

Eye of the Wood

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To Audra,

Who helped me find that damned word. Also, for being my sister from another mister.



The Eye of the Wood

Only the light of his own two eyes cut a path through the dense shadow wood. But eyes only reflected light. They did not, could not, make passage for more than one person. And so Empty walked his path alone, unsure of the fate of his surviving companions. He could only hope that they would make it beyond the hungry darkness and reach the eye of the wood.

The chosen knew torches were temporary. Knew that once extinguished, they would have no path together. The light of the torches helped the crossing and made fellowship possible in the dark. It gave them an island of safety, but only so long as they were lit. When the breath of the forest blew them out, there was no more safety. Then they must finish the journey alone.

They had no choice. At least one must succeed. Things at home were bleak after the failure of last year's ritual.

Empty put one foot in front of the other, gripping his shoulder pack tight against him. He squeezed his way through the darkness that pressed against his flesh behind him and on his sides, like the palm of some ancient, gnarled hand.

There was no way to describe what it was like to move through the living dark of the shadow wood. A veteran had told him it was like moving through water or molasses, but that wasn't quite right. The darkness was slimy too, like brushing up against warm, moist moss that stroked your body in anticipation.

Empty pushed his way through, feeling the strange warmth of the hungry wall. Its caress wouldn't be so gentle if he closed his eyes.

His eyes watered. They were dry. The wind had stolen their moisture.

The breath of the shadow wood had not relented after it extinguished their torches, and their paths divided. Most of the time, it was a warm, woodsy wind. But when it had consumed several of his companions, he could smell the darkness digesting. It didn't last long, but it had lasted long enough. He need only think of his struggling companions for the smell to flood his senses with awakened memory.

Here, there could be no dreaming. Here, all dreams slide their way into waking life.

Empty stopped. He ached. He stretched, pushing the living darkness as far as he could away from himself. His bones and joints groaned and popped. The darkness swallowed the sound.

Empty drew a long, deep breath and released it. Then he risked a single blink. In that fraction of a second, he felt the press of the darkness against him, but there was not time or space enough for the shadow wood to claim him for a meal.

The alchemist of his village had made each of the chosen a potion to use on their eyes, but Empty's was long gone. They were to use it every 2,000 paces, and he had listened. He gave up counting when the drops were gone. The journey was not supposed to take so long. The veterans had agreed, only two days in darkness if you walked true to the center.

They gave each of the chosen three days of eye potion.

Empty hunkered down and reached into his pack. There was little in the way of provisions left. But what he had plenty of was

the special sticky gum that the alchemist had made to help the chosen to keep their eyes open once the torches went out.

He withdrew the gum from his pack and carefully lifted the lid of the crock. He would need to blink before he used it. Once he applied the gum, it would be difficult to blink. He need only rub it off, but to blink right after application was a waste.

He looked at what was left and guessed he had one, maybe two days' worth. Empty doubted it mattered; he wouldn't be able to keep going longer than another day, anyway.

Still hunkered, he took another deep breath and blew it out, chancing the third blink. This time, he dared hold his burning eyes closed a moment longer.

Branches, like teeth, whipped out, invisible in the darkness, and pricked his flesh. He opened his eyes with the brightness of the pain. But the branches of the shadow wood had withdrawn in that fraction of a second that his eyes had opened. Sometimes, he could glimpse the branches that looked like tentacles as he opened his eyes, but it was fast, mostly just a blur.

He examined his fresh wounds. They were small, only one puncture bled. Empty withdrew a bandage from his pack and wrapped it quickly before the shadow wood could taste him. Then, he rolled back his top right eyelid, smeared the gum, and felt it stick. He repeated the process for his bottom right lid and left eye. The gum would last awhile; how long he wasn't sure, but he would feel the stickiness wearing off, would feel a short tugging sensation when he needed to reapply.

The surviving veterans of the ritual trained the chosen for two weeks. They practiced not blinking, using the gum, and using the eye drops almost every day. The training helped keep them alive. But nothing saved them if they fell asleep.

Empty was tempted to stop for a rest, to sit, and lean against the darkness, which would gladly prop up his slender form, awaiting closing eyes. But it would do him no good. He was tired. There were little rations left. They lost most rations when the torch light went out and the shadow wood fed on supplies and sleeping companions alike. It ate everything.

