

The Trail

She is exhausted. The walk is long and grueling and every inch of her aches. The scenery is incredible, the rolling hills and endless trees. Not a person in sight. The trail can't be far.

Alone in the woods.

Or so she hopes.

One foot in front of the other. She plods on. Naked feet squelching mud between her toes. Keep going, although her muscles scream. She is so tired.

The snap of a twig. A rustle in the trees. Muscles tense.

"Hey!"

She bolts, heart pounding, blood ringing in her ears.

How could he have caught up so quickly?

Branches snatch at her ankles as she runs, grabbing like he did. Days ago. Weeks? The mud gives way under her feet, making her slip. Her hand stretches out in front of her to stop the imminent fall and her thumbs scream in agony.

Of all of her, the wounds on her thumbs are the worst. The skin is mottled and blue, the nails on both almost black from the gathered blood beneath. Thin metal rings have eaten and ripped away at the flesh beneath the joins. It stings as she mud seeps into the infected tissue.

Exhausted, she pushes off the ground, pushing ever further. She can't have missed the hiking trail, it must be close. She won't go back. Not to the masked man. Not to his shack on the mountainside. Not to those makeshift cells. And not to the wall where he'd hand her, the cuffs on her thumbs holding all her weight for hours.

It's not for her, not really. There are others hidden in the darkness of the shack. She knew their names, their voices, their screams when he hurt them, just as well as they knew hers. Her stomach twists, a knot of tangled writhing snakes within her. They told her to run and she had obeyed.

She cannot get caught again, she has to tell someone, get them found too. Safe and home. Just like she will-

"Oh my god!" The hiker's voice is light, edged with shock and surprise, but it may as well have been a gunshot. She freezes at the unexpected sight of him on the path ahead. "Are you alright?"

She is rooted to the spot, dangling in terror like a rabbit in a trap. This hiker isn't masked, but her captor wouldn't wear a mask to catch her, would he?

But this hiker looks kind, his eyes are blue as the ocean. She can't remember the man's eyes behind the mask - had they been blue? She takes a step back, and the puddles of ocean take in the bareness of her feet, the marks down her legs.

"You're hurt," he says, the voice softening further. "Come with me, I'll get you somewhere-" he stops the moment she takes another step back. "Whoa, it's ok. Don't worry, you're ok. The village is back this way. Phones don't work out here..." He points behind him like it's just a short while away. But she doesn't move. Too much is at stake to trust the first man she finds. "Come with-"

He stops, eyes focussing behind her on the path, a voice drifting through the trees a couple following behind. The husband is tall and burly, his wife short, hair slicked back. Her heart skips a beat in hope. They lock eyes with her and the strange hiker and the taller man's eyes furrow in suspicion, his wife looking tense, eyes darting between the motionless pair on the path.

"What's going on here?" The new man's is booming, every syllable screaming dominance as he looks over the hiker and the beaten woman in front of him.

"I don't know man," the hiker rushes to respond. "I found her like this a few minutes ago. I'm trying to take her back to the village."

The bigger man's eyes narrow as they trail over the bruises, the lesions, the marks of cruelty upon her skin.

"You did this to her?"

"No way! She just came running out of the trees-" but he can't get through the sentence before the burly husband turns to her.

"Which way did he say the village was?" She points a quaking hand and the giant seems to growl. "Get away from him, lass. That leads further into the mountains. Come here." The woman by his side nods in agreement.

The hiker splutters. "Mate, it's not. I just came from the village. It's only three miles down!"

The runaway trembles, looking from man to man, eyes darting as her heart hammers against her chest. She's so tired of running- she wants to believe the hiker that it's only three miles to go but... something about it says that's too easy. The couple holds out a hand to her. She steps their way.

"You need to come with me." The hiker's voice cuts sharply through the forest a second before she reaches them. "You need to come with me. You'll be safe with me."

But the woman's soft eyes meet hers. Kind green and filled with pity. The eyes of someone who will care for her. Her husband puts a protective hand on the runaway's back to guide her between him and his wife. "Come on, let's get you home."

And so she walks with them, away from the hiker who stands agape on the path.

He is gone soon enough, swallowed by trees and undergrowth and the lilting chirrup of evening birds.

The husband never removes his palm from her back, resting there. The safety of them bleeds into her aching muscles, and her knees give out from exhaustion. Both man and woman catch her, the giant scooping her into his arms.

"I've got you. It's ok."

As his wife's hands retract, she sees them. Bruised swollen rings torn into the flesh of both thumbs. Marks to match her own.

She chokes on air, her body too exhausted to give her tears.

"It's ok," he repeats. "I've got you."