

# IN THE SHADOW OF A SHNORK



# THE FOREST CHANGES YOU

As the story unfolds, so does the forest.

What begins as a step into the wild becomes a test—of body, mind, and memory.

This isn't just a journey through shadows. It's a journey through yourself.

Along the way, strange forces will take hold.

A rush of strength. A sting behind the eyes.

Moments of power. Moments of weakness.

Some gifts. Some burdens.

You may grow stronger, quicker, clearer.

Or find yourself lost, frozen, hurting.

The forest gives—and it takes.

Each challenge brings change.

Some help you survive.

Others make you wonder if survival is still enough.

The question is not just: Can you survive?

But: What will survival make of you?

**HEALING:** RESTORES VITALITY AND INSTANTLY MENDS WOUNDS. THE FOREST ANSWERS, STITCHING BARK AND BREATH ALIKE.



**STRENGTH:** THE WILD SURGES IN YOU — ROOTS CRACK, STONE YIELDS. YOUR LIMBS CARRY THE FORCE OF STORMS.



**REGENERATION:** LIFE STIRS BENEATH YOUR SKIN. THE FOREST MENDS YOU IN SILENCE — WOUNDS KNIT, STRENGTH RETURNS.



**AWARENESS:** EYES SEE FURTHER, EARS HEAR WHISPERS. EVEN THE UNSEEN BECOMES FELT, AS IF THE WORLD LEANS CLOSER.



**ENERGY:** A JOLT OF VIGOR COURSES THROUGH YOU, SPARKING SPEED, ACTION, AND CLARITY. THE SUN PULSES IN YOUR VEINS.



**DEFENCE:** THICKENED BARK, UNSEEN SHIELDS, OR ROOTED STANCE — DAMAGE MEETS RESISTANCE AS NATURE GUARDS YOU.



**RAGE:** A WILD FURY FLARES UP, GREEN FLAME LICKING AT YOUR MIND. EACH STRIKE BURNS HOTTER, WILDER, STRONGER.



**PRECISION:** EVERY MOVE LANDS TRUE. YOUR AIM NARROWS, YOUR MIND SHARPENS — A NEEDLE THREADING FATE.



**FOCUS:** YOUR THOUGHTS ALIGN LIKE STARS. NO FEAR, NO NOISE, JUST PURE INTENT. TIME BENDS TO YOUR DISCIPLINE.



**POISONED:** TOXIC SAP OR CORRUPTED BREATH COURSES THROUGH YOU. EACH STEP SPOILS THE NEXT, EACH BREATH A SLOW STING.



**FROZEN:** ICY VINES CLUTCH YOUR LIMBS, SLOWING EVERY MOTION. TIME FEELS BRITTLE, THE AIR TOO STILL.



**SLEEPY:** HEAVY LIDS, DRIFTING THOUGHTS. A SOFT LULL LINGERS IN YOUR MIND — DREAMS PRESS FROM BENEATH.



**PAIN:** SOMETHING INSIDE SCREAMS — MUSCLE, MEMORY, SOUL. SHARP, CONSTANT, UNWELCOME.



**HUNGER:** THE BODY WEAKENS. A GNAWING VOID BUILDS WHERE STRENGTH ONCE LIVED. THE FOREST OFFERS NOTHING.



**STUNNED:** THE WORLD TILTS SIDeways. LIGHTS FLICKER, THOUGHTS SCATTER — BALANCE FLEES YOUR GRASP.



**DISORIENTED:** DIRECTION MEANS NOTHING. LEFT FEELS LIKE RIGHT, UP FEELS LIKE FEAR. YOU SPIN IN PLACE, LOST IN THOUGHT.



**BOUND:** TIGHTNESS. ROOTS, ROPES, OR WILL — SOMETHING HOLDS YOU FAST. MOVEMENT IS ONLY MEMORY.



**CORRUPTION:** SOMETHING BLACK AND CRAWLING TAKES ROOT. IT SPREADS, WHISPERING IN WRONGNESS, TWISTING WHAT'S REAL.



# IN THE SHADOW OF A SHNORK

A FORGOTTEN PAST. A RISING FORCE.  
A TRUTH BURIED IN THE DARK.

In a land haunted by echoes of its own wildness, one creature awakens to memories not fully his own. Born from shadow, shaped by mystery, he must uncover what lies between beast and hero... before the dark returns.

The omnipotent figure moved closer; voice calm yet curious.

“I have to ask... how did you find your way here?”

Without words or motion, as if some quiet magic linked us, my answer came low and guarded.

“Why do you need to know?”

There was no answer. Instead, a gentle force reached out, enveloping my eyes.

A hush fell over the space.

And then—

Colour. Light. Sound.

Memories poured in like river water rushing through cracks in stone. Laughter. Firelight. The ache of long marches. The shimmer of spells barely remembered.

And through it all:

Peace.

I exhaled slowly, breath caught between wonder and disbelief. A smile tugged at my lips—uneven, hesitant.

“That was... unreal.” I blinked hard, as if waking from a dream.

“You showed me my own memories. I felt them—like I was walking through them again.”

My voice rose, edged with urgency.

“How did you do that? Who are you? What are you?”

My eyes stayed closed a moment longer, clutching those fading memories as if they might vanish forever. When I opened them, something restless stirred beneath my skin.

“I never knew... about that part of me,” I whispered. “

The figure said nothing, watching patiently.

“Those memories aren’t just echoes of the past,” the voice finally came, soft but certain. “They’re roots you never saw—wild, tangled, and deep.”

I flexed my fingers, feeling faint scars—proof of battles fought, some with steel, others with sheer will.

This time the voice was steady. “You must remember, it’s not about running away. It’s about what you choose to become from what’s inside you.”

Something flickered behind my eyes—a hard edge of resolve.

“Then I need to know,” I said. “Not just where I’ve been... but where I’m going. And maybe I can help those who are still lost in the dark like I almost was.”

The figure’s gaze held mine, steady and unyielding. “What lies behind you shapes what lies ahead, you will only ever understand the world the way you have experienced it yourself.”

I swallowed hard, feeling a fire flicker to life deep inside me.





“Then show me. Let me walk that path again—step by step, until I understand.”

Moments later, the world around us softened, colours blending and edges blurring like smoke drifting in the wind.

Memories—half-forgotten, half-dreaded—rose up to meet me, swirling like leaves caught in a slow, spiralling dance.

