

WILDGROWN

Chapter One: The Dead Zone

Elara Voss

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The stag is already dead. It just doesn't know it yet.

I watch it from behind the skeleton of a birch tree – one of the last ones still standing on this side of the border, its bark peeled to grey ribbons, its branches reaching for a sky that won't answer. The stag has wandered too far east, the way they sometimes do when the grazing runs thin on the living side. Stupid creature. The grass here looks the same as the grass everywhere else, if you don't know what you're looking for.

I know what I'm looking for. I've been hunting the Ashlands border since I was fourteen.

The stag drops its head and tears at a clump of dead sedge. Its ribs show through the hide – too lean for this early in the season, too hungry to be cautious. The settlement needs the meat. Mara's youngest has been coughing for a week, the kind of wet rattling cough that

keeps the whole eastern hall awake, and bone broth is the only thing that seems to quiet it. I already know exactly how I'll prepare it: slow-simmered with wild garlic from the ravine and whatever root vegetables Thane managed to pull from the garden this morning. A pinch of dried thyme if we have any left. We probably don't.

My brother would tell me I think about food too much. My brother thinks about many things in a way that is simultaneously correct and unhelpful.

I nock the arrow. Draw. Feel the familiar bite of the string against my fingers, the tension building through my shoulders and down the length of my spine. The stag lifts its head and turns east, ears swivelling, and for a moment I think it hears something out there in the dead lands – something I can't. Then it drops back to the sedge, satisfied.

Wind shifts. I hold my breath, count the space between its ribs – there, the soft gap behind the left shoulder where the heart sits undefended.

I release.

The arrow takes the stag clean through the gap. It drops without a sound, as if the earth simply reached up and pulled it down. A clean kill. The cleanest kind, the kind where the animal never knows it was being watched, never has time to flood its own meat with the sour tang of fear.

I climb down from my perch and cross the border.

It's not a wall. Not a fence. Not even a visible line in the dirt. But I feel it – the way you feel the moment you

step from sunlight into shade, that subtle shift in temperature that tells your body something has changed even before your mind catches up. One breath I'm standing on ground that hums, faint and constant, the vibration of the Root Network buzzing up through the soles of my boots like a second pulse. The next breath –

Silence.

Total, absolute, suffocating silence.

I've crossed into the Ashlands a hundred times, maybe more, and it still hits me like a fist to the sternum. Not the absence of sound – there's wind here, and the creak of dead wood, and the distant call of a crow that should know better than to fly this far east. It's the absence of the *other* sound. The one beneath. The one most people don't even know they're hearing until it stops.

The hum of the roots.

Every Grower on this continent lives inside that sound, born into it the way you're born into the rhythm of your own heartbeat. The slow, ancient conversation happening underground – root to root, fungal thread to fungal thread, a network of life whispering beneath every field and forest and city from the northern glaciers to the southern coast. Some people feel it as a warmth. Others describe it as a pressure in their chest, or a faint ringing in their ears that they mistake for tinnitus.

I hear it as a voice. Not words, exactly. More like the shape of words – the cadence and weight of a language I understand without ever having learned it. I've heard it since I was a child, lying awake in the settlement's hall

with my ear pressed to the wooden floor, listening to something my mother told me was just the house settling.

It wasn't the house. Houses don't have opinions.

Here, in the Ashlands, the voice goes quiet. And the quiet is the kind that presses against your skull and makes your teeth ache, the kind that fills itself with every thought you've been trying not to think, every fear you've been drowning in noise.

I ignore it. I've had practice.

The stag lies where it fell, steam rising from the wound into the chill air. I kneel beside it and draw my skinning knife – good iron, sharp enough to split a hair, the handle worn smooth by years of use. My mother's knife, though I try not to think about that. Thinking about my mother while doing the things she taught me is a particular kind of pain I don't have time for.

The soil beneath my knees is grey and dry as old ash. Nothing grows here. Nothing has grown here in two centuries. Even the weeds avoid the Ashlands, as if they can feel the wrongness in the earth – the severed roots, the collapsed network, the vast underground graveyard of connections that once carried life and now carry nothing at all.

Two hundred years ago, this was a Grove. The Fifth Grove – Cinder Hearth.

I peel the hide back from the stag's flank and work the knife along the fascia, the thin membrane that separates skin from muscle. The motion is automatic, which is good,

because the Ashlands have a way of filling your hands with questions when your mind goes still.

The oldest stories say Cinder Hearth was the most powerful of all five Groves. The jewel at the centre, the place where Growers could do things that shouldn't have been possible. Nobody calls it anything now except *the Ashlands* and *that dead place* and *don't go east, girl, nothing good lives east*.

I've heard the official story. Everyone has. The blade catches on a tendon and I adjust, angling the edge to slice clean. The Fifth Grove overreached. Drew too deep from the Root Network, demanded more than the land could give. The network reclaimed what they'd stolen. An entire civilization swallowed by its own arrogance.

