever horrors await within.

Panic starts to claw at me as I realize I've been in the forest for some time now. How long has it been since I stepped over the entrance? Zale would begin to worry at any point, and the last thing I wanted was for him to come searching for me here. There were some things about this forest that I had never told him.

Gently, I press my palms onto Silas's chest, pushing myself back from his embrace. His golden eyes meet mine, and I see the remnants of silver lining them. I trace my finger under his lashes to wipe away what's left of the salt water there. My fingers shake as I say, "I need to go. Someone will come looking for me, and I can't let him come searching in the forest."

He blanches as he processes what I said. "Do you want me to come with you?" he asks, so softly it tears into my heart.

"Yes," I choke out, almost panicked at the thought of parting from him. "Yes. I won't be separated from you again. Ever." My hands slide to my thighs, steadying me as I lift onto my feet. My knees ache from the rocks I landed on. I can feel beads of liquid trailing down the skin there.

I offer my hand to Silas. He looks at my outstretched palm before wrapping his own around it, as if contemplating what it means. He leans over to grab my daggers, returning them to me hilt first on his way to his feet. I accept them and place them back into their homes at my waist. He grabs my other hand, squeezing softly. His warmth travels up my arms and I look over at him, offering him a smile that meets my eyes. He returns it while lacing his fingers in mine. My pulse quickens involuntarily.

Any delight at our reunion drains as the sound of something approaching echoes around us. Silas drops my hands and steps in front of me, shielding me. Whatever it was approaching was too close to hide from now. Drawing his sword, his stance changes; ready to attack or defend. I pull my own daggers out again, my hands tightening around them as I take my place beside Silas. He sends me a silent reprimand but allows me to remain where I stand. I had never allowed him to defend me while I cowered behind, and I wouldn't start now.

Shadows move ever closer, approaching us slowly. I strain myself trying to decipher what makes its way nearer. Silas lets out a huff of a laugh.

"Deer," he says, replacing his sword at his back. Sure enough, three deer step between the trees. Enough meat to last longer than I'd ever hoped for. I turn back to Silas to suggest that we each take one down and bring them back with us.

"Zale!" Shock jolts through me at the second male suddenly standing next to Silas. He faces us with an axe raised in his hand, assessing my situation. He pulls the axe back farther ready to strike.

"Gwyn, what's going on? Who's this?" Zale demands. His worry and fear is apparent in his harshness. How much had he seen?

"How long have I been gone?" I ask of Zale, ignoring his questions. With him now in the forest, maybe we could begin to understand how time worked here.

"You've been gone all day; it was starting to get dark. I was worried, so I came to find you. Who *is* this?" Zale's voice has turned accusatory. His eyes slice into Silas. He still looks like he might attack him at any moment.

"This is Silas. We knew each other... before," I say, unable to elaborate more. Not here, not now when Zale was ready for a fight as it is. My words ring into him, and his questions bubble to the surface. I casually step between both men. With my back to Silas, I raise my hands towards Zale. A silent request for him to

lower his axe. Zale remembers himself, pushing the questions back down. Relaxing his stance, he places the axe back into his belt.

"I was worried, Gwyn. I didn't want it to be like the last time. I don't think I could bear it again," he softly pleads. I step closer to him, moving my hand to rest on his shoulder to reassure him.

"We need to get back. We need to get out of here," I say gently. Then add, "Silas is coming with us."

Zale regards the man behind me, taking in his stature — the details of his demeanor. He must have decided he was a low enough threat because he turns back to me and says, reluctantly, "Come on, then." I think he just wants to leave this place. He never approved of me hunting alone and showed nothing but disgust for the forest.

I encourage Silas to follow. He falls into step behind us, the movement seeming almost forced. I turn back towards our projected path and step out in front of our group. Leading the way, I wind us back through the ancient trees. Back the way I had trekked just an hour ago — or was it this morning? Closer and closer to the forest edge we move, silent as death. We keep our steps close to one another, no one wanting to veer off and be swallowed up by the forest.

"Where have you been living these past... three years, was it?" Silas asks, causing me to jump at the sudden noise.

"In a cabin, by the sea." Zale's clipped response comes before words can escape from my open mouth. I swallow my indignation, continuing on the imaginary path in front of us. I ignore the acid in Zale's tone. Now wasn't the time or place for this.

Sweat starts pebbling on my skin from the sun's heat pelting down on us. A low ache starts in the sole of my feet. We should be almost back to the cabin now. Straight, then to the left, around the tree that sits beside the smooth boulder... I stop short, and Zale bumps into me due to the abruptness.

"What is it?" Zale asks, concerned. He reaches up and touches the small of my back, lightly grazing his fingers down my spine. I can feel Silas stiffen at the small intimacy of the touch.

