

Chapter 1

This wasn't our first sacrifice. The putrid scent of burning wood and decay permeating the air came from the large fire in the center of town. Burning. Burning away at the bad Spirits that usually remain after a disappearance.

Picture the whole village of four-hundred, seventy-two—no, seventy-one—standing around this fire, wearing the color of overripe forest mushrooms. Dark, almost blackish purples, sullen blues, and languid browns clothed those who normally wore bright, vibrant tones. Pale, resolute faces stared into the flames as the final remnant from Aarin, the carpenter's old father, floated up into oblivion.

He went missing two days ago. Aarin had cooked up his father's favorite dinner, and, waiting for an extra hour for his father to return, went in search of him in the woods during the late evening. He found the mushrooms. After that, it was just accepted. He was gone. He wouldn't return. It was time to move on.

Yet no one went in search of him. I don't even think we cried for him. Sometime we'd cry. Someone young would fall ill, then disappear. Those weren't as predictable as the usual ones were. But this disappearance was typical. He was old. It was just his time to go.

You must think we're insane. Someone disappears, but no one does a thing. But what you don't understand is that this has been happening for years. Centuries, I think. I haven't been alive that long—only for about twenty-two years or so, I think (my mom never disclosed my actual birth date)—but I'd heard stories about the disappearances.

It usually happens when we aren't paying attention. Someone goes for a walk in the woods. They don't return, but in their wake a circle of mushrooms is left behind. It's a sign from the Spirits that it was their time to go.

It is a tradition of ours to mourn this way. When someone passes from this life into the Neverwhere, we light a fire and burn whatever is left behind. Usually it's a few useless articles of clothing. Maybe some bedding. No big deal.

Life moves on. We mourn their death, celebrate their life, and move on with our own.

The old die and the young live.

But something happened recently that changed my attitude towards the whole "moving on" thing. It's not just a passing. No. It's more than that. It has to be. I know because the last person who disappeared wasn't even close to dying.

And I watched it happen.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't looking forward to going home. My hands were unusually cold. The constant presence that filled the emptiness beside me was now gone, and I didn't think anyone had noticed. It's not typical someone disappears two nights in a row. I wasn't sure if it had ever happened before. Surprises weren't held with high regard. It would be best to wait a week or so, and see if someone notices.

At home, Aunt Ada brought out two bowls of hot mushroom soup, as was tradition after a passing. The Spirits left a ring of mushrooms in the wake of a disappearance, so we prepared them as acceptance of that reality. We ate in silence. I was sure she noticed mother's absence. It did not surprise her.