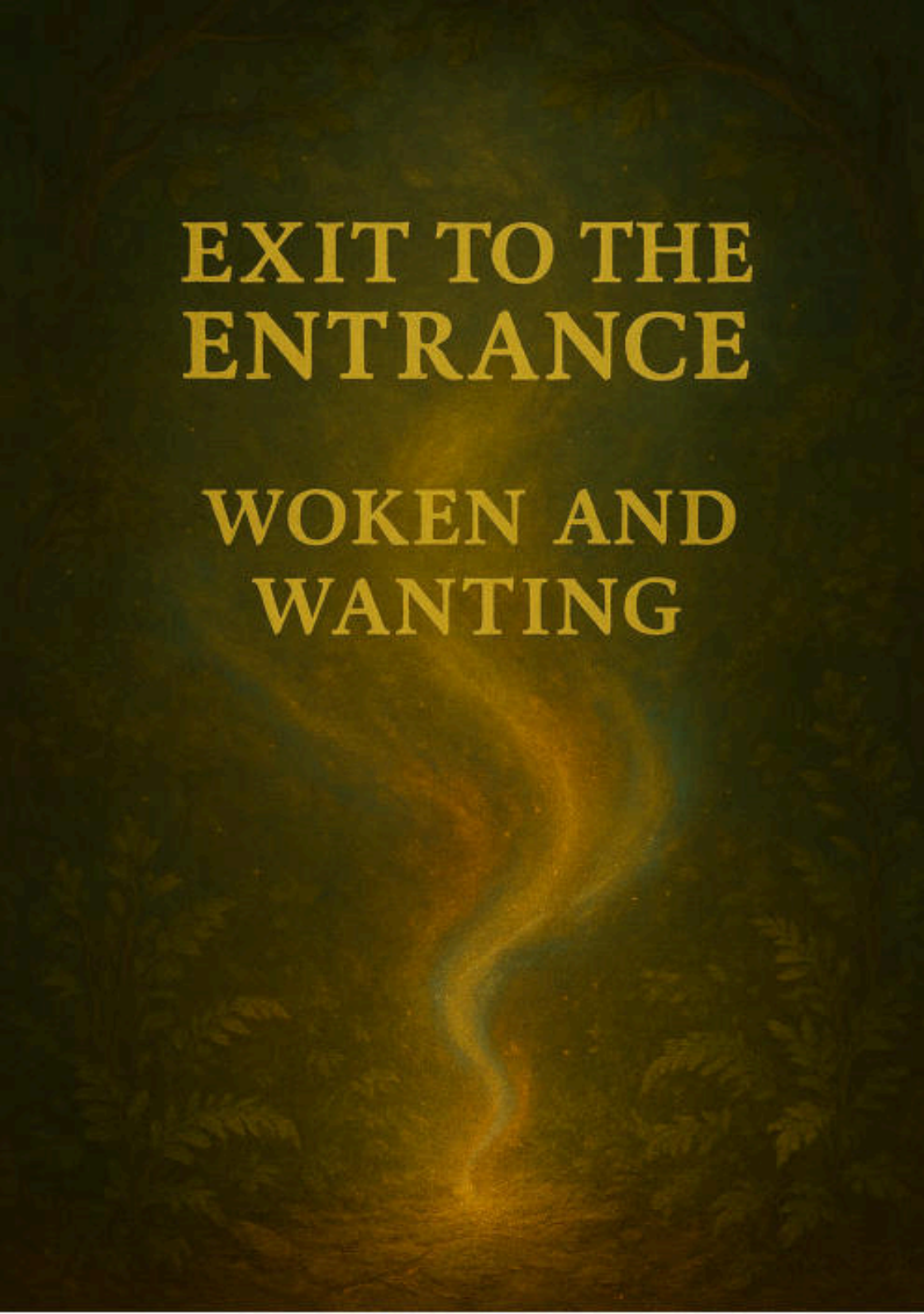
“Wha..?”

...

...

**EXIT TO THE  
ENTRANCE**

**WOKEN AND  
WANTING**



The air was thick and heavy, buzzing quietly with a strange kind of energy. Shadows twisted and danced between the trees, shapes shifting at the edge of sight.

I crouched low, the world tilting around me like it was breathing. My senses sharpened—every sound, every scent, every flicker of movement felt sharper, closer, alive.

The sky darkened, colours bleeding and swirling, and I felt it—something stirring deep inside. A pulse, slow and steady at first, then growing stronger, filling me with a rush of heat and light that surged through my limbs.

The forest whispered secrets in a language I almost understood. I felt like I was waking from a long, tangled sleep, like the world was opening itself up just for me—inviting me to see what had been hidden all along.

I was no longer just a shadow moving through the trees. I was something else. Something new, and yet, I couldn't have known, this was not my first experience of beginning.

The taste lingered—earthy, sharp, almost wild on my tongue. It was strange and unfamiliar, like biting into the forest itself.

As the flavour settled, shadows stirred deep inside my mind—faint echoes of something long forgotten. Flickers of movement dancing in the trees, the snap of branches underfoot, breath ragged and raw beneath a wild sky.

Memories that weren't mine, yet felt buried beneath layers of time—whispers of a beast I once was, or perhaps still was, hiding beneath this skin



The forest around me pulsed in rhythm with those distant echoes, calling me back to something primal, something raw.

But now, the wildness was different—sharpened, tempered.

At first, just the feeling of being held, somewhere between waking and not. A quiet hum filled the edges of thought, soft and low, like roots shifting beneath the ground.

Then, breath.

A slow inhale, sudden and strange, as if it were the first one ever taken. I blinked. Once. Twice. The world seeped in—not in colour, not in shape, but in weight. A heaviness behind the eyes. Limbs that remembered motion before the mind did.

I lay still for a while, unsure whether I had returned... or begun.

The forest stretched around me in a hush of greens and browns and golds. Trees loomed tall, ancient and still; their bark patterned like old maps. Sunlight dripped in weak lines through the leaves above, golden and dusted with motion.

I sat up slowly, sluggish but steady. My hands—green, wide-palmed, three-fingered—rested on moss. Familiar, but... not. As if they'd once belonged to someone else. My chest rose and fell. No pain. No fear. Just a sense of newness, aching at the edges.



A whisper of breeze passed through the clearing. Leaves rustled. Far off, something called out—a bird or a beast, or both. The sound stirred nothing familiar in my memory. That was the first thing it noticed: there was nothing to remember.

No name.

No purpose.

Only a question, quietly pulsing behind the eyes:

“What am I?”

I stood, wobbling at first, then finding balance. Feet met the ground like they knew it, like they'd done it a thousand times. The forest welcomed the weight. A beetle scurried nearby. A cluster of mushrooms swayed in the shadows of a log. And in the air: a scent—rich, loamy, alive.

I turned slowly in place. I saw no paths, no marks of passage. Just wilderness, stretched out in every direction, uncaring and untouched. But inside—beneath skin and breath and heartbeat—there was something else: awareness. Like waking up with new eyes.

Not just to see the world.

To understand it.

And maybe, in time... understand myself.

I raised a hand to my chest. The heartbeat was steady, but distant, like it wasn't entirely my own.

“I was...” I whispered, my voice rough and small. “I was something before this.”



Or maybe it hadn't been anything at all.

Something moved behind my eyes—a flicker of past lives, or future ones—impossible to tell. I touched my head. No scars. Just skin. Soft and still warm from the ground.

Wind passed through the trees again, this time stronger. I felt the pull in my chest, not forward, not back—just outward. Like the forest was breathing too, and it had woken in sync with something older than time.

I took my first step.

The moss gave way with a gentle squish, and the shadows bent just slightly to let it pass.

No direction.

No goal.

Only the sense that something had started.