I don't believe it. Not entirely.

I've walked this border my whole life, and arrogance doesn't leave scars like this. Whatever happened to Cinder Hearth – it wasn't a warning. It was a wound. My hands know this work the way they know kneading dough or stringing a bow – deep, wordless, automatic. Knowledge that lives in your fingers and doesn't need your mind's permission.

The sun drops lower. Amber light stretches across the grey earth, making the dead trees throw long shadows that look like reaching hands. I should hurry. Thane worries when I'm out past dusk, though he'd sooner chew glass than admit it. He worries with his eyes, my brother – watches the western tree line from our kitchen window, pretending to read while his gaze drifts to the horizon

every thirty seconds. I always know exactly how late I am by how many pages he hasn't turned.

I'm halfway through the second hindquarter, wrapping the cuts in oilcloth, when I see it.

A green shoot. Growing from the grey earth. Three inches tall, slender, with two small leaves unfurling at the top like cupped hands reaching for light.

I stop.

The knife hovers over the joint I was cutting. Blood on my fingers, steam curling from the carcass, the crow calling somewhere overhead – and there, less than an arm's length away, something *alive* in a place where nothing alive should be.

I set the knife down. Slowly. The way you move when you've startled something wild and you're trying to convince it you're not a threat.

I've spent twenty-two years on the border of the Ashlands. I have watched the dead zone through every season, studied it with the patience of someone who grew up inside its shadow, who knows its moods the way a fisherman knows tides. I have never – not once, not ever – seen anything grow from this soil.

I wipe my hands on my trousers and crawl closer.

The shoot trembles. Not from the wind – the air is dead still. It trembles from the inside, as if something beneath the surface is pushing it upward, fighting against the dead earth the way a drowning swimmer claws toward air. The leaves are a green so vivid it looks wrong, saturated and impossible, the kind of green that exists in

the living forest and has no business being here. No business at all.

The Root Network – the faint hum I carry in my bones even standing on dead ground, the echo of the living world at my back – shifts. Like a note bending in a song. Like something enormous turning to look at me.

I should not touch it.

I know this the way I know the border, the way I know the stories. Things that grow where they shouldn't are not gifts. They're traps, or tests, or warnings. The settlement elders would tell me to walk away. Thane would tell me to walk away. Every sensible part of my brain is telling me to wrap the meat, shoulder the pack, and get back to the living side while the sun still gives me an excuse.

I reach out.

My fingertips brush the first leaf.

The world detonates.

Green erupts from the point of contact – vines bursting from the soil in every direction, thick as my wrist, covered in thorns and flowers that bloom in real time, petals unfolding in cascading waves of gold and white and a red so deep it's nearly black. The shoot becomes a sapling in a breath, a tree in two, branches cracking upward through the dead air, leaves unfurling with a sound like a hundred whispered conversations happening at once. The ground buckles and splits. Roots – visible, pale, glistening – claw to the surface, tangling and weaving in patterns I've never been taught but

somehow *recognise*, like a language I spoke in a dream and forgot upon waking.

For three heartbeats, the Ashlands are alive.

I can hear it. The Root Network, roaring through these new channels like a river breaking through a dam, the hum so loud it fills my skull, my chest, the hollow spaces between my ribs. It's not just sound. It's *joy*. Raw, desperate, starving joy – as if the land itself has been waiting two hundred years for someone to touch it and say *grow*.

And underneath the joy – threaded through it, inseparable from it, the harmony that makes the melody meaningful – something else. Something that doesn't have a name in any vocabulary I know but that I feel the way you feel a change in temperature: a shift in the quality of the air, a deepening of the Root Network's voice, a resonance that says *this is what the earth sounds like when the wound is healing*. Not healed. Not whole. But the first breath of something that might, given time and stubbornness and someone willing to keep their hands in the dirt, grow back.

My eyes sting. I don't know why. Or I do know, and I'm not ready to admit it: that standing in the centre of something this raw and this hopeful and this impossible is the closest I've been to crying since my mother died, and the reason is the same. Not grief. *Recognition*. The feeling of encountering something you didn't know you'd lost until the moment you found it again.

And then it dies.

The green turns grey. The flowers blacken and curl like paper held to flame. The tree – already six feet tall, already reaching, already breathing – cracks down its centre with a sound like a spine breaking. The vines wither. The roots shrivel. The leaves crumble to ash between one breath and the next. Decay races outward from the point where my fingers touched the shoot, consuming everything the bloom created, and in five seconds there is nothing left.

Nothing but grey dirt and the faint, acrid smell of something that burned without ever catching fire.

And underneath it all – in the space where the Root Network had screamed its joy, in the place where the hum should live but doesn't –

Something screams back.

