

Klimt awoke and the moon returned his gaze from the sky: it was the first thing he saw. The wound-like markings that ran across it appeared vivid and solid, so much so that he reached out his hand as if he wanted to grab it and pluck it from the sky. His arm rose and created a dark shadow that struck his face.

He realized that he was in a forest. Beneath his body, the grass and brushwood were damp from the cold of the night, and all around him was a circle of tall fir trees, whose tips, straight as needles, alternated with each other in a climb toward the stars. It must have been a small clearing, a clearing in a forest that surely continued for acres and acres, similar to the one where Klimt and Marcel gathered wood.

He widened his eyes and a dull ache ran through his chest. He sat down and let his legs sink into the grass and flowers, his gaze now steady in front of him. He tried to breathe, and failed, he realized he had something inside him, like a large boulder of ice or a spider web impossible to break. He tried again to breathe and got only a convulsive spasm, which almost bothered him.

Klimt moved his hand to his own throat and followed its contours, only to realize that when he strained to breathe, that one merely stood still, unresponsive to the rest of his body.

He was naked, he understood that, too. His pale skin sank into the blue of the night and the silver of the moon as if he were drowning, and all his muscles, she sensed clearly, were just tugging and pulling, shot through with a rush of lightning that did not seem to stop.

Where was Marcel? Marcel was with him. All he remembered, before the moon, was Marcel's face: his brother's green eyes mirrored in his own and then the feeling that he had to escape, to survive. Marcel could not be far away. Whatever had happened, they could not have been so far away. Where their parents were, was a mystery: no matter how hard Klimt tried, he could not remember their faces, let alone their names. He could only think of Marcel.

He rose to his feet with ease and looked around. He managed to spot a path that continued through a dark forest and instinctively moved in that direction: he thus left the clearing, not knowing that he would never be able to find it again and that the place would become, over time, a mere sensation.

The path branched off into a narrow road uncertain of its direction, all curves and sharp corners, as if they had mapped it out with their eyes closed. The moonlight could not break through the blanket of trees, but Klimt could move smoothly: it was, however, a mechanical and desperate advance, a physical panic that was slowly infecting his whole body. In his mouth, he felt a strange taste.

The silence around him was deafening: it started right from his body, desolate and mute, and continued through the rest of the forest. No animals were moving in the darkness, no wolf or owl calls, even the night air seemed still.

The vegetation became thicker, so much so that he had to start moving it with his hands. At first, they were controlled and posed movements, then they became fierce: in the darkness, brambles and branches grabbed him like claws and dragged him toward them, and Klimt, like a trapped animal, tried to tear and destroy them in turn. They cut his legs and torso, sinking into his flesh, and left deep red furrows on his hands.

Klimt tore and tore and tore until the hands disappeared and he came before three figures, gathered around a fire and a sloping rock. He did not fall before them, but stood still, terrified by that vision and at the same time relieved to see something recognizable as another human being.

Their faces emerged in the flames like mirages, and above them, the darkness of the forest teemed with other illusions.

They were two men and a woman.

The woman was sitting on the rock, her long legs left dangling just above the fire, and the darkness made her look even thinner, turning every shadow that crossed her ribs into an abyss in which to lose herself. A man, the one crouching near the fire, was on his back, while the first one looked in his direction and was one of the largest men Klimt had ever seen. On his hands shone curved nails, resembling real claws.

Klimt walked over and found himself at the man's feet, lying on top of himself. He was so close to his boots that he could have been trampled.

«You must help me» his voice was different, corroded by something unknown, «My brother... My brother must be lost».

The woman came down from the rock and reached him so quickly that his head spun. Her bare chest was crisscrossed with tattoos, and her fingers were long and skeletal. She crouched before him and took his face in her hands.

«Poor little one» she murmured, «He's another one of those. He doesn't remember anything»

«Little one?» the clawed man spoke suddenly, catching him by surprise «Jarai, he's a beast. He is as big as I am»

Jarai licked her lips. Fire lit them up, showing the blood surrounding them. «But not as strong as you, for sure».

