

Red Leaves

I lay in a bed of russet leaves, fallen like drops of sun from Autumn trees. I taste the crispness of the cold, like shards of ice on my tongue. I feel the hug of dying leaves, coaxing me to rest with them. I smell the sharp scent of blood. If I stay still long enough they may not see me. I see the river of blood trickling down my red fur...

I was running. I ran with everything in me as the hounds chased after me. I prayed as blood pounded in my ears, I prayed as my lungs began to unravel, I prayed for my life, for my safety, for my cubs.

My vision blurred and warped itself around me like a storm: Trees became men, stones became hounds, rays of sun became hellfire. How was I meant to see the trap?

Thinking you have outrun something is like the first bite of a forbidden fruit. You are overwhelmed with a sickly sweetness, suddenly subdued by a screaming sensation of joy.

But then it hits you. All it takes is that sudden "crack" as the jaws of an iron beast bites into your flesh and bone, I felt the pain explode through my body like a thistle bud opening, my body crumpled to the ground, falling in a heavy whirlwind, like a sycamore seed.

The moment you look down, that is when the real pain hits. The body you once knew peeled open like a conker - nothing but a reddish mess clinging to a broken femur by a few bedraggled pieces of sinew.

It is strange how quickly I gave up. I have always seen myself as a fighter. And I stopped screaming too. Struggling just stretched the hole like a womb, but the screaming (I realised) was just a waste of time.

My first born came into the world with bright burning auburn eyes, like the sun. I knew then what true joy is. My next four all had their own little patch of sun on them. A white patch of fur behind the ear, a big toothy smile, a big flowing tail and an extra whisker on one side; all imprinted on my heart.

I could lie. I could say they'll all be okay, they have the others to look after them after all. But the scar left by losing a Mother can never be healed. I should know... I have failed them.

You won't believe how quickly blood leaves a body. It just floods out of you like a stream taking all that's inside with it, leaving you docile. Perhaps that is why I don't care when I hear the gruff barks of hounds and the ostentatious laughs of men.

In a flash of red they come around the corner on a herd of horses who can't bear to look at me, the horrors they have seen leaving their eyes empty. A man dismounts.

The leaves are so tempting now. So soft. So warm.

I look up into his eyes as he stands above me with a rifle in his chapped and tobacco ridden hands, and I do not care.

You would think I would have so much to say. But I have lost it now - the one attribute almost all humans lack - the ability to care. I feel the warm sun tingling on my face like a blessing. Why should I waste my energy caring about this man? When my thoughts can rest with my cubs.

And so that is where I will always rest. Their little patches of sun are printed on me. And I am printed on them.

By Alfie, age 16

