

SLEEPY GODS

A Novel

PORTFOLIO EXCERPT • PRELUDE + CHAPTERS ONE–FOUR

KYLE FIGARD

PRELUDE

The Fox and the Turtle

The fox stood upon the turtle's shell and lowered his narrow face to the seam.

"Come out," said the fox, "and I will eat you."

Inside the shell, the turtle strained with all his might to hold himself closed. His neck ached from drawing in his head. His legs trembled in their chambers. Even his small tail had gone stiff with the effort of keeping every tender part of himself beyond the reach of teeth.

He is right, the turtle thought. If I put out my head, I will surely die. But I cannot hold on much longer. My muscles are strained, and I feel my strength wane.

The fox scraped his claws across the shell. When this failed to open it, he leapt into the air and came down hard.

Once.

Twice.

On the third landing, one of his hind paws skidded from the polished curve. He caught himself in the leaves and snarled as though the turtle had insulted him.

"Open up and die, Turtle! Surely your weakness is apparent even to you by now. I will eat you and forget your name. Your bloodline ends today, you see. Once I am done, nothing of you will be."

The turtle drew himself tighter. His breath came shallow in the dark.

Oh, but he speaks true of me. I am weak, and there is nothing I can do to be free.

The fox jumped again. His claws clicked on the shell.

Wait, thought the turtle. Did he almost fall off me?

The turtle considered this. He waited until the fox gathered himself for another leap. Then, just as the fox came down, the turtle thrust both legs from the right side of his shell and lifted only halfway. His left legs remained tucked safely within.

The shell tilted.

The fox stumbled. His forepaws slipped over the rim, and he fell hard onto his side. His neck struck the earth directly before the opening in the turtle's shell.

The turtle snapped out.

His jaws closed upon the fox's throat. He bit until the fox stopped kicking and the leaves beneath them had gone dark.

At last the turtle released him. He emerged slowly, his legs still trembling, and stood over the body of the fox.

"It is I who will be known," said the turtle, "and you who will fall from history."

Then he turned from the blood and began the long walk home.

"And it is I who will forget your name."

PART I — WAKING

CHAPTER 1

Solace

The air is cool, still, and wet. It feels lovely on my skin.

A faint humming trembles through the chamber, so gentle that at first I mistake it for something inside me. My breath, perhaps. My blood. I flick my hand, and the blue-white light hovering above my palm folds into itself until there is only darkness.

I close my eyes to help them adjust.

When I open them again, bright little dots of blue-white light surround me. They lie scattered across the walls, the ground, and the long curve of the ceiling, each one pulsing at its own quiet pace. Together they make the soothing hum that passes through the stone and into my bones.

I pull my legs into a cross-legged position and float there in meditation.

The cold keeps me still. The hum smooths every troublesome edge of thought until thought itself becomes unnecessary. I feel only the cool air on my skin, my lips, and the tip of my nose. I hear only the pulse and the little well of silence that follows it.

Vmmmmmmmmmm.

Silence.

Vmmmmmmmmmm.

Silence.

There is nowhere else I need to be.

There may never have been anywhere else.

Moisture gathers beneath my nose. It creeps down to the tip and hangs there until the indignity of it draws my waking mind back into the chamber. I sniff. The sound is astonishingly loud.

I have become rather chilly in my stillness.

Reaching out, I turn two fingers through the air. A small circle of green-gold markings appears before me, its signs orbiting an empty center. I reach through the center and feel around in the warm inward dark where I keep what belongs to me. My hand finds something thick and soft. I pull free a mossy cloak and wrap it around my shoulders.

The lining holds the faint warmth of soil in sunlight. The outer moss is cool against my neck. It is the perfect contrast between cold and cozy, and so I continue my quest for insight. My mind loosens. The chamber receives it.

Vmmmmmmmmmm.

Silence.

Vmmmmmmmmmm.

Silence.

“Solace.”

It is the only word that comes to me.

“Solace.”

Peace unbound and free.

“Solace.”

I am found in me.

The word passes through my lips and joins the humming. For a while there is no difference between the two. There is no difference between the chamber and the dark that held me before I had a shape. I rest without hunger, without thirst, without the small violence of one moment insisting that another must follow it.

Then something scratches between my shoulders.

I open my eyes.

The bright little orbs have grown into mushrooms larger than I am. Their stems rise in pale blue columns, and their caps spread above me like the roofs of silent houses. Threads of light

travel beneath their translucent flesh. Spores drift in slow constellations through the chamber.

