
A WOODLAND FABLE
THE WOODS DO NOT ANSWER
A Shaman's Journey of Self-Discovery
ORION SAINT

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The Woods Do Not Answer

A Shaman's Journey of Self-Discovery

An illustrated short novel

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A Shaman's Journey of Self-Discovery

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Revised self-discovery edition

This is a work of fiction. Its characters, village, and spiritual traditions are invented.

Original story developed for this edition. Illustrations created with AI assistance.

Reading edition, 6 x 9 inches. Cover artwork is included in the page sequence.

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PART I

The Borrowed Self

CHAPTER 01

The Village's Question

Rook had spoken to storms for twenty years. None had ever stayed for the reply.

This had not prevented his village from consulting him. People came to the house beside the mill with dreams, fevers, quarrels, births, and the suspicion that their neighbors possessed more luck than they deserved. Rook listened. He knew which leaves soothed a nettle sting, how to sit beside a dying person without filling the room with his own fear, and when a quarrel required bread before it required philosophy.

For a long time, that had been enough.

There had also been days when he wanted no visitor at all. On those days he would hear a step outside, feel an old little pleasure at being wanted, and open the door before deciding whether he wished to. By evening he could be exhausted with kindness and quietly angry at people who had never known he wanted them to leave.

He had no name for that anger. A good man, he thought, ought to be grateful for the opportunity to help. So he buried it beneath another cup of tea.

Then people began calling him wise. They brought him better gifts. They repeated things he had said while half asleep. A sentence about remembering to close a gate became, by its third retelling, a teaching about the boundaries of the soul.

Rook did not correct them. It seemed ungrateful.

He acquired a black cloak, a mask carved from birch, and an antler crown so wide that he had to enter his own kitchen

sideways. Children followed him through the square. Adults lowered their voices when he approached. Gradually he learned to lower his own, and to pause before answering, as though fetching knowledge from somewhere deeper than thought.

One winter a child asked what he wore when he was not being the shaman. Rook said he was always the shaman. Everyone at the table nodded appreciatively. The child looked disappointed, as though he had described a door that could never be opened.

That night, alone in his kitchen, Rook had stood before the little shaving mirror without the mask. His face looked almost familiar. He tried the expression he wore for frightened visitors, then the patient smile he used for foolish questions. Beneath both waited a tired man who wanted supper and did not know what he wanted after it.

He put the mirror away. There were letters to answer.

The trouble was that people asked harder questions when they believed you had harder answers.

Three autumns before he entered the woods, the river had risen against the bridge. His younger brother, Tavin, kept the ferry. Tavin had asked whether the upper bank would hold until morning.

Rook had seen the bank once, in summer. He had seen the rain that night. He had also seen forty frightened faces turned toward him.

"It will hold," he had said.

By dawn, the river had taken the bank, the ferry shed, and Tavin.

Since then Rook had worked at grief as other men worked at fences. He inspected it, repaired it, and stood beside it pretending it was sound. When someone spoke his brother's

name, he would place a careful expression on his face. He had several. None fitted well.

Now another wet autumn had come, and the village needed a new bridge. The carpenter wanted stone footings. The miller wanted speed. The headman wanted a blessing large enough to cover both the expense and his involvement.

Eda, who had once been Rook's apprentice, stood beside the survey stakes with muddy hands.

"You could tell them to wait for the water to fall," she said.

"They will ask me how long."

"You could tell them you don't know."

The words were so ordinary that Rook resented them.

He looked beyond the roofs toward the black forest. Somewhere inside it, according to a story old enough to have stopped explaining itself, stood the First Tree. Its roots drank from the spring beneath all springs. Anyone who reached it with a true question would return knowing what could be known.

Rook had avoided the story for years. It was inconvenient to believe in a source of wisdom while making a living downstream from it. Lately, though, another desire had begun to trouble him. He wanted a morning in which his name arrived before his title. He wanted to choose what to do with an hour without first imagining who might approve.

He told himself that the First Tree would make him a better shaman. That was a reason he could explain to the village. The smaller, less respectable reason was that he could no longer bear to be necessary and absent from his own life at the same time.