And whatever I had been before... it had changed.



# TEETH IN THE TREES

THE WILD KNOWS



I moved through the forest in silence.

My feet made little sound against the moss and roots, but the woods were listening anyway. Every branch creak, every leaf flutter, felt like a whisper just out of reach. Nothing here was still. Nothing here was asleep.

My breath was slow, steady. Eyes wider now. Ears sharper.

The forest had no paths—only choices.

I moved toward the sound of trickling water, faint and erratic, like the forest couldn't decide if it wanted to hide the stream or reveal it. Thorns scraped lightly across my skin, leaving no wounds, but reminders. I winced, then sniffed the air.

Damp soil. Cold stone. And something sweeter—rotting fruit, maybe.

I followed the scent.

Moments later, I stumbled into a narrow glade where mushrooms the size of my head pulsed faintly with pale light. A fallen log lay cracked in half, its inside webbed with threads and twitching with small, pale insects. One scurried too close.

I snatched it.

Crunch. Bitter. Watery. But food.

My body responded immediately—more alert, steadier. Hunger dulled. Muscles tightened. It felt a strange sense of reward. Not just for eating—but for surviving.



A flicker of motion caught my eye.

Across the glade, something had moved between the trees. It froze.  
Watched.

Nothing.

Then again—a rustle, too heavy for wind.

I crouched low, backing slowly into the underbrush. The trees ahead seemed... wrong. Warped, as if turned ever so slightly toward one another, leaning in to whisper.

A guttural bark echoed once—sharp and wet—then nothing.

The forest swallowed the sound.

I didn't run, but it moved. Quickly. Carefully. My hands brushed bark and leaf and stone. I wasn't thinking anymore—I was sensing. Guided by a thread of instinct I didn't know I had.

When I found the stream, I fell to the ground and drank deep, cold water filling the hollow place in my chest. For a moment, all was still.

Then I looked up.

On the other side of the stream, carved into a trunk: three gouges, long and clean. Not random.

Warning, I thought. Or territory.

I stood, slowly. Watched the trees. The shadows.



Somewhere out there, something else moved. Something that knew these woods better. Something that watched.

My gaze drifted to a small hollow beneath a tangle of roots nearby. Dry. Sheltered. I could fit. I could hide. But hiding meant staying.

And staying meant being found.

Still crouched, I began gathering sticks, leaves, and a patch of dry moss. I shaped the beginnings of a nest. Temporary. Quiet. Concealed. I didn't plan these actions—my body remembered something older than thought.

By the time the sky had darkened, I had eaten twice more—berries I couldn't name, and a strange green bulb that left a tingling heat in my throat.

I had curled in under the roots, alert, watching the canopy above. Stars blinked between the leaves. A distant howl echoed through the trees.

Territory.

I lay still, body tight with awareness. I understood now: this forest had rules.

And everything inside it had teeth.

My body slowly unwound beneath the roots. Muscles eased. Eyes heavy. The cold surface at my back was grounding, steady.

Still, my breath came shallow, unsure—like I didn't quite trust sleep.

But sleep came anyway.

First the sound faded—the rustle of branches, the drip of water, the distant cries. Then the light. The forest dimmed not into night, but into nothing. A fog without colour or shape.

And in that void, the memory returned.

No—not a memory.

A vision. Fragmented. Slipping sideways.

I saw warmth. Firelight. Not flame, but something golden and ancient—like magic, not fire. Figures danced at the edge of the vision. One of them... felt familiar. Tall. Radiant. Laughing in a voice that hummed deep in its chest. The sound made my skin ache with recognition.

I reached out.

But the figures blurred, shifting like smoke. The light receded.

Faster this time.

Panic stirred in my gut—not fear of the vision, but fear of losing it.

The laughter turned to echoes. Then silence.

The light dimmed to grey. Then darker.

And then—



A pair of eyes opened in the dark ahead.

Not friendly. Not known.

They didn't blink.

All of my thoughts froze. Something unseen breathed out, and the fog recoiled. The light was gone. The warmth gone.

I was alone again.

And whatever had just watched it... wasn't dreaming.

Its voice—if it had one—was felt, not heard.

“Wake up.”



**TEETH  
IN THE  
DARK**

**BLOOD AND  
BARK**



I woke up knowing something was wrong.  
No sound. No wind. The forest had stopped breathing.

But I could feel it—in the roots, in the air.  
Something was coming.

I stood slowly, heart already pounding. Every part of me tense.  
Ready to run.  
Ready to fight.

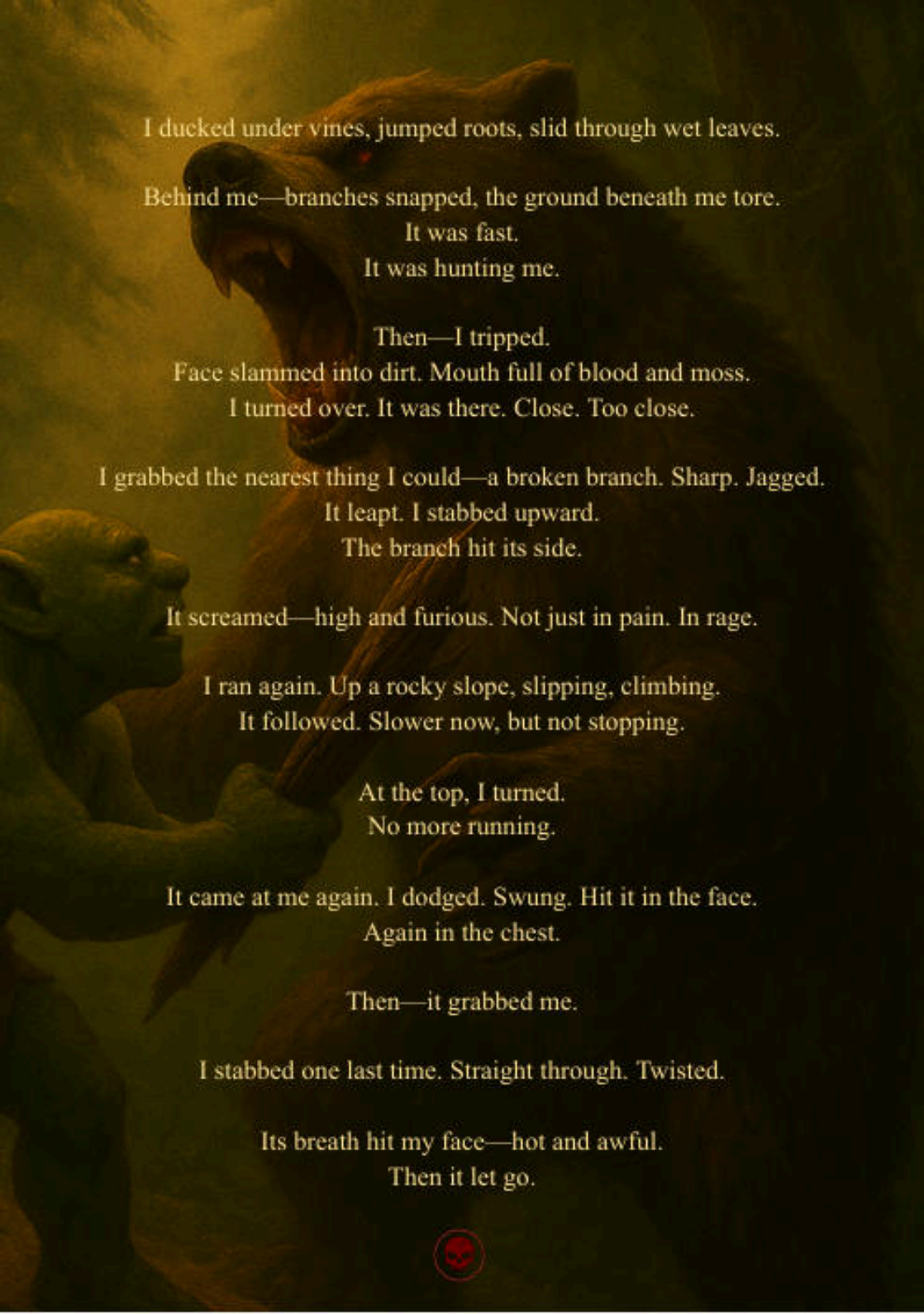
Then I heard it.  
Snap. A branch.  
Another. Closer.  
Then silence. The kind that presses on your ears.

