

How the Light came to the Terrible Forest

Once upon a time, when the sun and the moon were young, and the world still remembered the great darkness before the lights were set in the sky, there was a vast forest, set in the marshes beside a wide, black river. I cannot begin to tell you what a horrible place it was. Try to imagine a thick tangle of twisted trees, whose roots rose up in the middle of the pathways to catch your feet, and whose branches and dripping leaves met overhead to stop any light from reaching the ground. Between the trees grew long brambles, with thorns like clarning needles, and never a trace of sweet blackberry. Long creepers hung from the treetops, with stems like stinging nettles and burrs which clung to anyone who passed underneath. The ground was thick sticky mud, more than five feet deep in places, and even on the paths it would come up to your ankles; and, under the mud, leeches lay in wait to fasten themselves between your toes and drink your blood. Try to imagine it: but the forest was a hundred times worse than anything you can think of.

For in the forest lived all the bad, wicked creatures who hated the light: the dragons and the werewolves; the ghouls and the night hags; the goblins and the

big, black spiders; and, most terrible of all, the Dark Queen, who had the face of a huge snake and spat poison into the eyes of those she hated. She hated everything that lived in the light and made terrible plans to destroy the children of the earth, who loved to sing and dance under the sun and the moon. But she could not attack them openly, because she and all the creatures of the darkness were afraid of the light and dared not travel out of the wood.

Sometimes travellers who came near to the dark forest wandered into the shadow of the trees, because the paths were wide and dry near the edges, and were gay with brightly coloured flowers and scarlett butterflies. But those who tried to take a shortcut through the forest were soon helplessly lost, and ran shouting through the brambles, weaving in and out of the curtains of creepers. The wicked creatures of the forest always gathered in the trees around a lost traveller, laughing and jeering and, sometimes, offering to lead the way to the edge of the trees. But anyone who followed such a ~~guide~~ guide was soon wading through thick mud, and many found themselves sinking up to their ~~knees~~^{necks} in the marsh, while the goblin - it was usually a goblin who played this trick - shrieked with laughter in a nearby tree.

Now, every night, the Moon Princess passed over this awful forest, and she was sad when she saw that many of the children of the earth, whom she loved dearly, were

lost under the trees in the black darkness. She decided that she would bring her silver light into the shadows to comfort them and lead them back to the bright lands beyond the woods. So, one night, when the moon was full, the Moon Princess came down to the earth as the sun was rising and walked into the dark forest. ~~She decided that she would bring her silver light~~ by the path lined with purple flowers, that so many of the children of earth had taken.

As she walked under the trees, her soft, silver light shone for the first time in that place, and the travellers who saw it were filled with hope; but the wicked night creatures hated and feared her. Yet they were glad that the Moon Princess had come into the forest, because they thought that they could trap her in the thickest part, so that the moon would not shine upon the earth, and the Dark Queen could attack the children of earth when the sun had set. A small group of the boldest goblins moved before her, hidden by the thick screen of creepers, making the path plainer so that she could reach the black heart of the forest more quickly. At last, she came to a place where the trees grew so close together and the brambles were so thick, that she could go no further, and the creepers formed a blanket around her so that her light could not be seen. When she stopped, the thick creepers wound themselves around her arms and legs

and held her so tightly that she could not move or free herself.

Then the Dark Queen came and stood before her and laughed to see her hanging among twisted creepers; and she said,

"You fool, to come into my forest! Now you will be my prisoner, and you will hang there until I decide to kill you with my poison. But first, my armies will destroy the children of the earth, when the darkness falls."

When she had spoken, her daughters and the other wicked creatures surrounded the Moon Princess, pressing close about her, and tying her arms and legs even tighter with thin, spiny brambles and the fierce, stinging creepers. They boasted of how they would kill the children of earth when night fell, except for those few who would live for ever as slaves in the Dark Queen's fortress. The Moon Princess did not cry, or plead for mercy, but hung from the trees for a day and a night, and her light died.

At evening time, the sun set, and the children of earth were very surprised when the moon did not rise as usual. They gathered together in small groups, looking towards the east, and asking each other if it was not the time of the full moon. But they knew that something was terribly wrong; and, when they heard the stirrings in the dark forest and realised that its wicked creatures were ready to attack them, they were afraid. Some hid in their houses and whimpered with fear; some collected stones and kitchen knives

and ran about to all their neighbours, shouting to keep up their courage; and those who loved the Moon Princess best wept for her, for they thought that she was lost for ever.

Then the Mother of the Moon Princess, the Star-Blazing Queen, heard the cries of the children of earth, and saw that her daughter was a prisoner in the dark forest. She came at once to the earth, and as she came near, the children of earth hid their faces and did not dare to look at her; because, although she loved them, they now lived far from her and they could not bear her light. The children of earth could not even look directly at the sun, for their eyes were weak, but the Star-Blazing Queen was brighter than a thousand suns and they were afraid to see her - even those who loved her daughter's silver light.

When the Star-Blazing Queen came near to the forest, the creatures who saw her fled in terror, and scattered over the earth. The travellers threw themselves to the ground covering their eyes with their cloaks until she had passed. As she walked through the forest, the thick, sticky mud dried and became firm; the thorns and creepers shrivelled and burned up under her fiery gaze; and the trees stood for the first time tall and straight before her, for they knew that she had made them. Behind her, the fresh, green grass sprang from the newly dried soil, and the flowers of the bright wood - primroses, violets, bluebells and woodbine - opened their petals to the light.

She came at last to the thicket where

The Moon Princess was held prisoner. The Dark Queen did not wait to meet her, but, at the sound of her footsteps, she ran out of the forest so fast that she overtook the wind before her, and did not stop until she reached the sea at the edge of the world. The Star-Blazing Queen took her daughter into her arms, and the creepers and briars which bound her withered away, and her light shone forth again. The Moon Princess hugged her mother, and both of them cried for joy, because the Moon Princess was free and the Dark Queen and all her followers had fled. But the Star-Blazing Queen knew that her light was too bright for the children of earth, and so she rose again into the sky, leaving her daughter to light the forest and bring the lost travellers safely home.

There was one creature of the night who had not run away when the Star-Blazing Queen appeared in the forest. She was the youngest daughter of the Dark Queen, and she had felt sorry for the Moon Princess when the other wicked creatures tormented her. Now she was trying to hide behind a gnarled old tree at the edge of the thicket, for she longed to come to the light but was afraid. The Moon Princess saw her, and called to her to come nearer. The daughter of the Dark Queen threw herself at the feet of the Moon Princess, wrapping her cloak about her head and trembling in every limb. The Moon Princess raised her to her feet

and kissed her, and the daughter of the Dark Queen loved the Moon Princess, and forgot her wicked mother and walked in the light.

The Moon Princess walked through every part of the forest, and, wherever she went, the forest became light, the paths became firm and dry, and the grass and bright flowers covered the ground beneath the singing trees. All the children of earth who were lost in the forest followed her and came at last into the bright open country under the sun. When they looked back into the woods, they saw the sunbeams playing under the branches of the trees, and wild roses blossoming in the warm sunlight.

When the sun set on that day, the moon rose into her rightful place in the sky, and the children of earth danced and sang on the the flower-studded grass in her silver light; but the creatures of the dark forest hid in their holes and quaked with fear. To this day, the wicked creatures cannot bear to come out into the moonlight; but if ever you see one ^{come} sneaking out on a dark moonless night, thinking that the Moon Princess will not see it, you have only to remind it of the night when the Star-Blessing Queen came to find her daughter in the darkness, and it will run to hide itself in a deep hole and not dare to come out for a very long time.