

Dusk had long since swallowed the blood-smearred, crimson sunset – mist eclipsed the moon, watching the little boy among the limbs of trees, feverishly hunting for the inexistent exit. Deceased leaves lay scattered, scarred and scrambled along the winding alleyways, between the ribbons of trees. Seeking shelter amongst the thorny brambles, of the endless crescendo of undergrowth, the young boy stopped paralysed in mid step. Beyond the sight of all living, a figure hovered in the midst of the fog, snapping twigs with each step. Clutching a trunk with every ounce of strength in him, his knuckles white with anticipation – the young boy waited for the arrival of the unwanted visitor. The silhouette moved even closer, between the petrified shadows of the surrounding trees. Chittering in treetops, flapping in the branches and scrambling amongst the hedges – the forest's song fell short. Silence engulfed the forest. Signs of the imposter faded, and the colour that had not long before drained from the boy's complexion, regained its territory. Gradually the boy set out on his quest to find shelter in the impenetrable darkness.

A glimmer of hope glistened in the distance, in the form of flames, radiating some but little heat in an attempt to thaw the stone-cold atmosphere, that immersed the forest and its inhabitants. Aghast at the hazy environment that filled the neck of the woods as far as the eye could see – the young boy hesitantly moved in the direction of the flickering fire. Snapping the tranquility as if it were a feeble twig; leaves rustled out of sight. The young boy's heart raced like a drum in the broken silence and pungent winds twisted through the bare limbs of the long-gone winter, entwining themselves in-between the knots of brambles and coiling around the plump trunks of the trees. Branches whimpered at the force of the bitter blows that suffocated any still surviving leaf; the silhouette seemed just as uncanny as the whispering winds. Barely allowing himself a single breath, the boy stood among the trees: still, unmoving, motionless.

Raspy breathing enveloped the woods like a rough blanket, encasing all living inside. Sudden sharp movement disturbed the tranquility that had once ruled the forest. Hastily, the young child took off with the silhouette in hot pursuit of him. Flailing with his limbs as he scampered in between the knots of brambles, along the sprinkled leaves and among the jagged pathways he dodged every obstacle effortlessly. The silhouette was fast but lacked the agility that the child had. Racing through the forest grounds tripping, stumbling and tumbling over the devious roots and twigs – the young boy dared to look behind him after several minutes of sprinting. Nothing. Gasping for air as if it were his last intake; the boy seemed satisfied that he had outrun the stranger and made his way towards the eerie glow at the edge of a nearby clearing. Approaching the light – the boy discovered a ramshackle cottage, neighbors with a small pit being destroyed by slithering flames.

Perched on a thick log that lay on the forest's floor, the child kept watch for any unwanted intruders. Finally assured that he wasn't followed, he admired as the embers danced between the flames, content with the heat of the fire. Observing the nightly chorus of voices, he became accustomed to the occasional chittering, rustling or cracking in the midst of the ribbon of trees, that twisted around the woods. Relaxing in the company of the sweet nightly sounds and the silence that wrapped that forest with its warm touch, the worries that had previously consumed the boy washed away. Flames glowed in the moonlight; performing a show for anyone who would watch, oblivious to the peril, threat and danger that lurked behind the curtain of darkness - awaiting the right moment to emerge out of the depths. The unsuspecting young boy warmed his hands over the welcoming fire - seemingly forgetting the danger that awaited him not far away.

Torn to consciousness at the sudden ending of the forest lullaby - he became aware of a shadow that loomed over him sickeningly, devilishly. Swiveling around to meet the gaze of a sinister figure with a demonic grin, the young boy's screams pierced the night air - fading and yet growing as he was hauled into the never-ending labyrinth of the woods.

Streaks of pain slashed across his back - brandishing him with permanent scars, to remind him of the fire that spread swiftly across his back. Attempts to escape were becoming more feeble with every stroke. Crying every last drop of tears and screaming every last tone of sound, the child squirmed in agony under two muscular arms holding him down; there was no chance of escape. Wracking his mind for any sign of what he could have done to deserve this anguish, the child was interrupted by a new flame spreading like wildfire on his bare, weak and blood-soaked back - squeezing every last ounce of life out of him. Soon he lay there lifeless; motionless, unobjecting.

By ML