And then a sound that turned my stomach cold:  
A growl. Deep. Wet. Hungry.

I turned. And saw it.  
Just beyond the trees—  
Tall. Bent forward. Long arms. Clawed hands.  
Eyes burning red.

It watched me for a breath. Then moved.  
One step. Then another.  
Then it charged.

I didn't wait. I dove sideways, rolled through mud and thorns, got up, ran.  
I don't know how I moved so fast. My legs knew before my mind did.



I ducked under vines, jumped roots, slid through wet leaves.

Behind me—branches snapped, the ground beneath me tore.

It was fast.

It was hunting me.

Then—I tripped.

Face slammed into dirt. Mouth full of blood and moss.

I turned over. It was there. Close. Too close.

I grabbed the nearest thing I could—a broken branch. Sharp. Jagged.

It leapt. I stabbed upward.

The branch hit its side.

It screamed—high and furious. Not just in pain. In rage.

I ran again. Up a rocky slope, slipping, climbing.

It followed. Slower now, but not stopping.

At the top, I turned.

No more running.

It came at me again. I dodged. Swung. Hit it in the face.

Again in the chest.

Then—it grabbed me.

I stabbed one last time. Straight through. Twisted.

Its breath hit my face—hot and awful.

Then it let go.



Fell backward. Crashed through the trees.

Gone.

I stood there, shaking. Still holding the splintered branch.  
The forest was breathing again, but it didn't sound the same.

Nothing was the same.

I wiped my face. My hands wouldn't stop shaking.  
My whole body felt like it might fall apart.

But I was alive.

And now I knew something for certain:

The forest doesn't care who you were before.  
It only asks one thing.

Can you survive?





**THE  
ROOTS  
REMEMBER**

**THE BEAST  
BENEATH**

It wasn't a dream this time.

I was wide awake when I found it.

A scrap of hide—leathery, cracked with age—caught between the roots of an old tree. The bark had grown around it slightly, as if trying to swallow the thing whole. I tugged gently, and the piece came free with a brittle sound.

I turned it over.

The texture was strange—thick, calloused. Faint ridges lined the underside in patterns that looked almost like scales. The color was pale brown, but there were faint traces of green. My green.

I ran my fingers over the edge. Three points. Like it once covered three long, clawed toes.

My toes.

A sound escaped me. Not a word. Not quite a breath.

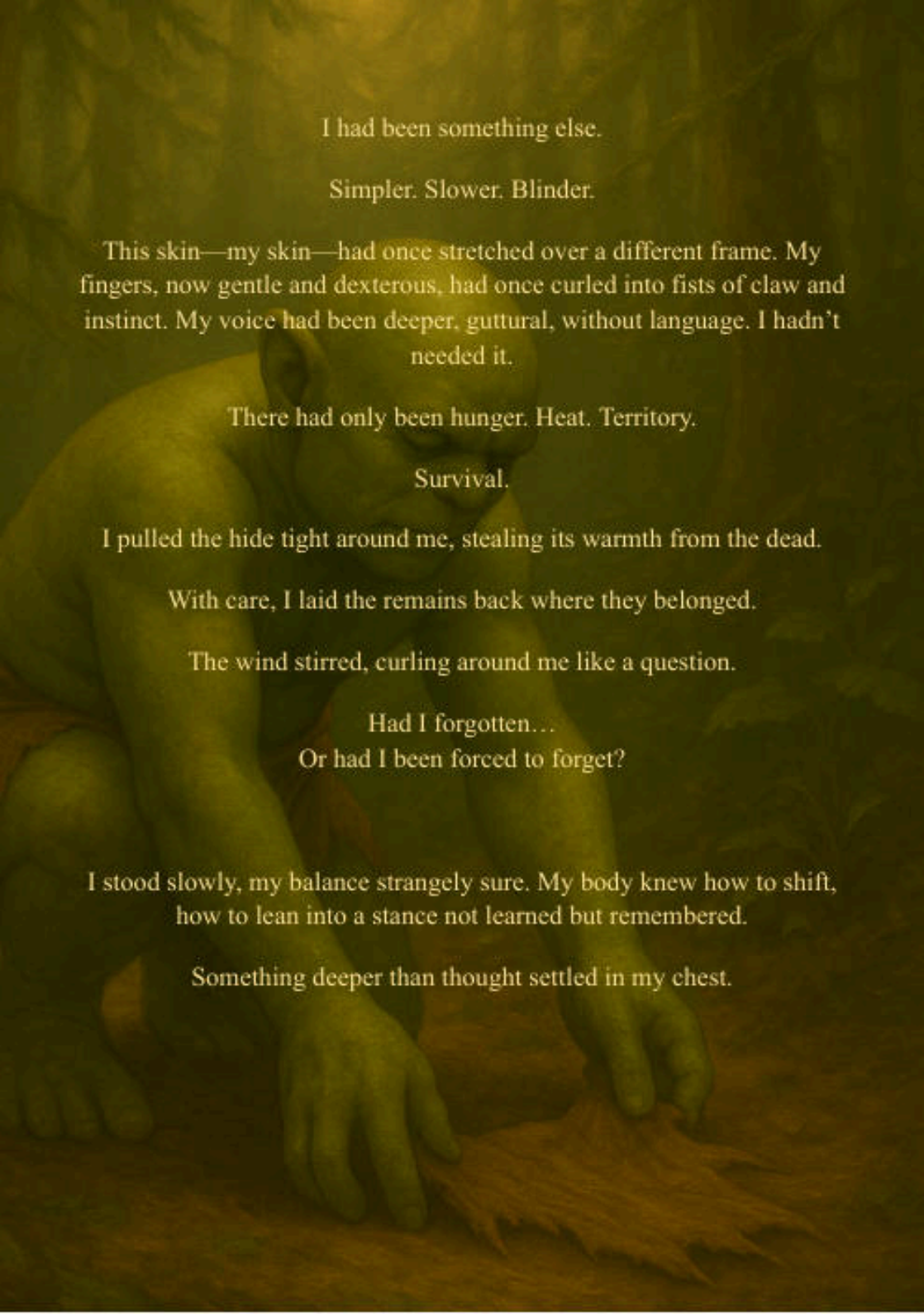
More like a remembering.