That evening he packed bread, a knife, flint, a wool blanket, and a notebook. He took the little copper bell from his brother's ferry. Its tongue was missing; it had washed ashore silent. He tied it inside his cloak where it touched his ribs.

Eda found him fastening the antler straps.

"How long?"

"Seven nights."

"And the bridge?"

"You know what to do."

She watched him. "That wasn't what I asked."

He had prepared a sentence about the duty of the shaman to seek truth. It suddenly sounded like a man arranging for someone else to lift something heavy.

Eda took a strip of red cloth from her pocket and tied it around his wrist. She had used it to mark the cracked survey stake.

"So you can be found," she said.

"I know the way back."

"Then it won't hurt."

At dawn he passed Maren's house. The old woman sat on her step, straightening the leg injured in the same flood that had taken Tavin. She looked at his crown, his staff, and his solemn face.

"If the woods give you wisdom," she said, "ask whether it comes in something lighter."

Rook would remember that remark after he had forgotten most of his prayers.

He crossed the field alone. Behind him, the first hammer struck wood.

CHAPTER 02

The Boy Before the Crown

The first path was broad, straight, and plainly wrong.

Rook discovered this after following it for half a morning. It ended at a charcoal pit, where three blackened stumps and an abandoned shovel offered no opinion on existence.

He consulted his map. The map had been copied from a map copied from a song. It showed the First Tree as a circle, the river as a wavering line, and a large stretch of woodland as a wolf with remarkably good posture.

Rook turned it sideways. The wolf became a hill. This did not improve its usefulness.

He had expected the forest to recognize him. Not bow, exactly, but perhaps rearrange a little. His arrival had been carefully considered. His cloak contained symbols of the four winds. The crown held feathers collected over twelve years. Surely something would indicate that the person now standing beside the charcoal pit was taking this seriously.

A squirrel dropped a cone onto his shoulder.

He left the broad path.

Beyond it, the trees grew close enough to rub against his antlers. Moss swallowed the ground. Pale mist drifted among the trunks, turning distances uncertain. A branch that seemed an arm's length away took twenty steps to reach. A rock he meant to skirt appeared directly beneath his foot.

He fell on one knee. Water entered his boot.

"A lesson in humility," he announced.

His knee continued hurting, unmoved by the interpretation.

By afternoon he found a narrow track descending between spruces. He knelt to inspect it. Deer prints. One deep mark from an injured hoof. The animals had chosen the easiest grade across the slope, though they could not possibly have studied the map.

He followed them.

The track led to a spring seeping beneath a stone. He drank and sat down. For the first time since leaving the village, he took off the crown. It lay beside him like a dead bush.

Without it, the forest sounded larger.

Water ticked into a hollow root. A woodpecker struck somewhere out of sight. Wind moved through the upper branches, reaching him as a soft hiss after the needles had already shivered. He had known these sounds since childhood. Yet he usually heard them on his way to something more important.

His father had once brought him here to cut hazel rods. Tavin had been small enough to demand carrying and large enough to resent being carried. They had eaten cheese against a tree. His father had fallen asleep with a slice in his hand.

Nothing remarkable had happened. For years, Rook had therefore failed to remember it.

Now he could see the cheese, the rough nails, and his brother trying to steal the last crust without waking their father. A whole afternoon returned to him, not as a teaching, but as sunlight on an ordinary hand.

He remembered something else. That afternoon he had carved a bird from a scrap of hazel. Its head was too large and one wing shorter than the other. Tavin had announced that it was a very distinguished potato. Rook had laughed so hard that the knife slipped from his hand.

Later he learned to carve ceremonial faces. People paid him for those. He grew careful with the wood, then careful with himself. The small birds disappeared from his workbench. Nobody forbade them. He simply stopped making things that needed no explanation.

Beside the spring, he picked up a pale twig and turned it in his hands. A blunt curve suggested a beak. His thumb remembered the movement before he remembered wanting it.

He put the twig in his pocket. It was possible to carry something without knowing what it was for.

He opened the notebook. On its first page he had written, before setting out: What must a wise man know?

He considered adding something about paths and humility. He could already hear the village repeating it. This was a discouragingly pleasant thought.

He closed the notebook.