I lower my feet, though they do not yet touch the ground.

"How long have I been here?" I ask aloud.

I do not imagine anyone will answer.

"An eon, sir."

The voice is stiff and croaky. It strikes my ears wrongly. I have not heard a voice in so long that the sound seems to have corners.

I turn calmly among the glowing mushrooms. "Where are you?"

"Here, sir."

I look beneath the nearest cap.

"On your back, sir."

"On my back?"

Something shifts against my shoulders. My cloak has moved.

I reach behind me, but the hem draws itself away from my fingers.

"What are you," I ask, "and why are you on my back?"

The hood lifts beside my ear like a head too tired to hold itself up properly. "You put me here long ago and never said a thing until today. Solace, solace, solace. You kept saying it. Finally, I thought. Finally he is waking. I thought you never would. You must be stiff. What does solace mean, anyway?"

"Put you on?" I touch the clasp at my throat. It gives an irritated little click. "Are you my cloak?"

"Bingo."

I know the word, though I am not certain from where. The cloak seems pleased by this.

"But how?"

"You meditate without food, water, or rest, floating in a glowing chamber for an eon, and you are uncertain how I am speaking?" The hem curls up as if considering me. "Very strange, you are."

"You are a cloak."

"Yes. We have established that."

"A speaking cloak."

"I had plenty of time to practice. Listening, mostly. There has been a great deal happening outside. Feet. Singing. Rain. Once, something large sneezed at the cave mouth and frightened me half to death, though I had not yet decided whether I was alive. No one came in. I should like that noted."

This is unexpected but okay.

I settle onto the floor. My soles meet a thick bed of fallen spores, soft and cold as new moss. "Do you know what you are?"

"Your cloak."

"Beyond that."

"Cold when you leave me lying about. Warm when you wear me. Green, I assume. I have never seen myself."

"And alive?"

The fabric goes quiet.

The humming moves through us both.

"I suppose I must be," he says at last. "It would be very embarrassing to have complained this much otherwise."

He. The knowing arrives without explanation, as some knowings do. I run a hand over the moss at my chest. Tiny fronds lean toward my palm.

"Thank you," I say.

"For what?"

"For speaking."

The clasp clicks once more, softer this time. "It was that or go mad, sir."

I rise and walk between the titanic mushrooms. The cave is much larger than memory suggests, though memory has become a room with most of its lamps extinguished. I pass a pool that was once no more than a damp hollow. Blind silver creatures ripple beneath its surface. A white root has broken through the

ceiling and divided the stone around it without cracking either side.

The cloak pulls backward as we pass the water.

“Wait.”

I stop.

“Is that me?” His hood bends over my shoulder toward the pool.

Our reflection trembles on the black surface: my green face and blue markings, his broad fall of moss, the soft hood peaked beside my head like a second curious creature. Tiny white flowers have opened along one edge of him. Neither of us noticed.

“Yes,” I say.

He turns one hem, then the other. The reflection turns with him.

“I thought I would have a face.”

“You have a hood.”

“You have a hood and also a face.”

“Would you like one?”

He studies the empty dark within himself. “I do not know. I have only just seen this.”

“Then you need not decide.”

One of the silver creatures rises beneath our image and scatters it into rings. The cloak watches until the water grows still and we return.

“The flowers are handsome,” I tell him.

He folds them modestly out of sight. “They are acceptable.”

Perhaps the whole space is a creature now. Perhaps it always was.

“Thank you, friend,” I say to the chamber. “For this solace.”

“Oh, you are talking to the cave.”

“Yes.”

“Not to me.”

“I thanked you already.”

“Quite right. Forgive my greed.”

I smile. The expression feels unused but not unfamiliar.

“It is time we go and see what has happened out there.”

The cloak tightens around me. “Oh, you are talking to me now?”

“Of course. Who else should I be talking to?”

“Never mind, sir.”

It is a short walk to the cave’s exit, though no daylight passes the final bend. The dark simply thins until I feel the outside waiting on the other side of it.

I step through.

White consumes my sight.

Pain flashes behind my eyes. I close them at once and sit at the mouth of the cave with my palms pressed to the earth. First comes sound. So many sounds that I cannot hold them separately.

Chirp chirp.

Tweet tweet.

Ka-kaaw. Ka-kaaw.

Rustling. Clicking. The clack of wood against wood. A far, soft rush like a great garment shaken in the sky. Tiny feet disturb dry leaves. Wings strike air and vanish.

