

## The Original (deleted and unedited) Prologue for The Boy Who Ran

The boy peered down through the branches with an odd look on his face—fascination, but sadness too. Long black hair kept falling forward into his face and it was distracting him, so he took a length of leather cord from around his waist and tied it back and out of the way. He was squatting on an enormous branch, high in one of the primordial trees—an elder of the forest—one hand was on its trunk while the other rested between his feet.

Two canopy levels below, deer were slowly making their way along a vague path. It was a doe and an older fawn, a buck. The two had been foraging on the leaves of the plants growing in the space immediately below the ancient tree when the boy first spotted them. They were searching for late-summer shoots that might have been overlooked and were working their way along the deer trail, gradually going south.

*Have you been walking and eating all night?* The boy's question was asked soundlessly, he often spoke to himself using his inner voice. An unconscious smile had appeared on his face as he watched the two deer. *You'll be too fat to outrun the hunters if you aren't careful.* The doe lifted her head and focused on something to her right, one ear twitching nervously. After a few seconds she decided that there was nothing to be alarmed about and resumed foraging.

The morning was fading and the boy could feel that the air was changing—warming and losing its freshness as its moisture was transformed from cooling mist to sticky humidity. The early morning fog had almost completely vanished now; its faint remains were barely detectable when he gazed into the distance between the trees. High above the boy, a woodpecker sharply interrupted the stillness and beat a brief staccato on a branch before it settled into a regular rhythm. The only other sounds he could hear were the faint humming from small insects and the soft whisper of air passing over leaves.

The boy had come into the forest well before dawn to enjoy its stillness. There was a peace that accompanied the thick smoke-like fog that formed during the cool hours of the darkness and he came here to enjoy it nearly every day. As soon as his feet touched the dark soil and he smelled the rich decaying leaves, his face would lose its tightness and his breathing deepened. He was a different person in the forest, different than the boy who slept and ate in the village—he belonged here.

The two deer moved farther along the path, and away from him—soon they would be hidden behind another group of trees. If the boy wanted to keep watching the deer he would have to change his position. There were two alternatives. He could stay high among canopy of branches to keep his bird's eye view. This would mean running along one of the massive tree's larger branches, high above the ground, and leaping to another large branch on a neighboring tree—it was tempting. The long leaps through space were exhilarating and provided the kind of challenge that the boy craved. And, it was exciting to fly through the emptiness between the trees, then make a successful landing on the narrow path formed by the next branch—and to do so silently. But to do this quietly enough to not disturb the deer was uncertain and he wasn't ready for them to flee. Instead, the boy decided that he would descend to the forest floor and follow the deer at ground level. In some ways, this path could be even more challenging, but he could also watch them from a much closer position.

As quickly as a hawk dives for its prey, the boy dropped from his high perch among the branches. To someone watching it would seem that he was falling, but his was a controlled plunge—every movement carefully measured, fluid, and silent. Branches and subtle variations in the trunk's surface provided the means to govern his descent. The drop to the forest floor was done in seconds.

The boy's feet landed perfectly on the exposed roots at the base of the tree, making no noise. He moved cautiously to follow the deer along a path that was parallel to the one they had used. His route contained far more undergrowth than

the deer trail. It was difficult to move at all without making noise, but the boy was skilled. At one point along the path, he was forced to turn sideways and tilt his whole body to a steep angle to avoid a thorny bush on one side and the branch of a nearby shrub on the other, deftly missing both by a whisker. The boy's feet automatically found the spots where they would cause the least noise—a tree root here, a rock there, packed earth when he sensed it. The boy rarely left a trace of his passage and almost never made a sound when he moved through the forest—to do otherwise was unthinkable.