

## Cernunnos

By Jonah Wisneski

Finn readied his bow, breathed in deeply, then let the arrow fly. It sailed through the air before embedding itself deeply into the flank of the buck. Instead of keeling over and dying, as Finn had intended, the buck bolted into the nearby woods. Finn sighed; he hated chasing dying animals. He slung the bow over his shoulder and approached the spot the noble animal had stood a few moments before. He found the tracks with ease and began to follow them. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Then fifteen. The buck remained out of sight, but the tracks persisted. Finn swore. He had failed to kill bucks with the initial shot, but he had never failed this badly; most of the time he tracked down the buck within five or six minutes because the arrow severely hindered its ability to run, but not this time. Then the tracks stopped.

Finn looked up, but he only saw trees. He looked down again and saw nothing but dirt and twigs. He turned around, and then it hit him like an arrow; the tracks he had been following were gone as well. He tried to survey his surroundings, but every tree looked the same. Finn's pulse began to quicken as the panic set in. He knew that a river should have been on his right, but instead he found a pile of rocks. At first, he thought maybe he was just mistaken, but the more he pictured the forest and traced his path, the more he realized that something had to be amiss because he had never seen these trees in the nearly three decades that he had spent hunting in these woods. None of this made any sense to him. He looked up, but the canopy of trees blotted out the sun. The more he examined his surroundings, the more he realized how oppressively dark it was. Then he saw the flash of green out of the corner of his eye and nearly swooned.

He ran over to the tree and sure enough, he had found moss. He breathed a sigh of relief. His village was to the south of the forest, so all he had to do was travel in the opposite direction. Finn began to walk. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Then twenty. Eventually, panic began to set in again; he should have been out of the forest by now. The forest was big, but he had been walking in almost exclusively straight paths, yet the time didn't add up. Then Finn saw it again, and his panic grew worse: moss was growing on the side of the tree in the same direction that he was walking. Finn cocked his head in confusion because either this moss was growing on the south side of the tree, or he had somehow gotten turned around despite only ever walking straight. He looked up to examine his surroundings, but all he saw were the same trees. He realized that the darkness overhead had grown even heavier. He checked another tree and saw that the moss growing there grew in the same direction as the moss on the other tree. He blamed his nerves for getting the best of him, then corrected his path.

As Finn continued moving through the forest, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something else out there; something just outside his field of view was watching him. He paused and scanned the trees again. He swore he had heard a crunching noise, but nothing followed. Then it dawned on him: the forest was silent. Not a single bird chirped overhead; no animals ran through the underbrush or scurried along trees; no wind blew leaves or bent tree branches. Finn

found himself surrounded by a silence even more oppressive than the darkness. That silence bothered him to his core and shook him deeply. One lesson he had learned as a child was that silence in the forest never boded well. Elders in the village believed that this silence was a portent of doom, almost as if the world itself paused to watch some tragedy unfold with bated breath. Finn shuddered as a chill shot through him. He wanted to go home, but he couldn't. Now that the idea of doom had entered his mind, Finn couldn't shake it. Perhaps an old god was stirring; Finn didn't like that idea.

He looked down and his eyes widened in surprise as he saw that the buck's tracks had suddenly reappeared. This hunt made less and less sense, but what else could he do? The only course of action that made sense was to follow the tracks, so he did. As Finn followed the tracks, he continued to listen to his surroundings, but he still heard nothing. He paused and twisted his head, erratically surveying the tree around him. He swore that he had seen a dark tree branch or something twisting to his right as if trying to grasp at him. Finn dismissed it as paranoia. Branches couldn't twist down and grasp at him like claws. Or could they? Suddenly he remembered the old stories told in his village; the elders always warned the children to beware the shadowy areas of the woods lest they become lost and the fae try to steal them away. Finn had never given these stories credence, instead dismissing them as tales meant to frighten children so that they didn't wander into the forest and become lost, but now he wasn't so certain.

Finn's blood froze as he realized just how dark this forest truly was. He knew that the day was waning, and the sun's position near the horizon attested to that fact, but he still estimated that he had at least two hours before the forest should become this dark. To make matters worse, he didn't recognize a single tree no matter where he looked. Finn swallowed, a lump forming in his throat as he grew even more uneasy. He glanced around the forest again, certain that something sat just outside his field of view, watching... and waiting. No. It was all in his imagination. All that had happened was that he had grown cocky as a hunter, and consequently he became distracted, which then caused him to become lost. Finn took a deep breath to calm himself and steady his mind.