A breeze carries grass and wild onion past my nose. It is cool and warm at once, comforting in both directions. I fill my lungs deeply and taste the sweetness of the living world when I exhale. I swallow as though I might invite it to become part of me.

Behind my lids, light settles from white to red. Dark lines begin to move across it. I chance opening my eyes a little.

The piercing brightness has softened to a shimmer. Green shapes gather edges. Leaves. Trees. Grass jeweled with water. I am sitting in a grove encircled by an emerald forest, the cave mouth opening behind me beneath a hill of fern and root. No

road leads inward. No footprint troubles the moss at the threshold.

“I wonder,” I say, “has no one entered the cave in all this time?”

“Not once. I hoped for company, naturally, but everyone stopped short. There was singing near the mouth. Sometimes weeping. Plenty of weather. No visitors.”

The grass is soft and bristly beneath my feet. I curl my toes and push them deeper until cool soil rises between them. A steady, comfortable energy travels into my soles and fills my calves, then my thighs.

She fills those who find her touch most appealing.

The thought is not quite mine. Or it is mine from elsewhere.

The earth, I think. Though I do not know how I know her.

“What was that, sir?”

I stir. “What was what?”

“You said she fills—”

“Oh. Nothing. A piece of something.” I look back into the cave. Blue-white mushrooms pulse patiently in the dark. I could return. The thought opens before me as easily as my little circle of signs. Cool air. Hum. No demands. A place in which one moment need never follow another.

The cloak’s hem rests against my ankle.

Something became alive while I slept.

I place one hand on the cave wall in farewell, then take it away.

“Let us be off,” I say. “We have been missing things.”

The cloak gives a simple huff of confirmation, and I smile at his happy reluctance.

Together we turn toward the trees.

The Givers' Grove

My legs ache from being idle for so long. After twelve steps, I allow myself to float just above the ground.

"That did not last," the cloak observes.

"Walking appears to involve a great deal of repetition."

"People speak highly of it."

"People are welcome to it."

I drift toward a single well-worn path at the edge of the grove, exactly opposite the cave. The path is narrow but deeply pressed, its earth compacted by many feet. Someone has edged it with flat river stones. Moss fills the spaces between them in careful green lines.

Near its beginning stands a small altar made from three slabs of gray stone. Rain has rounded their corners. A shallow bowl rests on top, and within the bowl lies fresh fruit.

"It seems someone has been making regular visits."

I lower myself until my feet hover beside the altar. There are red berries, two dark plums, a spray of tiny white flowers, and one curved yellow thing unlike any fruit I remember.

I take the yellow one. Its skin is tough and unpleasantly bitter. I bite again to be certain.

"Any good?" asks the cloak.

"No."

"Perhaps that is why they gave it away."

The yellow covering tears beneath my thumb. Inside is a pale, soft fruit. I peel it with some suspicion and take a bite.

Sweetness fills my tongue—creamy, gentle, almost like vanilla, though not quite. I close my eyes to attend to it properly.

"Ah," I say.

"A revelation?"

"The yellow part is only the peel."

“A cunning fruit.”

I eat the rest slowly. Hunger wakes as if the fruit has knocked upon a door. My stomach contracts with an urgency I had forgotten bodies could possess. I help myself to a handful of berries, then stop.

“These were left for someone.”

“One presumes they were left for the person in the cave.”

“How would they know I was there?”

“The singing, perhaps. People rarely sing at rocks unless they believe something is listening.”

I turn over the bowl. Its underside bears two simple marks cut into the clay: a curved back beneath a small open door, and beside it a shape that may once have been another figure. Time or a determined knife has scraped the second almost smooth.

I set the bowl down carefully.

“Thank you,” I say to whoever left it. The words feel insufficient, so I place my palm over the stone. A little warmth passes from me into it. Not a blessing exactly. More an answer.

The cloak shifts. “Someone sang shortly before you woke.”

“You said there had been many songs.”

“This one was nearer than most. Kind, too. It had a pause in it, always in the same place. I kept expecting another voice to fill the pause.”

“Did one?”

“No.”

The unfilled space lingers between us.

I select a red, round fruit from the bowl to carry and follow the path beneath the forest canopy. The temperature drops at once. Cool shadow nips at my bare skin where the cloak does not cover me. Blue tattoos wind over my arms, chest, and legs—circles opening into lines, lines closing into signs. I know they are mine. I know they once mattered. Their purposes remain just beyond reach, like figures seen through deep water.