A veteran had told the chosen to recite the sacred words of the ritual when they need courage in the hungry darkness. Every parent in his village taught the song to their children. For none knew who would be chosen, and all needed to understand the mistakes of the past. He felt the urge to stop and rest grow, and so he sang the first few verses of the ancient story passed from the mouths of his ancestors.

“In ages past, before the world turned dark,
One final living tree held within it a spark.
And as the world collapsed under the greed of the old ways,
This tree of light shined brighter with each passing day.
But hidden and sacred, the Ogora tree remained
Known to very few, a secret well-contained.
The guardians of the tree watched the world burn
And understood humanity was past the point of no return.”

He pressed forward. He did not know if he was thirty feet from the edge of the wood or three miles. When you were in that darkness, it rarely relented, never gave space save a few feet in front of your face. There were thin places sometimes, where the press of the darkness was weaker. The tree limbs blocked the light of the stars and moon at night and the heat and furnace of the sun by day. Shadow wood was greedy by nature. Perhaps it was from a trait of its origin, something in its birth.

Empty sang another verse as he pushed through.

“As the acts of men grew more guile,
New poison took root after every act so vile.
The shadow wood rose from roots of hate,
And it was on life and blood that it thrived and ate.
Few survived the cataclysm that came before,
And small communities formed after the last war.
But the shadow wood spread despite their change of heart,
And some communities died before they could get a new
start.”

He had to cross. For there was no food left for his family or the families of his companions. The world was passing into greater shadows, and only one space, which lay in the heart of the shadow wood, the eye of the wood, had the sacred food that held the time of darkness at bay.

Empty’s left eye itched. In his weariness, he reached up and itched it without thinking.

Before he realized what he was doing, he blinked, and his left eye stuck shut with a crust of the stinky gum that still clung to his top lid. He felt a sharp stabbing pain in his left ankle. He winced, clawing at his eyelid to unstick it. A branch scratched his left cheek, reaching to pluck his eye, but before it could do any more damage, he pried his left eye open. The only reason he had survived was that his right eye had stayed open. The gum held true.

He stopped and took several deep breaths, heart pounding. He felt the taste of vomit in the back of his throat, but swallowed the flavor. You couldn’t puke with your eyes open. Quickly, he reached back and removed the gum from his bag again and slathered it on the lids of his left eye. He felt the soft sucking of

blood on his left cheek and left ankle. The sensation made him shiver.

He pressed on into the darkness, walking in a straight line, trying to pretend that he was strolling through a meadow back home, and ignoring the voices and visions that now danced at the edges of the dark. Now that the shadow wood had a taste of him, it would sing him a siren's song, made of his memories, edging him toward madness.

There was hardly a choice: use the gum on his eyelids or clean the wound. He trembled at the thought of the trees' tongues tasting him.

He wanted to quit then. The memories and voices counseled rest. He shook his head in challenge and push against the gelatinous darkness.

Empty sang another verse as he walked, trying to drown out the sound of voices.

"The guardians shared the fruit of the Ogora, a delight.

The found consuming the fruit of the sacred tree resisted the blight,

And when they tasted the fruit, their dreams would be only of light,

And all that was needed was a single bite."

The fruit of the Ogoro grew only in the eye of the shadow wood. The tree itself was woven from living light. It was a seed in

the living darkness, and the fruit of its branches carried its spark. When consumed, the community grew and built new things, and the shadow wood receded, but only a little at a time. Never fast enough.

Empty felt a short tremor in the darkness, as if the shadow wood's stomach was growling. His pores prickled gooseflesh and he could feel the little hairs on his bare arms push up against the thick darkness, kept only at bay by his open eyes.

His voice shaking, he sang more verses.

“But the seed of greed grew in the hearts of men once more,

And over control of the Ogora, the neighbors went to war.

The blood they spilled from battle poisoned the sacred land,

And the shadow wood rose around the tree, clutching like a hand.

The survivors of that war found that the darkness spread far and wide,

And shadow wood so thick, they could not get to the other side.