As if to answer every one of his questions and shatter the lies he told himself to cope, Finn heard a loud crunching noise. He froze. Every fiber of his being told him to run away and hide, but he couldn't. Something compelled him to move onwards and meet the source of the crunching. Finn noticed that the buck's tracks were in the same direction as the awful crunching noise. He had to press on. For his own sanity, he had to know the truth. Then an idea pierced Finn's mind: a few weeks ago, Maeve had gone into the forest to collect berries for the week, but she never came back. Finn's face twisted as he remembered scouring the woods for any sign of his friend. Day after day the village searched, yet no one in the village could find a trace of her. One of the elders believed that Cernunnos had found her tarrying in his woods, so he took her as his bride. The elder explained that when he was a boy, one of the older girls had gone missing in the forest one day, just as Maeve had. He said that no trace of her was ever found of her, but one day he was hunting in the forest when he came across a horned man sitting by a tree, feeding a deer and a wolf. The man explained that he was Cernunnos, and he had come to visit these

woods and see how the village was faring. During his sojourn, a beautiful young girl had stumbled across his path, and he instantly took her away as his bride. To prove this statement, the elder said that the horned man gave him a bracelet that he recognized as having belonged to the girl, and the elder still wore the bracelet to this day as a memento to her. Finn knew that what the elder said was true because he was an elder tasked with governing and protecting the village, but at the same time, something about this explanation just felt off to him. Another loud crunch broke Finn from his reverie.

With each step the crunching became louder and louder. As Finn crept closer, he noticed little details: he heard what sounded like bones snapping with splinters occasionally falling to the ground, and every so often he heard what sounded like tendons snapping as flesh was quietly, but viciously, torn apart. His heart began to beat faster and faster with each step. His eyes darted from tree to tree, eagerly searching for what wasn't there. He knew that he had seen something thin and dark moving from the corner of his eye, yet he pushed on towards the crunching. He should have run.

Eventually, Finn found the source. He tried to comprehend what stood in front of him, but he was at a loss. The thing in front of him was not a tree, nor had it ever been one. Nevertheless, the half-devoured buck hung from what looked like countless thin, black branches while its many maws sucked the juicy flesh away. The thing had three goat-like legs, or was it only two? Finn couldn't decide if the third appendage was a leg or something more akin to a tail. No; he finally decided that it had to be a tail because a third leg was absurd, though it did look an awful lot like one. Finn banished the doubt from his fracturing mind as he attempted to comprehend the unfathomable visage in front of him.

The thing's body, if it could even be described as a body, was an ovular mass of slaverling jaws. Finn couldn't count them all, yet the longer he looked, the more they all seemed to blur together into one singular mouth. The thing was black, far blacker than the forest around it, and it was covered in a short, dark fur, almost like the fur of a goat. Then Finn noticed the thing's piercing eyes. Numerous eyeballs covered the thing's body, and each one was a striking blue devoid of a pupil. Finn could feel each eye stare through his being as it judged his soul. He felt his chest tighten as a cold liquid began to drip from his nose; he wiped it away, then diverted his gaze to the crimson smear on his knuckle. He raised his eyes again, directly staring into the thing's two orange eyes. Its singular mouth seemed to utter a word, but Finn could not hear. The half-eaten buck fell to the ground as the thing's horns contracted. No, that wasn't right. And yet, Finn knew that he had just seen what he could only describe as a mess of branches contract into two horns. Finn felt the blood drain from his face as his broken mind tried to comprehend the impossible thing.

"Cernunnos," Finn finally muttered as he fell to the ground prostrate. "I'm sorry to intrude upon your domain. I am but a humble hunter. I mean no insult to you or your domain." Finn couldn't bring himself to raise his eyes, but the thing said nothing. After a few more moments of silence, Finn finally looked up. The thing continued to stare at him, the two green eyes chilling his blood as they looked over his entire body. "I'm sorry if I offended you." Finn

began again as he resumed his prostrate pose. “All I wanted was to hunt this buck for my family and friends in my village. Please forgive my insolence if I wronged you.”

“Cernunnos,” overlapping voices seemed to hiss. “I suppose you could call me that.” Finn flinched as each word seemed to send flashes of pain shooting through his head. He felt a liquid faintly begin to trickle from his ears, but he didn’t dare move. Each word sounded as if a slightly different voice uttered it, but he couldn’t differentiate any of them when he closely examined the vaguely feminine voice.

“How’s Maeve?” he asked, his voice quavering on the edge of fear, joy, and excitement.

“Ah yes, my bride. She’s...” the thing paused. “I took her away; this forest is no home for a queen.”

“Will I ever see her again?” Finn raised his eyes and met the god’s kind face. It smiled back benevolently before tossing a wooden bracelet to Finn. He eagerly picked it up and examined it. He spasmed briefly as he noticed what felt like ants crawling on his leg. Finn’s heart skipped a beat as he saw two black shadowy tendrils shoot across the ground towards Cernunnos. No; he was just imagining things again.

“I’m afraid not,” the voice seemed sorrowful, yet Finn swore he heard tinges of joy, even pleasure, interlaced within the words. “She’s far happier where she is now, and far too busy as well. This keepsake is the best I can offer.” Finn averted his gaze from the figure’s two green eyes and oversized mouth as he examined the bracelet. He turned it over in his hands, inspecting each wooden link. The wood seemed darker than he had remembered, though only some areas were darker. Or at least that’s how it looked. These dark areas also seemed slightly damp, but Finn knew that it was just his imagination, or maybe that’s what he forced himself to believe. “Would you like to join her?” This time, the thing’s voice was cold and distant.