I push my hand through a cluster of leaves. One tickles my finger, smooth and waxy, then bounces side to side after I pass. The forest gathers itself around me: pine resin and damp soil, sweet decay beneath perilous bloom. Lily of the valley hides white bells under broad leaves. Foxglove leans over the path in purple towers. Nightshade berries shine from shadow, black and inviting.

Life and death breathe together here without argument.

"Where are we?" I ask absently.

The cloak lifts one shoulder and lets it fall.

"A fair answer."

The scents pass through me, and something opens.

Lives spin before my mind. A woman ground seeds with a stone. A child slept beneath a cart while rain ticked against its boards. Hands cupped a moth away from flame. Two figures ran through golden grass. A mouth formed a name I could not hear. Love passed from one life to another, reshaped but not diminished. Beings returned to the world in desperate hope of finding someone who might also have returned.

My floating body continues along the path while I am consumed.

"It is coming back, is it not, sir?"

I cannot answer. Tears streak my face. More lives arrive. So much pain. So much of it avoidable. A father spoke one cruel sentence and spent forty years wishing it back into his mouth. A village with full granaries closed its gates to hungry strangers. A hand released another too early. A different hand held on long after the one within it had gone cold.

What could I have done to stop it?

The question is older than the trees.

The web of complexity exceeds my mind. Solace reaches for me, and for one grateful instant I expect the cool blue dark of the cave.

Instead, a black canvas opens behind my eyes. White points glow across it, joined by threads. The threads divide and divide again, fracturing into spirals too exact to be alive. They writhe, straighten, and draw together into the shape of a spear.

It pierces my heart.

Cold bursts through me. Not the living cold of wet stone or morning air. This is cold with nothing around it, a single clean absence. It shatters inside my chest and throws me backward.

I strike the ground hard enough to lose my breath.

The red fruit rolls from my hand and comes to rest against a root.

“Sir?” The cloak tightens across my ribs. “Sir. Breathe. Whatever you are doing, stop doing it.”

I claw at the earth. No air enters.

Then warmth leaks from the place the spear struck. A thin gold line at first, it spreads between my ribs and pours outward until I am submerged in something thicker than light and gentler than water. The cold breaks apart. Breath tears into me.

I lie on my back beneath the branches, coughing and shining.

The cloak has wrapped both sides of himself around my chest. His hood hovers over my face.

“There you are,” he says. The croak in his voice is worse. “You stopped.”

“I thought I remembered.”

“Did you?”

I look into the green light overhead. The rush of lives is gone. I retain their weight but not their names. At the center of it all is a wound shaped like knowledge and an emptiness where the knowledge should be.

“No,” I say. “I remembered the shape of remembering.”

The cloak loosens, though only a little.

I sit up. The red fruit has split where it struck the root. Juice runs bright across the pale wood. Its sweet scent turns metallic for half a heartbeat.

My mouth floods with heat.

I look away before the sensation can become anything else.

“Shall we return to the cave?” the cloak asks.

The offer is quiet. Kind.

Behind us, beyond a turn of the path, the hum waits in darkness. I can feel it as surely as a hand extended.

I press my palm over my chest. The gold has faded, but a pulse remains.

“No,” I say.

I stand. This time I walk until the trembling leaves my knees.

The path climbs. Through the trees ahead I begin to see platforms resting among trunks, then walls woven from living branches, narrow bridges hung with rope and flowering vine. Smoke rises in pale ribbons from clay chimneys. A village has grown among the trees.

I move into a secure patch of forest and watch.

Mortals shape fire and cook their meals. They split wood, mold clay, carry water, mend cloth. Their movements are intentional and rhythmical. A potter turns a wheel while a small child sleeps against her back. Two old men argue over a roof beam, then lift it together. A young woman follows the path toward my grove with a basket on her arm.

She passes near enough that I see the dark braid down her back. She is singing.

The melody is simple. Four notes rise, each a little higher. One falls. Then comes a pause—long enough for an absent voice to answer.

None does.

She continues.

I watch her leave fruit at the altar and return to the village. The next morning, she does it again.

I intend to reveal myself on the third.

Rain comes before she does. It beads along the edge of my hood and drips from the leaves. The young woman arrives

beneath a patched brown covering. Her song has changed only in that she must sing louder over the weather.

The third morning becomes a week. The week opens into autumn. She continues down the path, though now she brings a little boy who jumps from stone to stone while she sings. Snow folds over the grove. The boy grows tall enough to carry the basket. One spring, he walks alone.

I am only watching for the right moment.