Not sound. Not vibration. Something deeper, something that moves through the dead roots beneath the soil the way lightning moves through a cloud, something that hits me in the chest and the spine and the place behind my eyes where headaches are born. A voice that isn't a voice. A presence that fills the silence the way water fills a well – dark and cold and so vast I can feel the edges of it pressing against the inside of my skull, testing, searching, as if it's looking for a way in.

I scramble backward. My boot catches the stag's hind leg and I go down hard, palms slapping dead earth, and the scream cuts off as suddenly as it began. Not fading. Not tapering. Simply *stopped*, as if whatever made it closed its mouth.

Silence. The real kind. The kind with nothing underneath.

I lie there. Breathing. Heart slamming against my ribs hard enough that I can feel it in my throat. The sky above is cloudless, the pale amber of late afternoon, ordinary and empty and utterly indifferent to the fact that something just screamed at me from beneath two centuries of dead earth. A crow calls to the west. Wind moves through the dead birches with a sound like dry paper folding.

Normal. Everything normal. Just a girl lying in the dirt next to a half-skinned stag, staring at the sky, trying very hard to remember how her lungs work.

I make myself stand. My hands are shaking. I tell myself it's the cold – early spring, late afternoon, the Ashlands always drop temperature faster than the living side. It's a lie and I know it, but the lie is functional, and right now I need functional more than I need honest.

I gather the meat. Wrap the cuts in oilcloth. Bundle the hide separately – Thane will want it for patching the roof leak he pretends isn't getting worse. I work quickly, mechanically, hands moving through a routine so practised it doesn't require thought. Good. Thought is dangerous right now.

I do not look at the patch of grey earth where the shoot grew. I do not think about the green, or the flowers, or the sound the Root Network made when it remembered – just for a moment, just for three impossible heartbeats – how to sing.

I do not think about the voice in the dark.

I hoist the bundle onto my shoulders and turn toward the border. Three steps. Three steps from the hum, from the living side, from ground that remembers what it means to hold a root system.

I take one.

And something stops me.

Not the voice. Not the silence. My hand.

I raise it in the fading light. Turn it palm-up. And there – tracing the inside of my right wrist, spreading to the heel of my palm, mapping the place where my fingertips touched the shoot – dark lines. Thin, branching, delicate. Running just beneath the skin like veins, but not the blue of blood.

The colour of roots.

They spread as I watch. Slow, deliberate, forking and rejoining in patterns that mirror the root systems I see when heavy rain washes away topsoil on the living side. They're warm. Faintly, impossibly warm, as if something is alive inside them – something humming at a frequency just below hearing, just above feeling.

I pull my sleeve down. Hard. Tuck the cuff tight around my wrist until the lines disappear beneath worn leather and stained cotton. My hands are shaking and my heart is trying to exit my body through my throat and the root-lines beneath the cuff are pulsing with a warmth that says *we're here, we're here, you're not imagining this, we're here*, and I want to scream at them to be quiet because I am standing on the border of a dead zone that

has just screamed at me and my skin is drawing itself a map and nobody told me the rules of this game and I am not, have never been, will never be a person who handles the unknown with grace.

I handle the unknown the way I handle everything: by pulling my sleeve down and walking home and pretending the world hasn't changed until I've had time to cook something and think about it.

Then I cross the border and step back into the living world, where the roots welcome me home with a sound like a thousand voices sighing in relief – a sound I have never heard them make before, not once in twenty-two years of listening.

Not relief.

Recognition.

I walk home fast. I don't look back.

I don't tell Thane about the shoot when I arrive, though he watches me unpack the stag with those careful eyes of his – the ones that miss nothing and say less. I don't tell Mara or Desh or old Corwin who sits by the fire and reads weather in the way smoke bends. I don't tell anyone.

Some things, once spoken, become real in ways they weren't before. Words are seeds – my mother told me that, on one of the last nights she was lucid enough to tell me anything. Words are seeds, and once you plant them in someone else's mind, they grow in ways you can't control and can't predict and can't take back. The border teaches you this: that information is power and silence is

safety and the things you don't say are the things that can't be used against you.

And I have survived twenty-two years on the edge of the dead lands by understanding one rule, the only rule that matters out here where the roots stop and the silence begins.

The things that grow in the dark are never meant for the light.

Or so I tell myself, pulling the blanket over my head in the settlement hall, listening to the snoring of the Hessik brothers and the quiet breathing of Mara's sick boy and the house settling around me with sounds that are not, despite what my mother said, just the house. The root patterns on my wrist glow faintly in the dark beneath the blanket, warm and patient, and the Root Network hums beneath the floorboards with a voice that sounds, if I'm honest, if I stop pretending, if I let the truth grow in the silence where I've been burying it for twenty-two years –

Like it's been waiting for me.

But I am not ready for that. Not tonight. Tonight I am a girl with a bruise on her wrist from touching something she shouldn't have, and tomorrow I will wrap the meat and feed the settlement and pretend the world hasn't shifted beneath my feet.

Tomorrow. The growing can wait until tomorrow.

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