The man seemed satisfied and lifted Klimt by the back of his head. Instinctively, he grabbed his arm and began to pull, but met with iron-like resistance, and even when he tried to bite it, the other only strengthened his grip, hurting him.

«I don't feel like wasting my time with this one. I've already done the last one» he turned to the man sitting in front of the fire. «Petre, you take care of it».

Petre turned around at that moment. Klimt could not scream, fear choked in his throat and mixed with the strange taste that fouled his mouth. Petre did not really have a face, but rather, he had the remnants of what must have been a face: exposed muscles and ragged skin tried to contain oversized bones that seemed to want to escape; his eyes, empty orbs of bone and skin, shifted to him.

It moved calmly, so slowly that Klimt began to think it was not moving, and when it faced him, his fear froze into a static and constant, terrible terror.

Petre's mouth opened in the flesh and revealed sharp fangs. «What are you looking for?» seeing that he did not answer, he spoke again «Why were you walking through the forest?»

«My brother» Klimt replied without realizing it, lost in those non-existent eyes «My brother Marcel is not with me. Before I fell asleep, he was with me»

The human, the creature, that being seemed almost to smile bitterly. He put an intact and beautiful hand on his chest and barely pushed. «Your brother has always been with you. You killed him to survive. His blood enabled you to overcome the disease. Your quest is over».

The fire crackled in the silence of the night. Jarai, Petre and the clawed man stood looking at it.

«I do not understand»

«Some among us forget. The pain is too great»

«Pain?» he was crying «I did not kill my brother. I did not eat my brother. Why should I have? Why would a human being do such a thing? And you, what are you? Monsters. You are filthy with blood. It was you who killed Marcel»

Later, they would tell him that his screams had been heard at the camp: everyone there had turned to listen and the echo of that voice, had been answered in the nightmare they had all experienced. No one felt pity, however.

Petre stroked his face, shushing him. He stared at him again and his mouth opened again like a butterfly from a cocoon. «You don't remember, but you were sick. Like the rest of us. Sanguinarius, they called it, the disease of blood and life. Anyone who contracts it is at first afflicted with terrible fevers and convulsions, lies lifeless in bed until his last minutes start ticking on the clock, and then, as soon as he gets the chance, kills the first person he finds at his side. And he drinks their blood. He drains the body of it».

Klimt stood with his mouth wide open, feeling his tears wet his fangs, rinsing away that oh-so-familiar red that had stained his throat and teeth until that moment.

«He then falls into a deep sleep» Petre continued, «Killing us is not easy. Treating us is impossible. So, they transport us here, to the northern forests. They take off our clothes and burn them. Our families, if they are lucky, manage to escape before being killed as possibly infected. And we stay, here, together. As far as I know, we will stay here for eternity»

He then turned toward the clawed man, who was still holding him. Klimt's body, however, was now swaying hanging in the void like a hanged man, and his gaze was lost in Petre's eye sockets; blood was spilling from his mouth, slowly trickling down his body.

A stabbing pain shot through his chest, starting from his back.

«Let him sleep. We're done here». Everything went dark as the creature turned to Jarai «Let's go back to Kaspar, I think he will want to examine this one».

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The first memories began to resurface upon his second awakening and never left his eyes.

His brother had fought back desperately. He had grabbed his head and pushed his face away, had hit him on the head again and again and again, had screamed with all the breath in his body, and had pleaded with him until he had turned his name into a prayer, and Klimt had devoured him.

Starting from the chest, he then ravaged his brother's neck and throat, until he reached his face, that look of meadows and sunshine that had remained endlessly open and empty filled with tears, and had not stopped for a moment.

Klimt brushed his lips with his fingers and felt them smeared with dried blood. His hands trembled, but he was afraid to cry: his chest did not move and his heart, which should have been beating wildly, was still. Every now and then it would barely throb, a dying tremor echoing among his bones.