The bridges in the village are rebuilt. The potter's child becomes the potter. A platform expands around an oak, then disappears after lightning splits it. The boy with the basket becomes a broad man, then a bent one. A girl walks beside him, singing the same melody with a pause in the same place.

Someone has placed a hand on my face.

No. The cloak's hood has wrapped itself across my eyes.

"Enough," he says.

I remove him gently. Sunlight strikes me from a different angle than I expect. The village roofs are tiled in red clay now. The tree on which I had marked the first winter has grown around the mark.

"How long?"

"Long enough for the singing boy to become the old man who stopped coming last cold season."

I look toward the path. A young woman stands at its far end with a basket. She has his eyes, though I do not know how I know this.

"Why did you not tell me?"

The cloak recoils. "I told you every day for the first ten years."

Shame arrives small and precise. It is not the white spear. It is a stone in my stomach.

Below, someone laughs as a cup falls and does not break. Someone else calls a name I cannot make out.

These people lived beneath my gaze. I held each life as a lovely pattern and learned none of them.

“Do you plan to spend another eon here, sir?”

“No.” My voice is rough.

The current singer has begun toward the grove. I could wait by the altar and allow her to find me. The thought opens a frightened little space beneath my ribs.

“I will meet her,” I say, giving the choice enough sound that I cannot pretend I never made it.

I turn toward the altar.

Before I can take the first step, a flute cuts through the forest.

The first note skips over the leaves. The second catches beneath my heel. By the third, my feet are already moving.

The Piper in the Vale

A flute does not command the body. It reminds the body of an agreement made before speech.

My left foot crosses behind my right. My right stamps the damp earth. I turn beneath the branches with both hands raised, laughing before I know why. The cloak flies open behind me, scandalized by the speed of our change in purpose.

“We were going to meet the singer,” he calls.

“We are.”

“She is in the other direction.”

“Then we are taking a generous route.”

The melody runs uphill, nimble as water over stone. It catches in the hollows of my knees and sends me leaping a fallen log. I have not moved with such abandon in ages. More than ages. The stiffness drains from my limbs. The forest blurs green and gold around me.

“A satyr,” I say.

“Is that good?”

“Almost never.”

The cloak groans, but I feel his hem lift to the rhythm.

Something flashes among the leaves. I stop so quickly that he swings around my shoulders.

At the base of a hazel lies a feather the length of my hand. Not yellow. Golden. Light moves along its barbs even in shadow, gathering at the tip before beginning again at the quill.

“Now this is curious.”

“What is, sir?”

I pick it up. Warmth travels into my fingers. For an instant the feather turns, not with the breeze but against it, its point drawing toward the deeper vale.

Some part of me knows this object. The knowledge rises eagerly, strikes a closed place, and falls.

“Nothing,” I say too quickly. “Only something interesting.”

The cloak’s hood leans toward it.

I make the green-gold circle, reach into my inward hold, and stow the feather there. The little space contains no dust and admits no time. It receives the feather without answer.

“You have a strange idea of nothing,” the cloak says.

The flute turns a bright phrase below us. My feet answer before I can.

We descend through vines and undergrowth into a little grove filled with people. Mortals have come from every direction and perhaps a few places that no longer lie in any direction at all. Some wear woven grass, some linen dyed the red of clay, some nothing but paint and flowers. Horned beings laugh beside round river spirits. A woman with bark along one arm beats a skin drum while three children chase each other beneath it. Beds, cookfires, cushions, baskets, and patched tents crowd the spaces between trees. This is not merely a gathering. Many have made a home of it.

At the center, seated on a low stump, a cloven-hoofed figure plays his pipe.

His legs are covered in dark brown hair. Little bells circle one ankle. Two horns sweep back from his temples, one wrapped in red thread and the other bare. Age has silvered the curls in his beard but has not diminished the wickedness of his smile.

I follow my feet closer. His black eyes lock upon mine.

The melody falters.

Only for a breath. Then he throws his head back and drives the music faster.

The grove erupts.

Someone seizes my hand. I spin beneath an arm, catch another dancer by the waist, and am passed laughing into a circle. The satyr’s notes carry vitality, excitement, and glee. Every

body discovers a different answer to them. No two feet strike the same place, yet the ground receives us as one weather.

My cloak flaps helplessly.

"You may enjoy yourself," I tell him.

"I am clothing."

"A speaking cloak."

"I have standards."

A reveler with yellow flowers in his hair takes one edge of the cloak and dances with it. The other edge lifts of its own accord.

"Traitor," I say.

"I am adapting."

