

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of *All the Colors of the Dark* begins with Saint embarking on a solitary journey, stepping onto the first bus of the day. The bus is filled with weary shift workers, their tired faces reflecting the strain of long hours, their heads nodding as they try to grab a few more moments of rest before they reach their destinations. The bus moves down a gray, almost lifeless road that stretches endlessly before her, surrounded by fields of brown wheat, which seem incomplete and desolate, as if the land had been left unfinished by some higher power. Along the way, towering pylons stand, their skeletal shapes contrasting with the sparse landscape, while a faded water tower interrupts the barren sky, adding an eerie stillness to the journey.

When she reaches Chesterwood, Saint disembarks and transfers to a second bus. The new driver's eyes remain fixed on her through the rearview mirror, his curiosity evident as she takes her seat, absorbing the uncertainty of what lies ahead. The landscape gradually transforms, from flat grassland to salt-streaked gravel, and the bus continues to rumble slowly, as if struggling to reach its destination. As the bus creaks and the suspension groans, it gradually slows to a halt, signaling the end of this particular journey. Saint steps off, feeling a sense of foreboding as the driver's gaze lingers on her before the vehicle disappears into the distance, leaving her alone in an unfamiliar and unsettling place.

Saint walks down a straight road, referencing her map to ensure she is headed in the right direction. The feeling of isolation wraps around her as she enters a sprawling woodland, the trees towering over her and the air thick with the scent of damp earth. She feels as if the forest itself is alive, watching her with its silent presence, urging her forward into its depths. Every step feels weighted with uncertainty, but she is determined to press on, her senses heightened as she navigates through the dense undergrowth, constantly aware of the unfamiliar world around her.

After some time, Saint encounters a cautionary sign that warns of a "Minimum Maintenance Road," reminding her of the dangers ahead. The path becomes more treacherous as she continues, with tightly rolled hay bales scattered throughout the fields, a tractor mired in mud, and trees growing closer, as if the landscape itself is trying to encircle her. The environment feels alive with movement, and the wind carries the scent of wild flora, a stark contrast to the heavy atmosphere of dread that clings to her. Leaves rustle in the distance, and possum haw berries tumble into the gully, their bright red color stark against the shadowy backdrop of the forest.

Saint proceeds cautiously, splashing through a cold stream that cuts through the path, feeling the chill as it soaks her boots. In the distance, deer graze lazily, unaware of her presence, while raccoons scurry in the underbrush, and ravens circle above, their black silhouettes cutting through the sky. The moment is almost surreal, as if nature itself is indifferent to her presence. The first drops of rain begin to fall, dappling the canopy above and casting shifting light through the leaves, adding to the sense of isolation that continues to press in around her.

Soon, she spots a solitary house, its exterior weathered and worn by time. The structure seems abandoned, with a corrugated steel roof that looks as though it has seen better days and several outbuildings that appear to be on the verge of collapse. A rusty tractor lies half-submerged in the mud, while a decaying shack tells the story of neglect and disrepair. However, it's the sight of the navy steel van parked inside the largest barn that fills her with an unmistakable sense of dread, a signal that something is terribly wrong.

The tension in the air grows as she hears a sound in the distance, her pulse quickening. She spins around, expecting the worst, only to spot a fox squirrel climbing a beech tree. Her heart still pounds in her chest as she approaches the porch, every step seeming louder in the silence. She knows that in her bag lie the only means of defense she has left—her slingshot and her grandfather's gun—objects that give her a small sense of security but also remind her of the peril she faces.