Finn froze, stuttering in response, but no matter how hard he tried, he didn’t know what to say. Finally, after staring at the ground for too long, he awkwardly removed his bow from his back and presented it to the god in his two hands. He didn’t dare raise his eyes from the dirt below. “It may not be much, but I offer my bow up as a sacrifice to you and your forest. You gave me something of Maeve’s so it’s only fair that I reciprocated.”

“For what purpose?” the god replied as it cocked its head, or what could be called a head, to the side. “You offer me a twig and twine, and for what? Do you expect gratitude or benevolence? Do you also beseech me for some favor?”

He paused before responding. Finn felt his body screaming at him to move and get as far away from this thing as possible, yet he somehow felt a vague calmness. Cernunnos was a benevolent god; he had nothing to fear, or so he kept telling himself. “No not at all. By surrendering my bow, I surrender my role as a hunter and assert my subservience to nature—my subservience to you and your forest.”

It paused as it pondered Finn’s words. It knew that Finn had hastily cobbled the excuse together on the spot, but it was an impressive improvisation. “How are you so certain you know what I am?” Its many jaws twitched into perverted facades of a smile as it smelled Finn’s fear, but he didn’t notice.

“What else could you be but a god?” As soon as these words passed over Finn’s lips, the growing spark of doubt ignited in his mind. Cernunnos was a peaceful deity concerned with the preservation of life, yet this entity spurned his rejection of his role as hunter and killer of nature. The vague calm evaporated as Finn finally noticed the dark malice radiating from the god. Then he remembered the buck. Cernunnos would mercifully kill the animal and leave it at that, or he would heal it, but this thing seemed to enjoy destroying the body. “What are you then?” Finn’s voice quivered as he tried to hide the fear.

It laughed a hateful laugh. Finn could feel it digging into his psyche, scorching what little sanity remained. “You said it yourself; I am Cernunnos. Or do you not believe a god?”

Without a word Finn sprang to his feet, notched an arrow, and released it. The shaft embedded itself deeply in one of the thing’s many blue eyes. Its laugh reverberated throughout the forest, but Finn had already turned his back and begun to run away. He didn’t care what the thing did; he just had to make it back to his village. But no matter how hard he pushed himself, no matter how far he ran, he could still hear the malicious laughter ringing in his ears.

Finn could feel tears streaming down his face. This wasn’t Cernunnos; it couldn’t be. But the thing had mentioned Maeve and even returned a keepsake of hers. Then the realization shot through Finn and his stomach dropped. The one elder had said that Maeve had become a bride for Cernunnos. This same elder also said that something similar had happened when he was a child. Could he have somehow... No; it didn’t make sense. He had to be misunderstanding the elder. Finn felt as if he was going to be sick.

Eventually he stopped, pressing his hand against a nearby tree to steady himself as the world spun around his head. He no longer heard the laughter, but he still felt the blood running down his ears. He wiped it away. Finn couldn’t catch his breath and he felt as if his heart was on the verge of exploding. He surveyed the trees, but they all looked as alien and unfamiliar as they had previously. Then he felt the pain in his wrist, or what remained of it. He fell back, blood streaming out of the stump where his right hand should have been. He looked up in terror as one of the thing’s maws twisted into a caricature of a smile.

“Did you really think that you could escape a god?” it hissed in its overlapping voices.

“You’re no god,” Finn replied defiantly, more blood trickling from his ears.

“No, I’m not.”

“The elders always warned us to beware the wrath of the old gods because we haven’t heard from them in ages. Now I understand why. The old gods are one thing, but that which inhabits the corpse of a god is far, far worse. I know that I can appease a god through some sacrifice, but a god slayer using its trophy as a mask...” His voice trailed off as its laugh intensified. Blood began to trickle from his nose.

“You foolish, foolish human. Your gods never existed in the first place. I am no god, nor do I possess the corpse of one. I never slew your gods because that would necessitate their existence.” Finn winced as a black tentacle lashed out and wrapped itself around his left leg. His bones snapped but he barely noticed the pain anymore.

“Then what are you? What beast are you?” Its laugh intensified again. Blood began to trickle from his mouth.

“I am nothing more than the offspring of my mother Shub-Niggurath. And yes, you’re correct; one of your elder’s brought me here a few weeks ago. He beseeched my mother for some pointless wish, so I was sent here in her stead.

“What did you do to her?” Finn’s voice was barely a whisper. Its laugh intensified for a final time. Blood began to trickle from his eyes. It mingled with his tears.

“She was an adequate sacrifice, though just barely. My mother and I were both pleased, so we agreed to accept his summons and listen to his request.”

“That monster...why would he...what would he gain?” Finn laughed hysterically as he clawed at his face, his mind finally cracked beyond repair. The thing laughed with him. Every penetration from the tentacles only made the hollow shell of a man laugh louder.

“He wanted me to destroy some neighboring village over some petty feud. As I said earlier, it was a pointless request, but we granted it in part because I have not eaten in millennia. As payment, I was granted permission to devour anyone who dared enter this forest until I chose to leave.” Finn’s laughter ceased as the gravity of his situation finally set in and he experienced a brief moment of sanity; he tried to scream but it was too late. “~~And oh, how I am famished.~~”