When the satyr finally rests his pipes, the gathering does not stop so much as soften. Drums continue. Bare feet slow. People tumble into cushions, share cups, and lean against one another. The grove fills with the hot scent of bodies, crushed mint, smoke, and bread.

Now that the music no longer carries me, hunger takes its place. It pulls me toward a long cloth spread upon the ground. The cloth is mostly hidden beneath bowls: white cheese shining with oil, black bread split into steaming halves, mushrooms cooked with garlic, red roots, green leaves, honey, salt. Nothing has been placed in a straight line. Hands reach from every direction, taking and passing, tearing and dipping.

A woman with bark along her left arm offers me bread.

"I am Olla," she says.

"Thank you."

She waits.

"For the bread," I add.

"Your name."

The request is ordinary. My answer should be as well.

I search.

There are titles somewhere in the dark. Shapes. The sensation of being called from very far away. No sound arrives.

"Sir," the cloak offers.

Olla considers this. "That is a terrible name."

"It is not my name," I say.

"A relief." She tears another piece of bread for herself. "Tell me when you find the proper one."

Then she moves on, neither frightened by the absence nor eager to fill it for me.

I eat. The crust scratches the roof of my mouth. Garlic burns pleasantly along my tongue. Someone presses a cup into my hand, and I drink cool water sweetened with bruised mint. Each taste arrives alone and leaves enough space for the next.

At the center of the cloth rests an empty cup. Food has been served beside it, though no one sits there.

"Who is expected?" I ask the nearest reveler.

The young man looks at the cup. "Someone returning."

"Who?"

"Would not need the cup if we knew."

He says this as though it explains everything. Perhaps it does.

A little girl crawls beneath my raised knee and settles there to eat grapes. The cloak drops one side around her back without comment. When she has finished, she wipes both purple hands upon him.

He becomes very quiet.

"You may object," I tell him.

"She is small."

"Small people can hear objections."

The cloak lifts his stained edge. The girl sees it, gasps, and scrubs at the moss with her sleeve until the purple fades.

"Sorry," she whispers.

His hem pats her shoulder. "Accepted."

Something passes through me at the sight. Not memory. A recognition of a truth I have never considered: warmth that cannot answer is only covering. Warmth that may say no, and stays when heard, is companionship.

The girl runs back to the dancers. The cloak settles against my side.

“You did well,” I say.

“I have been alive for an eon. One hopes I have acquired some judgment.”

“You decided you were alive this morning.”

“The experience is less difficult than advertised.”

I find a place beside the satyr and help myself to a bowl of purple grapes.

He watches me eat the first three before speaking.

“It has been too long, shining one.” His voice is rough honey. “What turn in the All brings you here? I thought you lost to the Less, yet here you sit before me eating my juicy grapes.”

I swallow.

The word *Less* brings a white point of cold to the center of my chest.

“I am not sure how I stirred. My cloak says a song may have done it. I was in that cave so long it grew colossal. The little glowing spores became a forest. One could build a large home on one of the mushrooms now. An entire village, even, provided the residents did not mind the humming. Though I suppose one would want stairs, unless they floated, and then—”

My thoughts scatter under the labor of speech. I close my mouth.

The satyr waits. He has always been good at waiting while appearing incapable of it.

“I am sorry,” I say. “It has been a while since I spoke, and it seems I have forgotten how.”

“You are doing beautifully.”

“Am I?”

“No, but I love you, and therefore I am willing to lie about small things.”

Warmth rises beneath my ribs. I look at his wide, familiar grin and realize I know him. I know the angle at which his left

horn once broke. I know he cheats at stones and cannot lie while holding rosemary. I know the rhythm of his stride when he is avoiding an apology.

His name is absent.

He sees this pass across my face.

“Pell,” he says gently.

The name enters me and finds a place still shaped for it.

“Pell.”

“There you are.”

I take his forearm. He takes mine. For a moment neither of us makes a joke.

“I have missed you,” I say.

“I know.” His thumb presses once against my wrist. “I have been missing enough for both of us.”

The cloak shifts behind my neck.

Pell’s attention snaps upward. “Did your cloak just move?”

“Yes.”

“On purpose?”

“Apparently.”

“Good afternoon,” says the cloak.

Pell stares.

For once, his expression is entirely serious. He looks from the hood beside my cheek to the hem curled around my ankle, then back to me.

“Did you say your cloak spoke?”

Something wells inside me. It climbs too quickly to contain.

I laugh.