"We should be at the clearing by now," I say, my voice a dead weight on my ears. Terror slowly creeps up my spine, clawing its way into the back of my skull and raising the hair on my head.

"Maybe we took a wrong turn," Silas smoothly drawls, always the optimist. He takes a step closer to me, coming up to the left half of my body. I feel his fingertips brush mine reassuringly. It feels territorial as well. "Maybe we should turn back and retrace our steps a bit."

"No. We went the right way. I'm sure of it," I say. Anger starts to spread within me. I know this forest like the back of my hand. I'd walked under this canopy most of my life. I'd taken this path hundreds of times before over the past three years. It had always led me where I needed to go.

"This isn't the way I came," Zale says from behind me. He twirls in a circle. "This is where you came in?" I nod my affirmation to him. "I came from the opposite way. Maybe we should try that?" he suggests, but before anyone can answer him, Zale turns on his heels and staggers back the way we came. I have no choice but to follow him. Getting separated would be worse than us getting lost together.

"Come on. We'll try Zale's path," I say to Silas, noticing his blank stare at Zale's back. When he turns to me, I try a reassuring smile. It falls flat before him.

Silas steps into my direction and we begin to follow in Zale's footsteps, back the way we came, back towards the area he had found us in moments before. Silas dips his head to my shoulder and whispers so as not to be overheard. "Are you sure you trust this man?"

It's been some time since we've been this close, but I know his emotions well. Genuine fear leaks from him, subtle but definitely there. I have never known Silas to be afraid of anything, except for his father.

"Yes. He saved me from that fire, Silas. He's the reason I'm alive today," I say to him.

"You've been with him this whole time, then? Since the night of the fire?" I can almost hear the heartache in his voice as he raises the question. I know what he's asking without him having to voice the words.

"Yes," I respond sorrowfully. It's the answer I know he didn't want to hear. "I haven't seen another human since that night; not until today when you found me." I look at Silas again, and he's focusing on the ground in front of us. He toes at the ground as he ponders what all of it means. I've thought about the fire every day since, agonizing over the truth of it.

We pass the area from which we came, heading in the opposite direction just as Zale said. Except, this path should be taking us deeper into the forest, not towards our cabin by the sea.

"Zale? You're sure this is the way you came?" I ask, concern lacing my words as they leave my tongue. Zale stops and turns to me. His hands grip into fists when he notes Silas's proximity to me.

“Yes, Gwyn. I came up behind you. You were too busy with *him*, watching those deer, that you didn’t notice.” He turns from me with a scoff. I’d played enough card games with him at the cabin to be able to see his deceptions, and this wasn’t one of them.

I could feel Silas scrutinizing Zale. I look over at him, inquiring. When his eyes meet mine, they say the same thing I’m thinking. Truth. Zale speaks the truth. He really did come up behind us. It didn’t make sense, but this forest never had.

We continue down the trail that Zale is adamant he took, but the feeling of impending doom begins to resonate with me. We are silent in our trek, and I wonder if the two men feel it as well.

Deeper into the forest we go, passing tree after tree, rock after rock; no other evidence of life forms besides ourselves on our journey. Just as I’m about to stop our pace, Silas breaks the silence surrounding us.

“Zale, we shouldn’t go any farther,” Silas warns, answering my question. The wariness in his voice is palpable. Zale pauses his saunter, turning back to our direction. His skin has turned even more pale. He’s frightened — lost.

“I swear this is the way I came.” I detect fragility in his voice. The desperation now growing within him becomes almost wild. He truly didn’t know the way out of the forest.

“I believe you,” I say to him, closing the gap between us. “Things sometimes happen here that we can’t explain.” I try to sooth him. In the distance something catches my attention. There’s an object protruding out from the ground. Nothing about it says that it was naturally formed. Rather, it’s something that was crafted.

I step around Zale, directing my steps towards the structure nestled between the trees. I hear two sets of feet take up a rhythm behind me, telling me that both men are at my back. I don’t say anything as I weave between the trees, gaining ground on whatever it was that was beckoning me forward.

The smell of ash dances its way into my nostrils, tickling the back of my throat as I step over fallen lumber. The sound of my boots sliding across soot reminds me of the sand on our beach. I walk on, crunching over debris, unable to stomach what was cracking under my boots.

“What is this place?” Zale whispers from behind me. My eyes begin to burn as my throat tightens. The constriction traps my voice. I stop in the center of the charred houses, a knot forming in my throat at the burned remains.

“Home,” Silas says for me. He steps beside me, gently grabbing my hand and squeezing it with his own. I turn towards him then, silently communicating my fears.

We weren't getting out of this forest.