

To survive an Easterian winter, you must be prepared. When the sun is a forgotten dream among the sea of dusky white, death lurks behind even the most inconsequential of corners.

This winter, my family starved.

Our reserves were fewer than last year. The resources my village had depended on for generations have dwindled. This winter was the coldest and darkest of my nineteen years. The nights stretched on, and I watched as my younger siblings wasted away. The sound of growling bellies accompanied us everywhere we went, making it hard to distinguish where the hunger ended and we began. Deep within the darkness, we had forgotten. Forgotten what it was like to be warm and full.

Lying in bed listening to Carlin and Isana's hunger had broken something inside me. They were my responsibility, after all. For whatever reason, I never thought they would fall to me, even after our mother's death. It wasn't until our father sailed off on an extended voyage to distant shores that I realized I was the only thing standing between them and death.

His absence started small. The first time our father left to run his merchant business, he was away for a fortnight. On the next voyage, he didn't return for a month. Then, he was gone for a season. After that, I stopped counting.

The snow had just begun to fall the last time we got word from him. Along with a disappointing allotment of coin, he mentioned he would be returning when the warm weather broke. I wondered what he would see in me when he arrived.

I wasn't the same girl the summer months left behind.

Hunger changes a person. Makes them question things they'd never considered before. On the nights our hearth did little to warm the bitter cold in our cottage, I'd begun to hate him. He used his merchant business as a pretty excuse to avoid the emptiness within our home, within himself. My hatred for him kept me going, kept me alive, even if he was a shell of the man he once was.

The truth that I tried to deny, tried to keep from my siblings, is that he abandoned us to live off scraps and charity in a village I don't even recognize anymore. The forest is depleted, and the game that had sustained us has long since found a safer place to live. Many of the families that had lived here for generations did the same.

Isana and Carlin were too young to remember, but there was a time when winter signified rest and reflection. Not famine.

The forest I approached now is barren in comparison to the wilderness of my childhood. The trees still stand tall and proud, a bastion to my memories. The path that stretched from our backdoor and disappeared into the trees remained. But the thicket is too quiet, too still. Like nothing living had stirred there for years.

I tried to ignore the pressing silence and focus on the humid air around me. A warm front had swept through Easteria yesterday, finally plucking the chill from the air. The snow was still thick on the ground beneath me, but the ice hanging from our roof had dripped in greeting this morning. I was determined to savor it — to ignore the nagging voice in my head that reminded me of my father's arrival.

Though the cold breeze still nipped at my cheeks I could practically smell spring approaching, an agonizing promise of better days when at least the plants, herbs, and roots would fill our bellies. I stepped from the threshold of our little cottage, leaving Isana and Carlin sound asleep, and headed down the path that stretched towards the forest.

Ignoring the rumbling in my gut, I pushed aside a patch of snow searching for the cold, damp earth beneath. I kicked off my shoes, peeled away my warm socks, and planted my toes on the hard, frozen ground. The cold sent a shiver up my body, but I relished it. It felt like years had passed since I felt the earth beneath my feet. Since I'd felt anything other than shivering emptiness. I could have stayed there for hours, but when my toes began to burn in earnest, I reluctantly slipped my thick socks and shoes back on and headed down the path. It was unwise to commune with the earth out in the open, anyway.

Hundreds of trips had carved this path well before I was born. As I walked, I trailed my fingers along the wet bark of the nearest tree trunks, my basket tucked tightly under my arm, brushing snow to the ground as I went. I wanted to breathe in the life slumbering beneath the cold, to feel something warm and alive.

With the warming temperatures, I had a good chance of finding food today. The image of my sleeping siblings flashed before my eyes. They looked so small tucked beneath the worn covers. I needed more than a good chance.

I *had* to find food today. No exceptions.

Within the hour, the sun would crest the ridge to the east, and the village would wake, along with my siblings, and I would lose my chance to forage. I needed to be fast, but the turn in the weather made me giddy, or maybe that was the disillusioned hunger. Regardless, the forest beckoned to me as I crossed through the thick expanse of evergreen trees.

It was here, in the heart of the forest, where I learned nature's sacred rule: the forest gives, and the forest takes away.

The forest itself is a sacred place. Terrifying and brutal, but sacred nonetheless. A place for life to live and thrive together. Everything, connected and essential. Every piece a part of the whole—including me.

At a time when the forest provided for us, my mother taught me how to speak its language. Her lessons became the mantra of my childhood. She taught me how to dig roots from the ground, how to find wild berries, and how to uphold the sacredness of the watchful trees. But that was many years ago before things changed. Before the forest abandoned us to starve our way through the cold season.

I looked around the clearing I'd come to and felt a grin spread across my face. Perhaps the first in many weeks. Among the blanket of white, I could make out dingy patches where the snow had thinned. I made my way to a fallen branch on the far side of the clearing, most likely brought down by one of the raging winter storms we'd endured this season. Our cottage had groaned and shuttered in the wind on more than one occasion.

I stooped to examine it, pushing it over. There, beneath the moist bark still stacked with snow, were mushrooms. The dusky, domed heads were barely the size of my palm, but they spread over the ground in a thick layer. I plucked several and carefully placed them in my basket. I was so preoccupied with profusely thanking the forest for providing a morning meal that I was caught off guard when a twig cracked behind me.

I whirled around, putting my back to the tree. A flush of heat had spread up my body, preparing my limbs to move, to run.

Fear.