The first sound comes out queer and enormous. The next folds me in half. I laugh until my belly aches and tears tickle my cheeks, until the revelers nearest us begin laughing without knowing why. Pell’s grave expression lasts three heartbeats before pride ruins it. His mouth splits into a grin.

“Ahhha—” I try to breathe and fail. “You—your face.”

“A miracle ought to receive proper reverence.”

“You knew.”

“I suspected. Your shoulders have been arguing with you since you arrived.”

The cloak draws himself up. “I would have appreciated warning.”

That sends me away again.

When at last I can sit upright, the world looks wavy through tears. My senses seem newly washed. Smoke rises in separate blue threads. Grapes burst sharp and sweet between my teeth. The hand still resting on my arm belongs to someone, and he has a name.

“Thank you,” I say through the last reverberations. “I feel clearer. More returned, though my memories remain sporadic. I am curious how I stirred. You were nearby. Do you know?”

“In fact, I do.” Pell reaches behind his stump and produces a dark green bottle sealed in red wax. “I would be happy to tell you if you agree to share this with me.”

“Is it wine?”

“It was when I acquired it.”

“When was that?”

“You ask very suspicious questions for a man who ate a fruit peel this morning.”

I glance at the cloak.

“I told no one,” he says.

Pell’s smile becomes unbearable.

I hold out my hand for the bottle.

A Path Without a Map

The wine is older than several mountains and younger than Pell claims. It tastes of blackberries, cedar smoke, and one summer afternoon I cannot place.

We empty the first bottle beside the stump. The second travels with us toward the fire. By the third, the light has softened from gold to amber, and the drums have found the rhythm of my pulse.

Pell tells me nothing useful.

He asks what I remember of the first rain. I tell him I remember rain but not which was first. He asks whether I recall the old elm. I see a green shape against white sky, then lose it. When I ask why, he kisses my forehead and presses a cup into my hand.

“First,” he says, “you must remember having a body.”

“I have one.”

“You have been carrying one. That is different.”

He lifts his pipes before I can argue.

The tune begins low. Feet strike earth around the fire. I join them.

Day gives itself to night. Firelight flickers across faces until my thoughts grow hazy. I swirl and swing and laugh. I clap until my palms sting. Someone teaches me a step that requires three knees; when I confess to owning only two, she lends me one of hers. Pell chirps from his throne, leading and following us at once.

I dance until dizziness finds me a place to lie.

Everywhere here is a pillow to catch the fallen. Bodies mingle and settle, shoulders beneath heads, calves across hips, hands resting where they are welcomed. Laughter lowers to murmurs. Affection moves through the grove without claim. I am warm,

and the ground and bodies around me are soft and binding. A broad-backed river spirit snores against my shin. Someone's fingers comb idly through the moss at my shoulder until the cloak pretends not to enjoy it.

I see no reason ever to leave this place.

The thought should frighten me.

Instead, sleep takes me before I can decide.

It is not the sleep of the cave.

Dreams pass. I cannot keep them, but I feel them changing me as weather changes soil. Once in the night, I wake because someone rolls away. Cool air touches the damp place where their warmth had been. A moment later another sleeper shifts closer. Loss and return. Cold and comfort. Neither cancels the other.

Then I sleep again.

Birdsong wakes the grove.

Gray morning lies between the branches. Around me, revelers make the small noises of healthy sleep: breath, sighs, an occasional snort, someone muttering a fierce argument with a dream. I gently release myself from several grasps and float upright.

The cloak hangs crookedly.

"You have leaves in you," I whisper.

"I have endured worse."

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"I was danced with without my consent."

I stop.

His clasp taps my chest. "I am making a joke, sir. He asked. I said yes."

"You can say yes?"

"I can say many things. You have heard several."

I consider this while drifting over the sleepers. "I am glad."

"So am I," he says, nearly too low to hear.

Pell rests upright in his woodland throne, chin against his chest, pipes held safely between both hands. I sit cross-legged in the air beside him and wait.

His eyes snap open.

“Good morning, friend,” I say. “I believe we have much to discuss.”

He groans, straightens, and rubs both palms down his face. “First, tell me how you feel.”

“I feel well.” I search more carefully. My muscles ache. My mouth is dry. Someone’s flower paint marks my thigh. I am hungry, rested, and faintly embarrassed by things I do not entirely remember. “More whole than before. More like myself than I have for some time.”

Pell smiles. “Good. I had hoped to ground you.”

“You did not ground me. I floated here.”

He points at my feet. Dark earth stains both soles.

