

The Harvester
by Caroline Shirley

The road is so dark that even the street lamps that line it find little luck in intruding upon its unlit state. A boy runs along this shadowed street. The breaths that choke through in ragged gasps turn to mist, quickly left behind to dissolve in the wind. His bare feet, ripped to shreds from the friction of his skin rubbing against the ancient street, thump furiously against the sidewalk. But the pain from these wounds no longer reaches his mind. He has now been running for hours, and his conscious thoughts have dissolved under the pounding of his footsteps. His world has shrunk to match his simple task. His exhausted mind can form only one thought. He must keep running.

He no longer remembers why. He no longer knows when he started or how long it has been. Those thoughts have been lost to the winds that trail him. He runs purely on instinct now. And that instinct is driving him. Pushing him. Letting him run on. His vision has turned red from pain, so he no longer sees the yellow eyes that watch him from the edge of the street lamps' feeble glow. Suddenly, his foot catches on an uneven chunk of sidewalk, and without warning, he collapses to his knees. He stays there for a moment, confused and yet horrified by his sudden fall. He staggers to his feet, forcing himself to continue his race. The memories that hover at the edge of his mind urge him on. But even these foggy memories of terror are not enough to overcome his pain and exhaustion. He crumbles to the sidewalk. The adrenaline that powered him through the many hours has come and gone. Cloudy tears begin to trace rivers down his cheeks as he curls his knees into his chest. His sobs intensify and his shoulders shake in desperation as he hears the footsteps belonging to the owner of the yellow eyes. The boy attempts to crawl toward some unreachable point in the distance. But he quickly stops struggling, for even he knows his efforts are futile.

The footsteps cease and their owner stands above the crying boy, whose shirt is becoming soaked with his own tears. The boy greets the man standing above him with deep moans that would tickle at the bones of anyone within earshot. Of course, no one else is around to hear his mournful sounds. The child's tears have now created a small puddle around him on the street, and he flips onto his back to catch his breath. The tears drip into his ears and stain his hair salty. He squeezes his eyes shut in an attempt to control the flow. But the tears find gaps through his eyelids and pour out of his head in a way that seems inhuman.

He finally surrenders to exhaustion and falls into unconsciousness. The man stands over the boy, pausing for the first time. This brief hesitation is fleeting, however, and the man roughly rips the boy from his tears of mournfulness and throws the child over his shoulder. He retreats back to the edge of the street lamps' glow and disappears into the night air.

The trek to the training camp is tedious. Hours pass, and yet the boy still lies unconscious, spread across the man's shoulders. A slight frown tugs at the corners of the boy's lips and the yellow slowly fades from the man's eyes while being replaced by hazel with flecks of green. His expression has shifted from emotionless to a remorseful, watchful gaze. He has always hated this part: bringing in the young child who shows potential. He has brought in dozens, possibly hundreds, of young children to meet their certain deaths. Their identities blur together because it always happens the same way. The chase, the collapse, and the weight across his shoulders as he carries them back to the training camp. He tries to

remember every one of them, like it's some sort of tribute to remember their faces. But he knows it's not enough. It was never enough. He failed every single one of those children. It hurts him to think about it. He never wanted this life. He is simply trying to survive, but all those children died because of his actions. He looks at the boy. He is young. Too young.

Painfully young. No older than nine. He will almost certainly not last a day in the training camp. And if he somehow manages to escape the horrors of the camp, he won't survive even a minute at war. But then again, very few kids make it through the war. The only survivors are a few grizzled teenagers, hardened by exposure, their once innocent souls lost. So, new kids are always in demand to feed the war machine. Adults are too, of course, but there are very few of them left. The small bands of survivors hide in the rubble of the ruined cities. They're practically impossible to find now. They know which mistakes lead to discovery and avoid them at all costs. Children are not as disciplined. They get restless and bored. They make mistakes.