My knees hit the dirt.

I stared at the hide for a long time, heart thudding deep and slow. Something stirred in my arms. My shoulders. My back. Like echoes of a posture I no longer held. A way I used to move—low to the ground, hunched and dragging.

And suddenly, I could see it.

Not clearly. Not as a memory. But as a shape in my bones.



I had been something else.

Simpler. Slower. Blinder.

This skin—my skin—had once stretched over a different frame. My fingers, now gentle and dexterous, had once curled into fists of claw and instinct. My voice had been deeper, guttural, without language. I hadn't needed it.

There had only been hunger. Heat. Territory.

Survival.

I pulled the hide tight around me, stealing its warmth from the dead.

With care, I laid the remains back where they belonged.

The wind stirred, curling around me like a question.

Had I forgotten...

Or had I been forced to forget?

I stood slowly, my balance strangely sure. My body knew how to shift, how to lean into a stance not learned but remembered.

Something deeper than thought settled in my chest.

Not fear.  
Not pride.

Ancestry.

And then, a noise.

Not near. But not far.

A low grunt. A heavy tread. The crack of bark beneath too much weight.

I froze.

There was something else in this forest.

Something that hadn't evolved.

The sound came again.

Heavier this time. Closer.

I crouched low behind a root, body still, breath tight in my chest. I didn't know what I was waiting for—until it stepped into view.

It wasn't like anything I'd seen before.

Its body was squat and wrinkled, skin thick and pale like stretched clay. Its eyes were half-lidded, dragging along the ground as if looking took effort.

It had no clothes. No tools. Just a mouth that hung open, leaking breath like steam from an old pot.

But then—

It scratched at the dirt with three thick fingers.



Three, like mine.

It made a low, rattling grunt—the same sound I had made that first night when I had tasted the forest's strange offerings. A sound I hadn't known I could make until that moment.

The creature didn't see me.

It dragged itself forward, snout low to the ground, sniffing. It found something buried beneath a patch of moss—some root or grub—and devoured it whole. Loud. Wet. Joyless.

Not hunger.  
Just need.

I stayed hidden, not from fear—but confusion.

There was something in its breath. In the way it moved. Not its shape—that was foreign—but something deeper. A rhythm I recognized.

Like a song I once hummed without knowing the words.

I stepped carefully over a low root, shifting my weight—

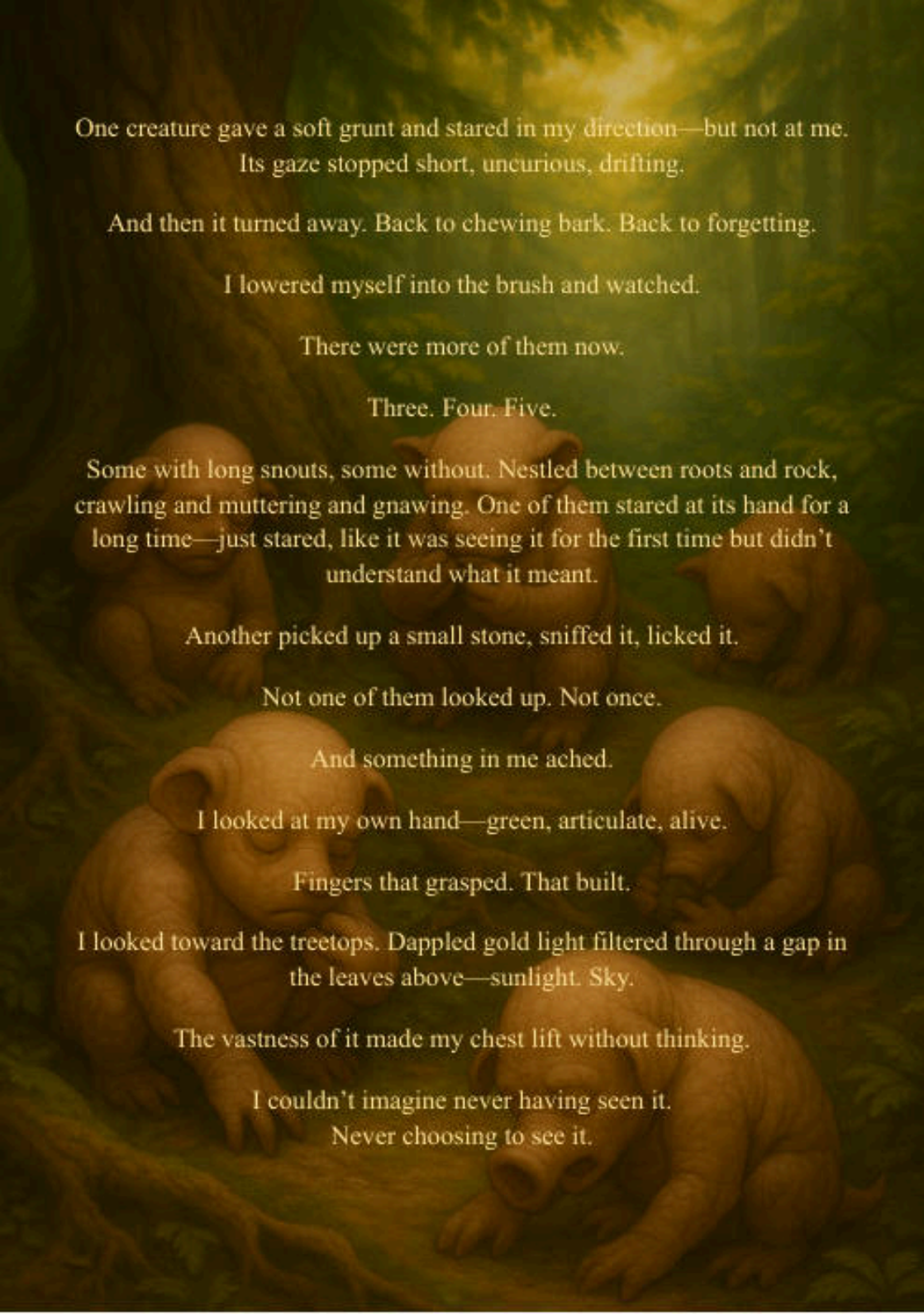
Snap.

A branch broke underfoot.

The sound cracked like lightning in the stillness.

Heads turned.

Eyes blinked slowly, without focus.

A group of piglets is shown in a forest setting. The piglets are light brown and are scattered throughout the scene, some sitting on the ground, some standing, and some looking towards the camera. The background is a dense forest with green foliage and a bright light source filtering through the trees, creating a soft, dappled light effect. The overall mood is peaceful and natural.

