

## 'Artemis'

I fell in love with her the day I saw her.

We were both young, but she was even younger than I, and we grew up together. In the gentle quiet of the woods, I got to see her grow. To feel her touch and hear her laugh and dab away at the gentle salts on her skin in the dark. You'd have fallen in love with her too, if you'd seen her. *Artemis.*

Yes, a goddess by any other name.

And if I could I would have prayed to her shrine every night, and I would have left gifts and offerings in the great silence of her halls, watched by the other believers and scorned by those who hated her so deeply for the life inside her laughter that I so desperately clung to in the cold silence of being alive.

If you had listened to her quiet voice, you would have realised that you had never heard music before.

Oh, how I miss that melody.

What saint or saviour was I in a past life that I should be so lucky to know her, so damned undeservedly so? I still ask myself, in the aching quiet of those same woods, if she was happy; if she strove to be the good she was or the goodness simply was her.

And in the stillness of these branches and these roots, in these shoots and leaves and bows and in this cycle of growth and death and growth, the tears roll heavy down my face. All this life around me seems so much less without her.

She grew as all girls tend to. The seed turning to budding blossom to thorny rose, all the beauty and majesty of that which rises from the earth. And then returns to it. She would have been the most steadfast oak, or the most intricate yew, twisted up in the stark white birch of her skin. I'm sure of it.

Because the trees of this forest taught her so much, and that girl always paid her dues. They were her cradle and her shelter as a babe, and they became the supports that steadied when her own legs couldn't. They held her and beheld her when she learnt to climb their knots and break above us all, touching heaven, looking over all that green. They hid her from the wind and from the world, clutched her in their grasp when she collapsed under the desperate weight of it all.

Through it all, I watched on. She would talk, and I would listen. As for my wager, I would whisper in her ear, and pull her in close when little else seemed to offer comfort. I did what I could, because that was all any of us could do. But she was the best of us all.

She forgave those who weren't sorry. She was worth more than what any of them could offer her and yet I don't think she quite knew it. I think she just chose to live. To be the unrequited love that lingers in the heart of even those who leave. And she spoke a language so true and pure that it translated the souls of all of us. Took our syllables and stretched them into songs like the hymns of the birds at sunrise. Pulled our vowels and turned them into the notes and our consonants into the steady drumbeats and she made the dew on the grass turn from droplets to

a dancefloor. Even through all that, she knew how to be the silence between the chords; she was the echo and the reverb, the chorus and the crescendo and I swear by all the seven hells she still seems to ring out even now.

It was a spring. The new petals had just begun to push through what remained of the frost, and the air was alive again with the sounds of bird and bug and the gentle whistling of the wind rather than the icy howls of the winter blizzards. She was there, her feet dipped into the still of some forgotten waterbed, caring not for the cold or for the thin layer of dirt that crusted the hem of her dress - the dress she'd rolled up around her calves and up almost to her thighs so as not to soak it through in its entirety. This thin layer of dirt. On the bottom of her white dress. Nuzzled against her white skin.

She wouldn't speak to me, she just sat there in silence and traced circles through the water, stuck in the reflection of her eyes - a trap we'd all fallen for before. She had forgotten her shoes, ran to this spot on just her soles, red track marks down her cheeks and swellings around her eyes, and she had collapsed there in silence, anchoring herself on the static of the water. But then we heard them. Shouts. Jeers. The calls of wild dogs, barking and bellowing and braying in laughter, beckoning her with a splintered, fragmented bastardisation of her name. She began to cry again and I begged her to run and she wouldn't. Why wouldn't she run? She had to run.

But instead she sat there and she cried into the silt and the stream and I wanted to pull her close as ever and clamp her mouth and quiet her crying so they wouldn't find her but she wouldn't even look at me. And they did find her. And they clamped her mouth. And I tried to go to her but they cut into me with their knives and they seared my skin with their matches and they made me watch. They made me watch. And then they pushed her up against me and I wanted to whisper in her ear but you couldn't hear anything over the sounds of them. Them, and her screams.

She stopped after a while. Screams turned to a discordant whimper. The whimper turned to the gentle racking breaths of her sobs. The sobs turned to nothing. I couldn't move and she was slumped against me and I couldn't do anything but watch. Some of them ran. Some of them stayed. Some of them continued. And then they left as well.

And there was this thin layer of dirt. On the bottom of her red dress. Nuzzled against her purple skin.

And that was when I started crying. I screamed and I shouted and I shook the ground in my anger and out of the desperate need to hear the echo of her. I ripped up chunks of earth and chased the birds down from the branches and the foxes from their dens because she was life. I wrapped my arms around her and I swore that as those beasts stalked away through those woods that brambles would grip their legs and nettles would burn their skin and thorns would pierce their flesh and splinters would find their eyes and poisonous berries would drip sweet nectar on their tongues and the vines and the branches and the forest itself would hunt and wrap immovable limbs around their throats and they would fucking die.

But the echo never came.

I don't know why she didn't run. I don't know why they came for her in the woods. It was meant to be her one sanctuary. And I did nothing. I just watched on and I stood there in silence and I did nothing to save her, that girl whom the world should have realised was everything. It was a spring, but it was the coldest one we've had, and the frost rolled in over her and icicles danced on her lashes and the wind breathed into her out of sympathy.

I fell in love with her the day I saw her. We were both young, but she was even younger than I, and now I grow without her. Or maybe she is here, in the ground somewhere, that life and that love gently kissing at the roots of the trees of this forest that she so dearly loved. This forest that so dearly loved her. This forest that could do nothing to save her. And these trees that still whisper her name.

*Artemis.*