They mourned for the fruit that kept the darkness at bay,

And would bring back the light with each passing day.

The shadow wood grew thicker and spread across the land,

And all hope seemed lost for the world of man.

But something in the tree longed for light and love,
And gave the survivors another chance to rise above
Their violent, greedy, and arrogant ways,
By proving their worth and venturing through a dark
maze.”

Once a year, when the passage opened only for a week, Empty’s people held a lottery for all who had reached the age of seventeen. Those selected must brave the shadow wood. In most years, five in ten returned bearing the fruit of the Ogora tree and shared it among the people. But some years, none returned. In those years, the shadow wood swelled at a rapid pace. When it swelled, as the ancient story said, “more trees took root in the few remaining lands of light and spread their hunger and aching greed to bring the night.”

In some years, as many as seven may return. Those were years that the darkness walked back, where they could even harvest the shadow wood and create new tools and talismans to bring more light to the world. But those years grew rare as the will to press on waned amongst Empty’s people.

Once, they had tried to plant the fruit of the Ogora, and for a while, it grew and thrived. But it would bear no fruit and before the next year’s ritual, it withered and died.

The darkness contracted and spasmed around Empty. You could not hear the screams when the shadow wood claimed a meal. No, the darkness swallowed all light and sound. But Empty could feel it. He could trace the tremble against him as the darkness held him at his edges.

Empty shivered. He wondered who it was, who of his companions had started drifting into a dreamless sleep. Perhaps it was

Magus or Emma. They had sat talking with Empty while a few companions risked a nap when the torches went out. But he did not know who the fourth companion was. For the moment the fire went out, all light and sound around them were swallowed by the dark. There was no way to communicate.

He pressed into the wall of dark, eyes wide, and forced his way forward. He had to make it to the center. His wives and children were waiting for the fruit of Ogora. If they did not get it this year, their souls would starve and bring more shadow wood into being. The darkness had grown bold when no one returned from last year's harvest and two years in a row would eat into their lives like cancer. There remained only a few thousand acres of the land of light left.

Suddenly, the darkness felt thinner, and Empty felt his heart lift. He was so tired, and the whispers in the back of his mind were growing louder.

"Rest, Empty. Rest your eyes for just a few minutes." It was the only sound in all of the forest. The void of sound made his mind beg for distraction. Empty felt the temptation to give in. But he kept his children in the front of his mind's eye. Kept his wives, Myra and Franka, and their husbands in his heart. They were his light now.

He took another step and another, and his pace quickened. He was certain he was approaching the center now. He was told by a veteran of the journey that sometimes when you approach the edge, the darkness grows thinner, and the path forward becomes easier.

But the veteran had also warned that there are thin patches too, how a mountain has a false summit. The promise of relief could drive one mad, he warned, but when you reached a thin

spot, let it give you courage, not hope. Hope could be stolen. It was something outside of you. True courage could not. Courage, you had to surrender from within.

Empty could not help but hope. And for a moment, he thought he was almost through. Once there, he could stock up on the fruit of the Ogora tree, would have a stable light source, and all would be well again. This is what he was taught. But now, he felt the lesson slipping into the hungry mouths around him.

Another cry of pain rippled through the dark, and around him, he felt the tension of the shadow wood raise as if in some mad chorus. More like a scream than a song. The darkness pressed on him. The vibration intensified, like muscles working on a meal. Dizziness, weakness, and nausea took over Empty. He wanted to close his eyes and put his head down and ride out the vibrations. Motion sickness stirred him in circles.

The shadow wood thrummed and pulsed in a strange rhythm. It was almost musical. He knew what it meant. Two days ago, the shadow wood had consumed six of his companions. It was foolish to let so many sleep at once, but they had grown arrogant in the light of the torches. When the gale took their light, he felt the death and consumption of six companions. He could feel their scream, their attempts to break free from the closing, smothering darkness as it chewed them. The first thing the darkness took was your only defense: your eyes, your sight, your mirrors of the universe. Once you could no longer see, there was no way to escape the mouths.

Empty felt the echoes of screams and the thrashing body as it digested one of his few surviving companions nearby.

The darkness tightened around him. He felt his breath pushed out of his lungs and the beginning of teeth digging into

flesh. When the shadow wood fed, it grew strong, could press harder against your light, and if you could not persist, it took your eyes.

