

As I step into the woods, the autumnal scent of oranges, cinnamon, vanilla and apples hits me. The crackly rain of rusty red and burnt orange leaves swirls around my head and drifts down towards my feet. Red squirrels clutching shiny nuts stare at me before scuttling up into a tree. The springy, moss-covered ground has been transformed into a carpet of the colours of the sunset.

This feels vibrant and safe

I inhale deeply, allowing calm to flood my body. Today is market day in the village, and I simply can't stand the suffocating hustle and bustle going on. My lungs shrink to the size of walnuts, my heart pounding like a deer's hooves on hard ground. And with people always going 'Kathryn, can you bring over the potatoes?' or 'You're twelve, so make yourself useful!' it doubles the anxiety. My mother understands this, thank goodness, so she normally lets me help load the wagons and then lets me aimlessly wander around for the day. Today, however, is the first market day of the autumn, and it's where all the villagers trade all the crops. And so, extra hands are a necessity. But after half an hour of pounding panic, I excused myself and left running.

I walk down a path, plucking plump blackberries along the way. The sun sends its warming arms down through the trees, enveloping me in its rays as though it were a blanket. I let out a sigh of relief. All the suffocating stress and internally squeezing panic that remained inside me melts away like butter. It leaves me lighter than before, and I set off skipping. A woven basket which I had brought from the market is now full of blackberries that are simply begging to be eaten. I help myself to a handful of particularly sweet succulent ones as I skip down the path. Now that the stress and panic has left, I notice more. Candy floss fluffy rabbits sit sunbathing, birds busy nestbuilding, the occasional dainty deer already camouflaged in its autumnal surroundings. The crackly rain of leaves continues, the trees gently undressing themselves for the winter. Blackberry bushes sagging with the sheer weight of the fruit. Rosy red apples hang teasingly out reach.

lovely

This language is excellent - and the description of setting reflects the calm of your protagonist.

Everything seems to be in a playful mood. The leaves seem to play tag as they drift down. The tree branches wave to each other in the lazy breeze, and even the blackberries seem to be having a competition of who is sweeter.

I've probably walked around four miles into the woods now, but still I keep going. It's not as if I'm going to get lost, but the deeper woods tend to be more sketchy than the rest. I've ventured down into them a few times, but each time it was with a whole group of adults. As it happens, there's a legend in the village about the deeper woods. It says that if a baby is ever brought into the clearing of the woods, it and all the people around it will suffer instantaneous death. Then, the Skeletal Nymph - the evil woodland spirit - will steal it from the earth and convert it into a demon. The demon will then go on to destroy the village and its people. So, when a baby is born, it experiences five years of quarantine, and then, five years old, is taken to the clearing and is introduced to it. A wine glass is filled with the child's blood, and is left as an offering to the Skeletal Nymph.

it might work better here if your protagonist doesn't believe this...

As the story goes through my head, I rub the scar on my right palm. A bright red cut, straight and small. I remember the dagger. The sole dagger used to bleed the five year olds in the clearing. Old Man Dove cuts them. His close cropped white hair, the merciless eyes. The heart that only wants to save himself. The cut goes one centimetre into my hand, and still stings when I scratch it. He once said that girls are better for bleeding as the blood is sweeter. It stays in my mind that he couldn't possibly know that. Unless...

I shake my head. That was the past, and the Skeletal Nymph is probably made up. Maybe the bleeding is simply a custom that I over think. Anyway, the woods here are covered in autumn fruits and crackly leaves, and the air is a crisp evening breeze. Nothing dark at all.

I allow myself to daydream away, as I go deeper and deeper into the woods. The blackberry basket swings on my left arm, still full of the succulent berries. Birds swoop around, collecting twigs for nests and worms for dinner. Rabbits frolic in the crispy leaves, and squirrels begin feasting on freshly picked acorns.

Whatever guard I normally have slips discreetly away, leaving me as vulnerable as a newly born doe.

Locked in my daydream, my eyes glaze over, and I notice nothing. I don't notice that the crackly rain of leaves has disappeared, along with all the leaves on all of the trees. I don't notice that the sun's sparkling rays have left. I don't notice that the air has turned into a stinging cold wind. No. I notice precisely nothing. [good - setting creates a good shift](#)

The wind whistles eerily through the bare branches. Birds, squirrels and rabbits are non-existent. The trees bend over in an arc like fashion, blocking light. Its gloomy. Its cold. And still I register nothing. Not a single thing.

I jerk back into reality. A stray branch hit me square in the eye, sending a shoot of stabbing pain through my skull. I reel backwards, clutching my head in my hands. The blackberries spill to the ground, splattering the earth with purple mush. When I open my eyes, panic floods through me. I have absolutely no idea where I am. I spin round on my heels, and am about to start running when I freeze on the spot. Before me are two paths. Identical ones. I spin round again. I can't risk going up a path, as it might be the wrong one. I can't stay here, unless I want to have a panic attack. My heart is beating around a million times per minute. I'm producing sweat at an industrial level. My lungs are shrinking to walnuts. I look around frantically, desperate for a solution. [How can setting reflect this panic?](#)

Then I see something that makes me and my blood freeze.

A hooded figure.

It stands fifty feet away, barely visible due to the gloom. In its arms is a parcel. A large parcel. That moves.

I notice that the figure is standing a mere step away from entering the clearing. The long black cloak covers the face, legs and feet.

Then the parcel gives a small sigh.

It's a baby.

My eyes are wide as platters, frozen in terror.

*If a baby is ever brought into the clearing of the woods, all the people around it will suffer instantaneous death.*

A scream is stuck in my throat.

[Lovely use of structure here](#)

The figure lifts a foot, ready to step into the clearing.

And I just know that it's the last thing I'll ever see.