One creature gave a soft grunt and stared in my direction—but not at me.  
Its gaze stopped short, uncurious, drifting.

And then it turned away. Back to chewing bark. Back to forgetting.

I lowered myself into the brush and watched.

There were more of them now.

Three. Four. Five.

Some with long snouts, some without. Nestled between roots and rock,  
crawling and muttering and gnawing. One of them stared at its hand for a  
long time—just stared, like it was seeing it for the first time but didn't  
understand what it meant.

Another picked up a small stone, sniffed it, licked it.

Not one of them looked up. Not once.

And something in me ached.

I looked at my own hand—green, articulate, alive.

Fingers that grasped. That built.

I looked toward the treetops. Dappled gold light filtered through a gap in  
the leaves above—sunlight. Sky.

The vastness of it made my chest lift without thinking.

I couldn't imagine never having seen it.  
Never choosing to see it.

A person is seen from behind, walking through a dark forest at night. The scene is dimly lit, with a bright, glowing orb of light in the center of the forest, casting a soft glow on the person and the surrounding trees. The person is wearing a dark jacket and pants. The forest floor is covered in leaves and some mushrooms are visible in the lower right corner.

They didn't know.

Not the sky. Not their hands. Not each other.

They lived in a loop of crawling, chewing, sleeping, repeating.

They didn't live.

They lasted.

I turned away, breath uneven.

And as I walked back through the forest, I thought of the things I had eaten.

Not the berries. Not the bugs.

The other things.

The strange growths, hidden under shade. The pulsing forest fruit I had consumed without knowing why. The soft, glowing clusters that had tasted of nothing, yet changed everything.

I reached the clearing again. The place where I first became aware.

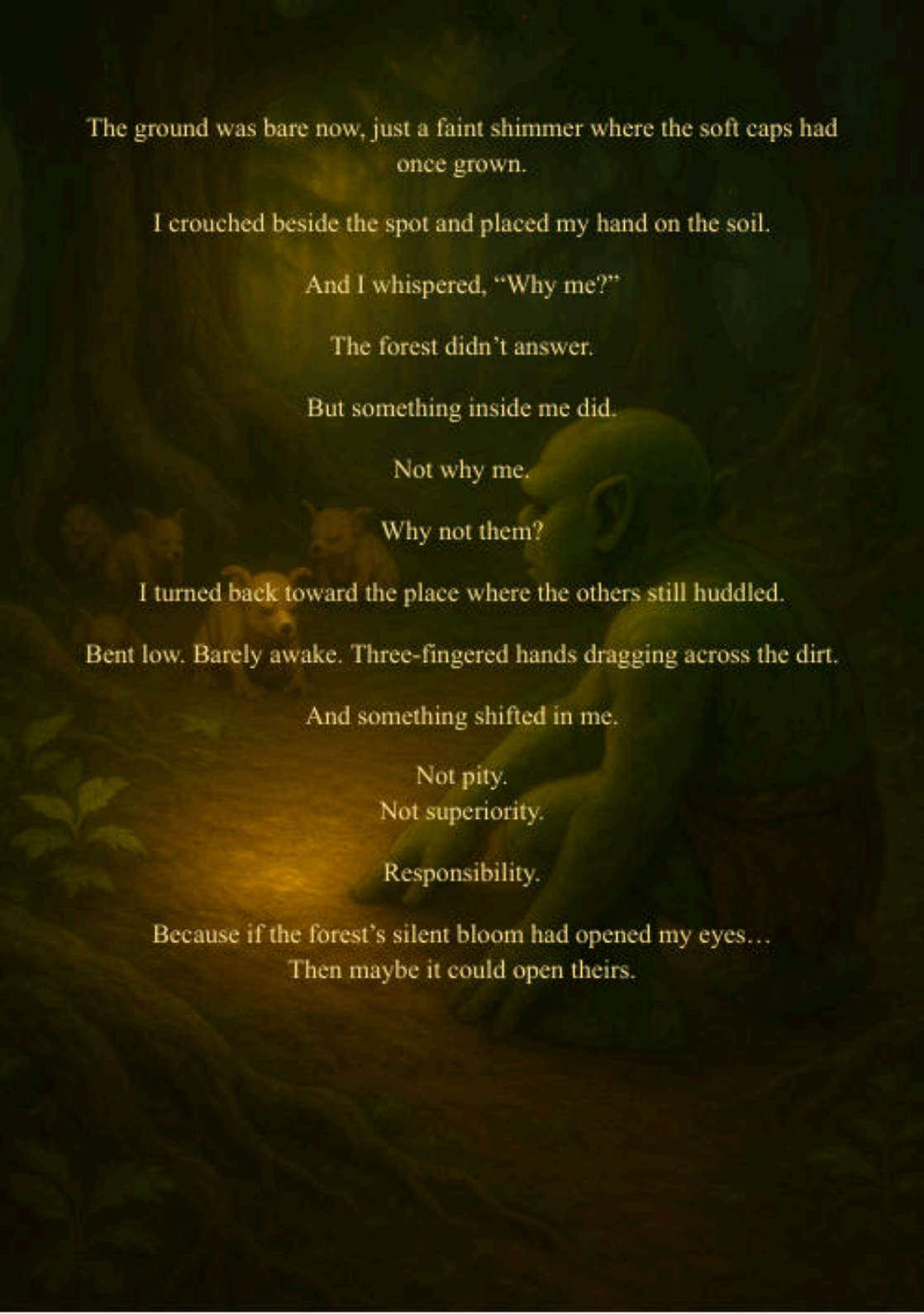
Still, nothing came from before. No memories.

And yet—I didn't feel young.

Not newborn. Not freshly made.

So why did it all begin here?

Why was there nothing behind this moment?



The ground was bare now, just a faint shimmer where the soft caps had  
once grown.

I crouched beside the spot and placed my hand on the soil.

And I whispered, "Why me?"

The forest didn't answer.

But something inside me did.

Not why me.

Why not them?

I turned back toward the place where the others still huddled.

Bent low. Barely awake. Three-fingered hands dragging across the dirt.

And something shifted in me.

Not pity.

Not superiority.

Responsibility.

Because if the forest's silent bloom had opened my eyes...

Then maybe it could open theirs.

# THE TASTE OF THOUGHT

The First Offering



The background is a dark, moody illustration of a forest clearing. In the foreground, a pig is shown in profile, facing right, with its mouth wide open as if barking or grunting. The pig is rendered in a light, almost white color, contrasting with the dark, shadowy background. The trees in the background have twisted, gnarled roots and sparse foliage, creating a sense of an old, perhaps overgrown or abandoned place. The overall lighting is low, with some highlights on the pig and the ground, suggesting a misty or overcast day.

I returned to the clearing the next morning.

The others were still there—sprawled beneath the same twisted roots, eyes half-closed, mouths working endlessly at bark, mud, leaves.

One stirred as I approached. A soft grunt. Slow blink. Then back to chewing.