He knows that he is a lucky one. He will never have to fight. His job is too important. He is a harvester, plucking kids from their lives in hiding to throw them into a war that is not their own. The leaders use these kids like the little plastic army soldiers of the old world, used until they are broken and then discarded so that new ones can arrive to continue the cycle. As the harvester moves steadily through the forest, his thoughts wander and he is reminded of a fragment from his past. This boy over his shoulders reminds him of his own daughter, who was stolen three years ago when the young girl was just twelve. Despite his many attempts to learn of his daughter's whereabouts, he has no idea if his girl is still alive. The pain of his loss crops up at odd times. And today, carrying this little boy, his heart aches. He applied for this job to survive in the war-torn world. It was supposed to be temporary, just until he had enough money to disappear into the Canadian wilderness. But he never receives enough to save. His running begins to slow, but not because of exhaustion. The beginnings of an idea are stirring in his mind. Not a mastermind plan to end the war, just a simple idea that could save this one little boy's life.

His feet gradually slow to a stop, and he sets the boy gently on the forest floor. The boy's auburn hair is plastered against his head, and his eyes are squeezed shut tightly as if he believes that if he cannot see the man then perhaps he will disappear. His clothes are damp and streaked with dirt, and he looks as if he has been running for months not just a few hours. As if on cue, the boy's eyes open. He looks tiredly at the man standing above him, eyes glazed. A low moan escapes his lips, but he seems to have accepted his fate. He put up a good fight, better than most kids his age could ever accomplish. But in the end, his body could only run for so long. The man's gaze flickers from the boy to the direction they came from. He begins to see the many problems with his idea. They are easily over twenty miles from their starting point, and the boy is exhausted and without food or water. If he leaves him here, this little boy will almost certainly die alone in the woods.

The boy lies on the ground, gazing up at the man and wondering at his bizarre behavior. The boy knows that harvesters snatch children for the war and he has resigned himself to his death. He remembers his mother telling him: "Run. For if you don't run, they will catch you, and if they catch you, you will die." However, the man seems to be having an argument with himself as his expression changes every few seconds, thoughtful to annoyed to back again. It is thoroughly perplexing. His mind begins to consider the possibility of an escape, but that idea is pointless and he knows it. He has no idea where they are. Or

even what direction to run in. Besides, his muscles ache so badly that he doubts he can even move, let alone outrun a man twice his size.

Staring down at the child, the man wishes that the little boy would just get up and run away into the dark forest. Instead, the boy simply looks at him with a beseeching gaze. The boy's fingers twitch. It is the first movement that the man has seen from the boy and this small twitch gives him a bit of hope. Then, moving like a ninety year old, the boy staggers to his feet. Without speaking, the man's finger slowly raises to point the way back to the boy's home. The boy takes a step. It is painful to watch him. He moves slowly, like he is made of rusted metal. But slowly he moves into the edges of the forest. The man watches the boy until he is swallowed by the trees and enveloped by their branches. It seems like it takes forever for the boy to disappear into the darkness, but he feels an obligation to watch his retreat. Then, with movements much smoother than the boy's, he runs in the opposite direction, swatting away branches and leaping over logs. He looks back in the direction of the boy, but only once.

The boy is terrified. He is scared that his release is some kind of elaborate trick and that the man will reclaim him any second. He walks slowly, as if he is worried that the ground in front of him will collapse. His eyes dart from side to side, and his back is arched protectively forward. He is coursing with nervous energy, but unable to use it to make his sore body move any faster. Everything hurts, even his head throbs with every step. It begins to rain, silver drops floating down from the sky to meet the boy trudging drearily along. He opens his mouth and lets the drops cascade down his throat. It's a slow process, but the water sharpens his thoughts. The boy suddenly stops and falls onto his knees, his fall not triggered by exhaustion, but by realization. The last of his family was stolen away from him years ago. He has no friends to help him, no possessions to speak of, and nothing to return to. He sits down on the mossy floor and notices for the first time how beautiful the trees look, enshrined in the early morning glow. Their branches seem to reach toward the golden light and the moss that dots them is a vibrant green. He sits there for hours, watching the trees and the sky and the birds that traverse it. He is content. Content to let himself fall into a meditative state. Content to let himself die with the beauty of the forest surrounding him. So it comes as a surprise to him to see the man reappear before him. The boy holds up his hands. He is done with running and fighting, and he will let the man take him. But the man simply shakes his head and holds out his own hand to help the boy stand. The boy stares for a second, then swings his small hand to meet the man's worn, scarred one. And the man pulls him to his feet, with no words exchanged between them. The boy begins to walk again, this time with the man who once chased him at his side. Guiding him to the North.