“Ah.”

“Now,” he says, “I am the reason you woke. In part.”

The last softness of wine leaves my mind.

Pell looks toward the fire. “Long ago, something reached me through the roots. Not a voice. A rhythm where a voice should have been. It led me to your cave. I would not enter.”

“Why?”

“Because the rhythm was very clear about that. Sing at the threshold. Leave food. Never cross inside.” He taps four quick beats against his knee, one low beat after them, then holds his fingers still. “So I found a mortal willing to make the walk. She sang. She taught another. Family took it up, then friends, then those adopted into the work. The song changed, as songs do. The promise did not.”

I think of the old man who had once been a jumping child. The woman walking now in his place.

“They did this for an eon?”

“Not for you alone. The walk became how some mourned, how others gave thanks, how children learned the forest. Mortals are forever taking one purpose and making seven more useful ones from it.”

“And they woke me.”

“Their care reached you without breaking your door. Slowly. It appears to have worked.” Pride lifts his eyebrows, then falls away. “Later than I hoped.”

“Why now?”

Pell rolls the pipes between his palms. One hole has been bound in golden thread, though no crack shows beneath it.

“The old elm stands at the center of the vale. Its rings hold what has happened here. Not what we wish happened. Not what we have told one another. What happened.”

The words make my tattoos tighten against my skin.

“Something is bleaching those rings from the outside inward. A white hush has already taken roads, little gods, family names. When it reaches the heartwood, the one waiting there will become unreachable.”

“Who waits?”

His eyes meet mine. For all his warmth, there is desperation in them.

“Someone who has longed to see you again.”

A hollow opens inside my chest. It feels shaped around another body.

“Then tell me who.”

“If I put a name into that hollow before you can answer it, the wrong story may grow around it. You are not merely a man who misplaced an afternoon. Stories adhere to you. You know this, even if you do not yet remember why.”

“You are asking me to follow a path I cannot see toward a person you will not name.”

“Yes.”

“And something stands between us.”

Pell's grip tightens around his pipes. "Someone else. One you wished to forget."

The white points behind my eyes draw themselves into a spear.

I look away.

"You know the name of that someone too," I say.

"I know what it calls itself now. I will not give it a door through your mouth before you have walls strong enough to hold one."

Anger warms my face. It is a thin anger, uncertain of its rights.

"You say you love me, then hide the world from me."

Pell receives this without flinching. "Yes. I have hidden too much, and I may answer for that. But not by filling your empty places with whatever tale I choose. You must find witnesses. You must see what your absence has done. And when a memory comes, you must decide to remain."

"Remain where?"

"In yourself. With us." He leans closer. "Can you trust me far enough to take one step?"

Trust is not a light. It does not appear because I gesture correctly. I can feel the cool mouth of the cave behind every thought. I can feel the grove too: dirt on my soles, an old friend's worried eyes, the weight of a cloak who was lonely before he knew he lived.

"Tell me where to begin."

Pell exhales. "Go to the village and speak to the current Giver. She may not know the elm, but she carries the root-verse. It will tell you where to seek the next witness."

"And every step will restore my memory?"

"No."

I blink.

"Every step will give you a chance to stop abandoning it."

The honesty hurts more than a promise would have.

I nod.

Pell touches his brow to mine. "See me when you remember, yes?"

"I will."

"And if you do not?"

"I will see you anyway."

His smile returns, smaller and true.

I leave the grove while the revelers wake behind me. At its edge, I turn my hand through the air and open my inward hold. My fingers close around a knobbly, crooked wooden staff. The grain twists along its length like slow water. I do not remember cutting it or receiving it, but it settles into my palm with the familiarity of an old promise.

I rest it across my lap and begin to float toward the village.

The cloak clears his throat.

"Sir, perhaps you should consider your appearance to the locals."

I look down. Green skin. Blue tattoos. Moss cloak. Staff. Nothing else.

"What is wrong with it?"

"They may not know how to react to a nude, floating green man carrying a wizard's staff."

"Pell's people reacted favorably."

"Pell's people are recovering from reacting favorably to everything."

I concede the point.

With one hand, I smooth my shape into the warm brown skin and black hair common among the villagers I watched. The blue sigils remain. They will always remain, though I do not yet know what they say. A loose gray tunic and dark trousers take form beneath the cloak.

The cloak considers me.

"Better."

I continue floating.

“Feet,” he says.

I lower them.

The earth receives my weight. The sensation is less graceful than levitation and more honest.

Staff in hand, I walk toward the village.