The likelihood of coming across dangerous predators had dwindled with the game, but it was never smart to let your guard down in the forest. My ears strained to hear a disturbance, but only cold silence echoed back to me. Another sharp stab of hunger wracked my body, and I chalked it up to hunger-induced paranoia and felt grateful again that we at least had breakfast this morning.

Next, I made my way to check the snares I set the morning before. I picked my way through frozen undergrowth and fallen branches to find them empty and unsprung. I wasn't surprised. I'd barely caught a handful of rabbits and only one pheasant the entire winter. It made me wonder what father was eating out there on the open ocean. I wondered if he was hungry, like we were, but I doubted it.

I wondered how the redemptioners had fared this winter, as well. From what I saw of them at Temple, they seemed well fed. Granted, most of them were rich enough to import goods from the west and trade for what they needed.

I couldn't have been more than seven when the men from the west came. It was an anomaly for Easteria to receive visitors then, and I was painfully curious about them. The rumor was the Elderly king had sent men to discover untapped resources in our tiny village.

There were only a handful at first, but as they discovered the bounty of Easteria, more and more came, bringing their wives and families, their culture, and their beliefs with them.

Vicar Abaddon was the first to step foot on Easterian soil. It was midsummer and the air was thick and heavy. We all crowded around the southern tip of the village, watching him and two of his men arrive. Even after all this time, I still remembered his tall lanky form taking easy, unhurried steps towards us, clouds of dust pluming into the air with every footfall. He was wearing a finely tailored tunic and pants, both dark and crisp, as if he'd not just arrived from a weeks long sea voyage. He was wiry and lean, but he gave an air of strength with his confident gait and dark, calculating eyes.

Father was holding me on his shoulders, my mother pressed close to his side with a sleeping Isana in her arms. The Vicar didn't seem intimidated by the watching eyes of the villagers. In fact, he seemed to delight in it. When he stopped in front of the waiting crowd, a smile graced his face, revealing a row of long, yellow teeth. I remember thinking he looked strange, different from the salt of the earth people I was used to.

He even gave a speech. A shiny, optimistic speech about the untapped wealth and potential of Easteria. He said he wanted to bring our village into the modern age, to bring us into the fold of the Free God, under the protection The Gathering of the Free. I'd never even heard of such things before, but the weary looks on my parent's faces told me they had.

He said our village could be redeemed, saved from an eternity of torment in The Grave Plains. At that time there were only a handful of families who lived in Easteria, generations of their families had lived here before them. No one believed our home would change so drastically, then. Maybe no one thought our new visitors would survive the winter, but redemptioners are tenacious, and as more started pouring in, things began to change.

When Vicar Abaddon and his men built the small building that now sits in the middle of our village square, he coined it the Temple of Redemption. Of course, we never planned to attend. We didn't believe in any god, much less the Free God. We relied on the forest and the land for what it provided. In a way, communing with nature was our worship. Wasting our time cloistered away in a dark temple seemed wrong, blasphemous in a way.

At least, that's what my mother told me after the temple had been erected. We were sitting in the kitchen. Mother was stooped over her mortar and pestle, mixing one of her many healing concoctions. I asked to go see the new building in the square, my imagination filled with naivety and childish curiosity. My mother went unearthly still for

several heartbeats before dropping to her knees in front of me. The green eyes that met mine shone with worry.

“The temple is not for us, Avyanna. The Vicar is not to be trusted. You understand?” but I didn’t understand. The Vicar seemed like a beacon of light in the monotony of my childhood. Some of the villagers thought he would be a good addition, bringing more wealth to our land. Others were wary of the charismatic stranger.

Regardless, after the Temple of Redemption was built, more and more people came from the west. They began setting up their lives here, and soon we were outnumbered. And not a single one of them missed a day at the Temple of Redemption, clearly believing in Abaddon’s vision for a more *civilized* Easteria. So, they became the redemptioners, the nickname growing in popularity among the original villagers.

Now, almost a decade later, Vicar Abaddon ruled this village with an iron fist, all of his redemptioners falling into line behind him.

I tried to stay focused, to ignore the gaping chasm that opened within me when I thought of how my home had changed. How it was still changing, even now.

My snares may have turned up empty over the past few months, forcing us to survive on the little we had leftover from the warm season, but that didn’t mean the forest couldn’t provide for me today.

I continued on, discovering some small bright red berries on a bush along the other side of the clearing. Winter rubies, my mother called them. They were a bit frozen but would thaw easily over the hearth. I picked several handfuls, making sure to leave some for the birds.

Before I turned to leave the clearing, a prickling sensation tickled the back of my neck and I tensed, checking over my shoulder to make sure I was alone. Our cottage sat well away from the small houses that had popped up around the village square when the redemptioners came, and that’s how I liked it. I’d never encountered anyone in our part of the forest, especially not this early. But my mother’s words echoed in my mind.

*You can never be too careful.*

Only snow and branches looked back at me. The meager lot in my basket weighed me down, begging me to reach in and take a bite, but I resisted. I would eat when my siblings ate, and maybe then I would stop feeling like a paranoid mess.

For years, my mother taught me that the forest could provide, but I had begun to doubt her. Somewhere beneath the howling winds of this winter, I found myself more disconnected from the land than ever before. The thought felt like a betrayal, but the reality was that the forest was overhunted and over foraged. The harsh landscape seemed to mock me from every direction. I spoke its language before I spoke my own, but it owed me nothing.