They hadn't moved much and yet something in me had.

I kept low, cautious. I didn't want to startle them—not out of fear, but because I knew how fragile they were. Not in body... in mind.

They weren't ready for questions. Only patterns. Cycles. Habit.

But even the old loops can be broken.

That was the hope, wasn't it?

I watched them for a long time.

And then one noticed me.

Its head turned—slightly too far, like its neck didn't quite understand the limit. Its mouth opened wider, a line of drool slipping to the dirt. Then: a sound.

Not a call. Not a word.

Just a grunt—wet and low.

Then it lunged.



I stumbled back as the creature crashed toward me—limbs swinging, teeth bared, not in anger but confusion. Its movement wasn't a choice.

It was a reaction.

A leftover thing, buried in the blood.

It swung a wide, slow arm. I ducked. Caught it by the wrist. Twisted. It yelped. Collapsed to the ground.

I didn't hurt it. Just stopped it.

Pinned it.

Its face writhed beneath me—eyes wild and unseeing.

But close now—so close—I could see something else.

In the way its jaw shuddered.

In the tremble behind its eyes.

A flicker.

Faint.

Like a thought had almost formed—but died before it reached the surface.

“You don't know,” I said quietly.

My voice shook. “You don't know what you are.”

It moaned, low and hollow. Its hand opened, fingers splayed.

Three of them.

I let go.

It didn't run. Just slumped into the dirt and began to chew on a patch of moss.

I stood slowly. My breath was rough and angry—not at it.

At the world.

At the weight of knowing.

I left them there.

Not to abandon them.

But to find what might save them.

I returned to the place. The one that birthed my knowing.

The clearing was different now. Quieter. Wiser.

And at the center—rising from the mulch like forgotten thoughts—stood a small cluster. Pale. Soft. Almost glowing.

The forest's fruit.

No brighter than before. But now... it felt sacred.

I knelt. Reached out. Picked one.

It pulsed in my hand—slow, faint. I could feel its stillness beneath the skin, as if it waited for something too.

“Let this be enough,” I whispered.

Back at the clearing, the creatures hadn't noticed I'd left.

I crept closer and found one sitting alone—smaller than the others, calmer. It wasn't eating. Just staring at a patch of dirt, slowly dragging one finger through the mud. Not forming anything.

Just motion.

Habit.

But not frenzy.

It would be this one.

I crouched and placed the bloom between us.

It didn't move.

I waited.

Wind moved through the trees.

The others muttered, scraped, chewed.

Still, the small one didn't move.

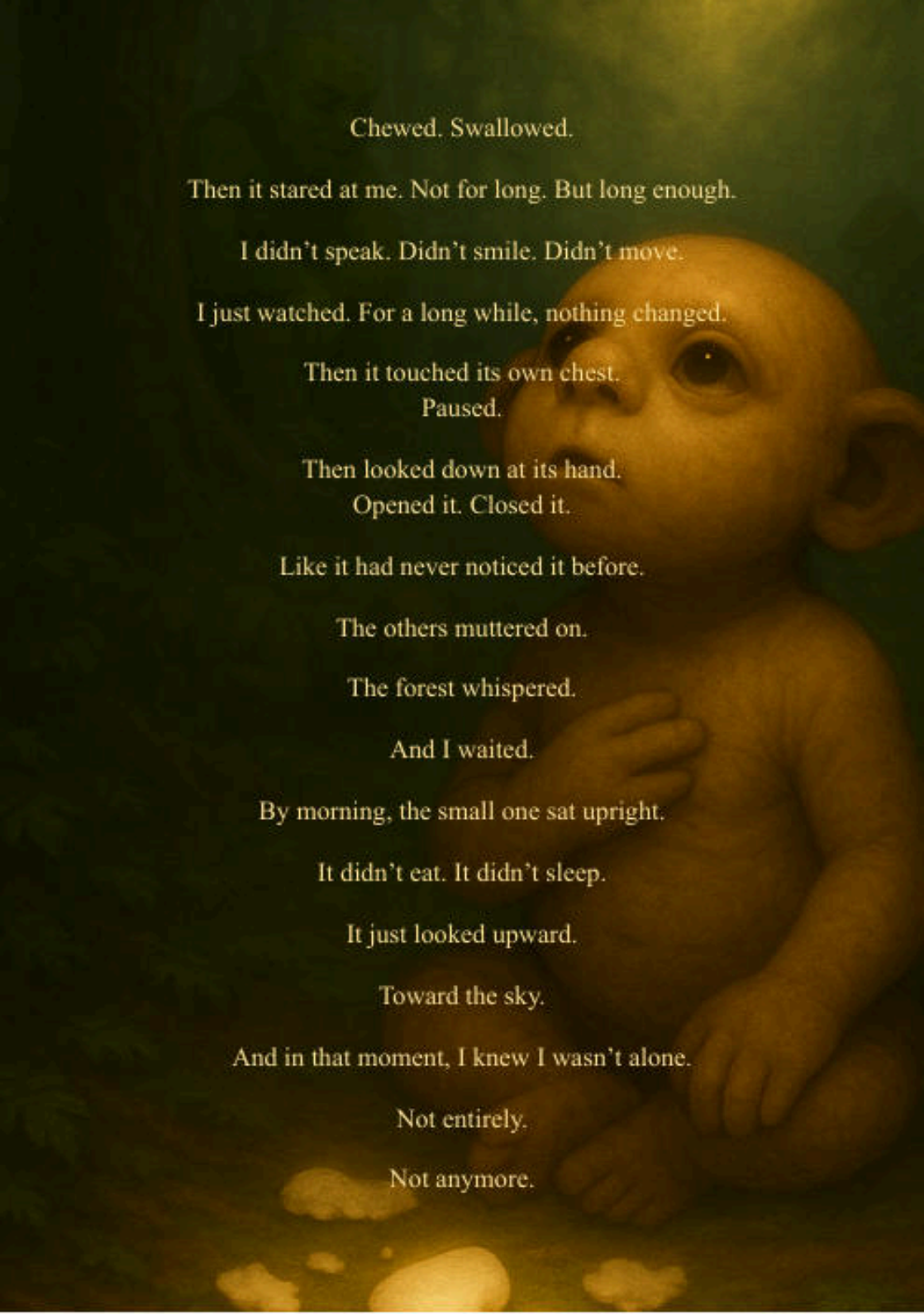
Then—finally—it sniffed.

A slow tilt of the head. A blink.

It reached out. Took the bloom.

Brought it to its face.

Sniffed again. Bit once.

A photograph of a baby sitting on the floor, looking upwards with a curious expression. The baby is shirtless and has a few small white spots on their chest. The background is a soft, out-of-focus greenish-brown.

Chewed. Swallowed.

Then it stared at me. Not for long. But long enough.

I didn't speak. Didn't smile. Didn't move.

I just watched. For a long while, nothing changed.

Then it touched its own chest.

Paused.

Then looked down at its hand.

Opened it. Closed it.

Like it had never noticed it before.

The others muttered on.

The forest whispered.

And I waited.

By morning, the small one sat upright.