Empty's eyes watered and they screamed for moisture. They itched. He kept his hands at his side, standing rigid, not letting his hands reach his face or go anywhere near his eyes. If he closed them now, when the shadow wood was digesting, he too would be a meal. It would take a fraction of a second for branches to grab hold, take his eyes from him, and finish him.

He trembled. Sweat gathered on his brow from the heat of the moist dark. His bladder let go. Even so, he kept his eyes open. The press of the darkness peaked. Empty felt the gum in one of his eyes lose its potency. He pushed against the darkness and reached up, holding his lids open, knowing that if he didn't, he could not keep them open longer. Empty would run if possible, but the thickness of the darkness would slow him and he would only further exhaust himself.

His fingers could feel the lids of his eyes fighting, the muscles in Empty's face cramped from exertion, and then... he closed them.

But just a moment before he did, the shadow wood released its grip on him. It had finished its digestion. He had made it. Empty held them shut for just a second and opened them again. In that brief space, the tiny pinpricks of the branches of the shadow wood scraped the edges of his bare arms, drawing blood. He felt a strange sucking sensation on his wounds and shivered at the lapping of many tongues.

The voices in his head grew louder with every taste of his blood. Empty tried to drown them out by thinking of his loved

ones, but they stole their voices and turned them to their wicked purpose.

He walked faster, hoping against hope he would find the blessed relief of light that must be near.

Then Empty alternated blinking eyes. The sharp branches of the shadow wood slashed every time he closed one eye. The wounds were not deep. Only beads of blood gathered on his skin. But when they did, he could feel a sucking sensation sweep the wound, and the blood vanished. The strange sensation of the sharp blossom of pain when he switched eyes and the sucking of the darkness lapping him up over and over was maddening. Empty's wounds were appetizers. He was the main course. It was unwise to tempt the darkness with a taste.

The voices were mad shrieks now. The shadow wood did everything it could to break down your mind and defenses. They had warned him of this. He must press on no matter what strange things the woods did to him.

Empty had asked once, why they do not all go and live at the foot of the Ogora tree and spread light out from there? The veteran who had counseled him and his fellow travelers had said that once, long ago, it was tried, but no one had ever heard from the group again. They found no sign of them at the foot of the tree when the passageway opened the following year.

"No," the veteran had told him, "This is a journey that must mostly be done alone. For never does anyone make it through the whole passage with a torch shining. The eyes always led part of the journey. The ritual was about the strength and sacrifice of the one, so that all could have light again."

The press of the darkness was almost complete. The thrumming and vibration made Empty's bones feel as if they would shatter under the pressure.

Empty stopped and kneeled. The voices in his mind shouted for submission. There were little promises of relief that echoed in the darkness of his mind. What wonderful lies. He wished he could believe them. He put his head in his hands and wept, keeping his fingers apart so the light of his eyes still shone out and made sure not to blink.

In the end, it was the tears that saved him. His eyes were moist again, and the moment he realized that crying helped, he stood, and took another step forward and another.

Again, the shadow wood shuddered, and the darkness tightened around him, slowing his pace. His second of three surviving companions was lost now. This time, he fought through nausea and fear and kept going.

Empty thought of his lost companions, recalled the greatest tragedies of his life, and forced all of his deepest sorrow out of the hiding place in his heart. He commanded his pain to drive his tears endlessly. Snot dribbled down his lips, but the more he wept, the better his eyes felt, and the better his eyes felt, the more the light reflected from within.

The darkness grew thinner again. But this time, it continued to thin in degrees. With each step, he could feel a greater certainty that he was almost through.

Then he tripped forward over something.

As he fell forward, he tried not to close his eyes, but he could not help it. The gum had softened with his tears. His instincts and exhaustion betrayed him. In the fraction of the second his eyes were closed, he felt the tension of all his muscles stretch out

over years in anticipation of the piercing of his eyes, and the sinking of teeth into his flesh.

But nothing happened.

Empty pushed himself up and lifted his gaze.

There it was.