A crow landed on the opposite bank. It watched him with its head tilted, then lifted a piece of bark and dropped it. Its left wing had a pale feather near the tip.

"Do you know the First Tree?" Rook asked.

The crow made a harsh sound.

"I thought not."

The bird took off along the deer track. Rook watched its flight until the trees concealed it. Then he put on his crown and followed at the more sensible pace available to a man with a wet boot.

That night he slept beneath a leaning rock. He dreamed of a bridge that kept moving a little farther away each time he reached for it.

CHAPTER 03

The Voices He Carried

On the second day, Rook tried silence.

He did it impressively. He vowed to utter no word until sundown, walked with his head lowered, and arranged his face into the expression he used when receiving important dreams.

Within an hour he was arguing inside his skull.

He argued with Eda, the headman, his younger self, and a man who had once accused him of charging too much for a winter blessing. He gave excellent answers. Everyone else had the disadvantage of being absent.

After a while, he noticed that even his private thoughts had begun addressing him from somebody else's chair.

Stand straight, said his teacher. Don't make a fuss, said his father in a voice that had outlived the occasions on which he actually used it. Be useful, said no one Rook could identify. That instruction appeared to have entered without an introduction and settled in permanently.

His father had also laughed, slept in the sun, and sometimes admitted he had cut a board too short. Rook's memory had kept the commands more carefully than the permissions. He wondered who had done the selecting.

Then he began explaining the forest to himself.

The fallen trunk meant surrender. The fern meant renewal. A beetle climbing his sleeve apparently meant persistence, although it might equally have meant that his sleeve was in the beetle's way.

He noticed that he had given everything a meaning before giving it a look.

Near midday, he reached a hollow filled with dead leaves. A thin birch stood at its center. Strips of bark hung from its trunk like loosened bandages. Around the hollow, roots curved out of the earth and returned to it. Rook had the uncomfortable impression of a room whose occupants had stopped talking when he entered.

He sat against the birch.

The silence became so thick that he could hear his own swallowing. He attempted the breathing rhythm his teacher had taught him, lost count, began again, and became annoyed with the numbers. Somewhere beyond the hollow, a branch creaked.

"Tavin?" he said.

The name escaped before he remembered his vow.

He waited.

The creak came again. His brother had made a similar noise when stretching after a long day on the river. Rook found himself smiling. Then the branch broke, landed among the leaves, and revealed itself as a branch.

He stared at it for a long time.

There were mornings in the village when he heard his brother's step outside. A cough in the square. The whistle Tavin used to call the ferry dog. For a fraction of a moment the world would be whole. Then it would resume its usual shape, and he would have to endure the difference.

He had never told anyone about this. He had described other people's grief with great tenderness. His own he treated as a leak in a roof that must be hidden from visitors.

Rain began gently. The birch offered almost no shelter.

Rook could have moved to the spruce at the hollow's edge. Instead he stayed where he was, as though discomfort might purchase a revelation. Rain ran down his neck. His crown caught the droplets and delivered them efficiently behind his ears.

At last a gust brought down a shower of water so cold that he stood with a startled yelp.

He moved beneath the spruce.

He rested his head against the trunk and tried a smaller experiment. Instead of asking what the rain meant, he asked what was happening to him. His neck was cold. His jaw ached from holding itself solemnly. He was hungry, frightened of the coming night, and ashamed of both.

He loosened his jaw. He moved his blanket over his shoulders. The changes were so modest that he nearly dismissed them. Yet for a few minutes he inhabited his body without assigning it a task.

When he noticed a fern uncurling beside his boot, he looked at it until the urge to make it a teaching passed. Its green pleased him. He did not have to improve that pleasure.

The rain continued. Nothing congratulated him for choosing shelter.

He ate a piece of bread and looked at the broken branch. He had wanted it to speak because he had something to say. That possibility hurt more than the disappointment itself.

"I miss you," he said.

The forest did not turn those words into anything else. It did not assure him that his brother lived inside the wind. It did not accuse him. Rain struck needles. Water darkened the earth.

Rook sat until the light thinned.

When he rose, the hollow was simply a hollow again. The roots were roots. One of them had trapped a small puddle in which the gray sky shook whenever a drop fell.

He walked on without a vow.