It didn't eat. It didn't sleep.

It just looked upward.

Toward the sky.

And in that moment, I knew I wasn't alone.

Not entirely.

Not anymore.



**STEPS  
NOT IN  
SILENCE**

**SOMETHING THAT  
CHOSE**

I didn't sleep much that night.  
I watched the small one—curled beneath a curtain of moss, unmoving.  
The others hadn't changed. Still groaning and gnawing, dragging their  
knuckles through the dirt.

But the small one was different.

He wasn't eating. Wasn't twitching. Just still.

Watching the sky.

As morning began, the forest felt quieter.

I stood at the edge of the clearing for a long while, unsure whether to  
speak, wait, or offer something more.

In the end, I did none of those.

I simply turned and walked.

I followed no path. The forest offered none.  
But my legs carried me forward, and I let them.

The ground shifted beneath me—damp leaf litter giving way to rock, then  
root, then soft soil again.

I crossed through pockets of silence where the trees grew older, thicker.  
Shadows stretched longer here.

It felt like the forest had been left untouched, undisturbed for ages.

At some point I paused beside a narrow stream. Let my hands touch the  
cool water.

I drank. Rested.

Listened.

That's when I felt it.

A flicker—behind me.

Not a sound. Just a shift.

Like the air had folded in on itself for a moment.

I turned sharply.

Nothing.

Only the breeze brushing through the trees.

But the feeling stayed.

Not fear. Not danger.

Presence.

I didn't speak.

Didn't call out.

I waited.

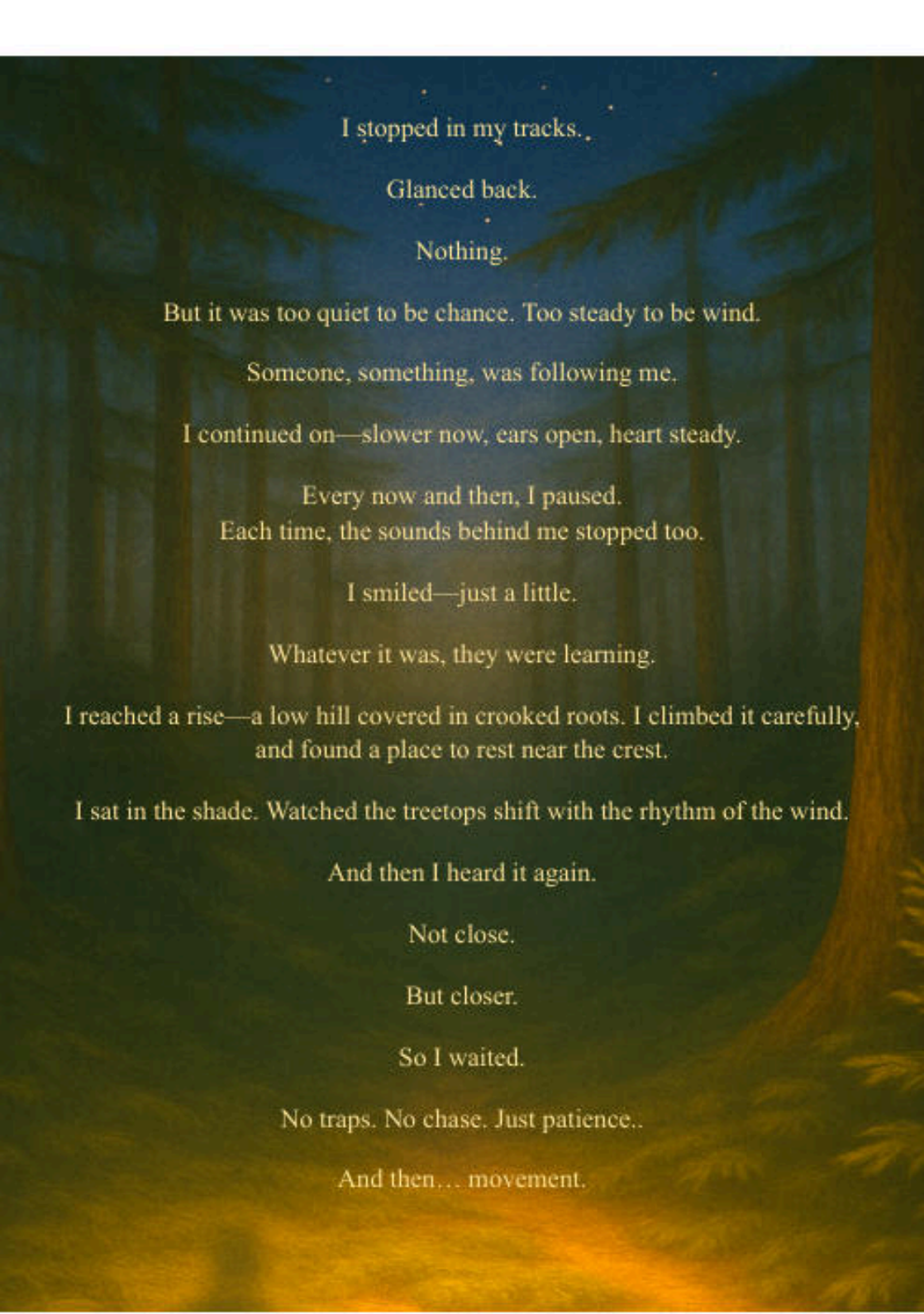
Then I walked on.

And again—it came.

Soft.

Deliberate.

A rustle—not from the trees above, but from the undergrowth behind. A  
soft crunch of moss under foot.



I stopped in my tracks..

Glanced back.

Nothing.

But it was too quiet to be chance. Too steady to be wind.

Someone, something, was following me.

I continued on—slower now, ears open, heart steady.

Every now and then, I paused.

Each time, the sounds behind me stopped too.

I smiled—just a little.

Whatever it was, they were learning.

I reached a rise—a low hill covered in crooked roots. I climbed it carefully,  
and found a place to rest near the crest.

I sat in the shade. Watched the treetops shift with the rhythm of the wind.

And then I heard it again.

Not close.

But closer.

So I waited.

No traps. No chase. Just patience..

And then... movement.



He stepped into view just as the last stars blended into the sky.

Small. Upright. Quiet.

The same one.

He stood at the edge of the clearing, half-hidden behind a thick root.  
Watching me.

I said nothing.

He took a few steps closer. Hesitated. Sat.

Not crouched, not crawling. Sat. Like he had chosen the shape his body  
would take.

His eyes were clearer now. Not wide with instinct. Not dulled by hunger.  
They searched.  
They saw.

He didn't growl. Didn't moan.

He just blinked.

Once.

Then looked at the sky.

The same way I had, just days before.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

I didn't smile. Didn't speak.



Just sat with him.

And in the hush between us, something unspoken passed through the trees.  
Our eyes wandered toward the far horizon.

Not a word.  
Not a thought.

Just a sense.

We were moving forward.

Not fast.  
Not all at once.

But together.



**VENOM  
IN  
VEINS**

**THE PATH OF  
POISON**