Golden light showed from the Ogora Tree which climbed higher than the shadow wood. It cast its light on the greedy darkness that hoarded the power all for itself. Its great leaves were the size of a human head, and shimmering golden fruit winked like stars against the background of its dark, greenish-brown trunk. The trunk itself was massive. Twenty people reaching around it to hold hands could not hope to clasp each other's fingers.

Above, the sun climbed to its highest point, and what few clouds were there drifted lazily. He knew that if he dared to climb to the top of the Ogora tree, he could see his village beyond the shadow wood, at least that was what the veteran had told him. One of their group had made the climb, hoping to see if there were other villages around that would send emissaries of light, but they had seen none but their own. Their village was a circle of light, a clearing in the darkness. Its own eye of the wood.

"Perhaps," the veteran said, "We are the only ones holding back the creep of the shadow wood."

But now that Empty was through, his tears turned to laughter. His laughter turned to smiles that crept to the heavens. At first, he blinked furiously. Then Empty closed his eyes and held them shut for several minutes. Once he opened them again, he threw his bag at the foot of the tree and then stood and ran along the edge of the shadow wood, careful not to cast a single finger into the dense darkness.

Outside the wood, it looked only like a thick forest. It was not until you were inside of it you understood that the trees were one living, breathing stomach. It was a hungry ghost, forever famished and unable to fill its craving. Such was a mirror to humanity. Such was the poison gift they had all deserved.

The Ogora had its own song to sing, and Empty felt all his burdens dissolve, all his fear and anguish fade in the golden light. He ran to the trunk of the tree and wrapped his arms around it as wide as he could. Then he stopped and lay down in the soft grass between a pair of roots. He gathered some of the fallen leaves of the tree and made himself a soft bed, cradling himself among the roots.

Empty listened to the sound of the stream that passed under the shadow wood to nourish the sacred grove. All around him was light, and the softness of air. He gulped in breath, opened to the space, and felt himself relax for the first time in days. His body released all its tension into the soft bed. He spread his arms wide and reveled in the rest.

The fruit of the Ogora, as if knowing his presence, dropped into his open palm. It glowed in the same way the tree did, and he knew that if he simply held up this fruit as he journeyed home, he would find passage. It would still not be easy, but it would be easier. He could blink and walk at a steady pace. And when he was tired, he could surround himself with the fruit and rest.

Empty bit down and let the juices of the fruit quiet his hunger and slake his thirst. He felt joy in the flavor, and in moments, he consumed the entire thing. Then a lightness took him. He felt as if someone had lifted him off the ground and he lay in suspended softness. He closed his eyes and slept for a long time.

How long, he could not say, but the sun was just rising over the shadow wood when his eyes opened again.

Empty stretched, grabbed his shoulder pack, and filled it with as much of the Ogora fruit as possible. He counted 34, in total. It would be enough to give his village a single bite each so that they could press on for another year. It would hold the Shadow wood at bay until the way opened again during the summer solstice, the day of greatest light.

He wondered briefly at his companions, but shook his head. It was not possible that any had survived the time he had slept, or if they had, they may have found their way back to the village. It was easy enough to be turned around, and some veterans never made it to the eye of the wood but still came home after a few days.

He turned back toward the shadow wood with the fruit in his hand. It was said that all who made it to the eye of the woods returned home safely. Empty had been told that his whole life, and he had always questioned it. But now he understood that even if he lost his light, his tears would lift his spirits. He was the first to use tears, but he would not be the last.

He took the first step into the shadow wood and knew he would find his way home to spread the light among his people. This year, they would only keep the light at bay, but he would share his knowledge in hopes that during the next ritual, all ten would return and chase the darkness like never before.

Empty sang the last verse of the tale as he stepped forward.

“Once a year when the sun lingers longest in the sky,

Ten volunteers can journey through the shadow wood
and make their try,

To bring back the fruit to share it with their kin,
And push back the shadow wood with the light shown from
within.”

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About the Author

Michael Kilman is an anthropologist who occasionally visits other worlds and reports back what he finds. When he isn't writing fiction he is lecturing at a few universities in the Denver metro area, or working on his YouTube series 'Anthropology in 10 or Less.' Michael can be found at his website, loridianslaboratory.com, and on Instagram at @LoridiansLab

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