

## Chapter 12



You come to a halt as you reach a fork in the road. Unsure of where to go, you take out the map and find where you are. You can either go through Gloom, a dreary looking forest, or take a small detour down through Vignette. “What do you think?” You ask Mira.

“I don’t know. Isn’t Vignette where that girl from your tea shop said she was from?” You recall your conversation with Dana and you do remember her saying she had to move for some reason. Still, the forest is probably named Gloom for a reason.

“I say we take the detour. We go down through Vignette and around Gloom.”

“You’re the boss,” Mira says and starts walking.

It doesn’t take long before you see the surroundings start to shift. The grass is becoming dull and lifeless, the trees all withered and dead. Entering Vignette sends a chill running through you. No, not just a chill. You feel like something’s being drawn out of you, making you feel weary and miserable. This is not the curse that warlock gave you. This is something else.

The few people you see look even more miserable than you feel. It’s as if the life has been completely drained out of anything living. Suddenly, a woman runs up to you and takes your hands.

“Please, you have to help me!” she pleads, her wide eyes baggy and red, her cheeks tearstained.

“What’s going on?” you ask, giving her your full attention.

“My son... he ran off... said he was going to fix the problem,” she manages to say between sniffles.

“It’s okay,” you stroke her hands in a comforting manner. “Where did he run off too?”

“He went to Smithereens. He believes that’s where the problem lies,” she wipes her eyes, her sleeves already wet from previous tears. “Please, he’s just a kid! No one else will help me!”

“It’s alright, we’ll help you find him. What’s your name?”

“Elisa,” she snuffles. “My son’s name is Jason. Oh please find him.”

You look to Mira, and even she understands you have to at least try to help Elisa, her desperation evident. Guess you’ll be going through Gloom after all.

You stand at the entrance of Gloom, neither of you wanting to enter it. You take a deep breath, trying to calm your nerves, and you take the first step. As soon as you enter, you feel like you’ve stepped through a door. Behind you is now a wall of fog and trees, and you cannot see the outside at all. Mira steps through the fog after you and looks around. “This is worse than the forest between Lavish and Hometown,” Mira says. And she’s right. Gloom is just trees and fog and darkness as far as the eye can see.

“I have a feeling you can easily get lost in here. We need to try to have a sense of direction as we go. According to the map, Smithereens should be straight ahead.” You say, already dreading this.

“Right. Walk in a straight line. How hard can that be?” but you can tell by her voice that she’s just as uncertain as you are. Mira takes two sticks she conveniently finds on the ground and sticks them down behind her in a cross-shape. “We can barely see where we entered this place, we should at least try to make the entrance more visible.” It’s a valid effort, but you can’t really see it unless you really look for it.

With another deep breath, you both steel yourselves and walk off on the barely visible path. You try your best to keep a straight line, but with the fog confusing you, you have no idea if you are. Your travelling companion isn’t exactly helping either, with her amazing sense of direction. It feels like the fog isn’t just regular fog either. It feels like some sort of magic fog, designed to make you lose your way.

“I heard that this forest was actually where Vignette got their Christmas trees from,” Mira says as you trudge on, trying to keep your wits about you. “I wonder what happened.”

“Have you been to Vignette before?” you ask.

Mira nods. “Once, a couple of years ago. It did not look like that then.”

“What did it look like?”

“Alive,” she says. “I was there in winter, and people were happy and excited and having fun in the snow. They had rows of pine trees lined up for selling. That’s probably where the Capital gets their Christmas tree from as well.”

The trees in Gloom are actually proper, green pine trees full of life, in contrast to the dead ones surrounding Vignette. “The trees here are fine. Why can’t they still use these?”

“Don’t know,” Mira shrugs. “Probably because they’re scared of getting lost. Or they’re scared the tree will wither and die as soon as it reaches Vignette.” She looks at you then. “You felt that too, right? Like your life was slowly being drained from you?” You nod and shudder.

As you walk, you try to maintain a light conversation to keep yourselves sane, but also trying to concentrate on not getting lost. “It’s just a straight line,” you tell yourself, but the fog is really messing with your mind. In your peripheral vision, you swear you see several eyes watching you as you go. But every time you turn your head too look, there’s nothing. You ask Mira about it, and she sees it too.

Eventually, you notice the ground and trees slowly looking more withered as you walk, just like in Vignette. Iron fencing surrounds what looks like a graveyard ruin. Several stone graves line the fencing, with bits and pieces broken or missing. In the middle of the ruins sits a small child in front of a stone statue. You have reached Smithereens.