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You Will Forget You Are Even Burning

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YOU WILL FORGET YOU ARE EVEN BURNING

CHERAMIE JOHNSON

"There's places around here," Rego's mother told him once, outside on their front porch over coffee and tea, "where demons walk."

"Demons, then?" He was always playful, he always catered to her.

"Devils," she whispered harshly, and her skinny fingers shivered against her cigarette. "Monstrous women with flames shooting out of their wings and heads, and if you ever see one, look away. If you see one, don't go near it. It will draw you into its flame and you will forget everything but what it feels like to burn. You will forget you are even burning."

He laughed until he was seventeen, and then he saw one. Or at least, he thought she might be one. But she didn't look the way his mother described. Instead she was pale as marble, with a thick cascade of hair that was pink like dawn and so soft it looked like rose petals. There was crimson in her cheeks, and her lips looked like they had been painted with wine. Rego was tall, but she was taller. Still, she barely grazed the ground with her toes when she walked. Her grace was aided, perhaps, by the feathered crimson wings that unfolded majestically out of her back, two arched accessories that began at her calves and soared upward to delicate tips just behind her head.

First he saw her running through the forest, just the back of her, and her wings obscured all but the pale stretch of her legs bouncing off of the rocks and leaves until she reached the clearing, arched her back, and took flight. Soon he started to watch for her all the time. Soon, she started to notice. At first, she ran from him playfully, then as days went by she began to run faster. Before long, she began to fling sharp pebbles at him that scratched his face open.

He got to wanting her so badly that he stopped eating. Started spending all of his time in the forest, kneeling between the shadows of the trees. Then one day, as he rested in the trees at the edge of a lake, he noticed something moving at the top of the cliffs surrounding the water.

He froze on the edge of the water and watched her descend onto the cliffs. Her wings pounded powerfully through the soft air, thrusting her toward the edge. Rego reached up to pull the brim of his hat down against the fierce glare of the setting sun. His gaze drifted upward to the edge of the drop -- and at that moment a ripple rolled across the surface, quick as the lash of a whip.

Suddenly -- a sharp ache exploded in his stomach. His hand clenched. Completely nude, she was perched at the brink of the fall. Behind her, the sun blazed against the mountain and

illuminated her figure. Her wings glowed crimson and white, bright tongues of flame. His eyes burned with salt when she looked down at him, and squinting he saw that her head was thrown back. She had seen him, then. She was laughing. She knew she was out of reach.

For a moment, he wanted to see her obliterated, beaten, shamed, her beauty was that piercing. Then she plunged swiftly through the fiery sky, a spark streaking against the dark cliffs -- but not before he something move in the water. A hoarse warning burst from him. He was on his feet in seconds.

From the depths of the water, an oily black tentacle cracked through the air to whip around her waist and slam her into the still liquid. An instant later, her head ripped open the water, followed by two slender arms, dripping with black filth, followed by her entire self, miraculously free but unable to fly. Her wings were weighed down with dark oil, but she made it so close to the shore before dropping that Rego could have reached out and brushed her fingertips, perhaps grasped a hand. The ache in his stomach burned fiercely, blinding him. Then, he stepped back, and he laughed.

The monstrous tentacle enveloped her again and she disappeared. Her torn wings sliced through the liquid. On his knees in front of the water, Rego barely brushed a strand of her pink hair, streaked with black, before that, too, faded. The lake smoothed into a glassy mirror. Rego was left with his reflection, no more.

"They call her the Water Tramp of the Lake," he would tell his niece and nephew, years later. "They say that when the moon is full and bright she escapes to crawl onto the shore. The townspeople gather to watch the spectacle." His nephew coughed politely, his niece usually cringed. But he would press on.

"Her eyes, they say, shine like the devil's against her coal colored, ravaged visage. Her hair, they say, is limp and tangled. Her wings, they say, are black as pitch and drip when they drag along the shore, where she crouches for a moment before the tentacle drags her back in. Grotesque, they say she is, evil."

They laughed, and always placated him. He was Uncle Rego, after all, old with a voice that was tan like a garment faded from old tobacco smoke. Their mother said that he was still young enough to hope, but they never believed her. Uncle Rego, they knew, would never marry, would never be anything but tan and faded. The world had lost color for him long ago.