

Cold is all I am. My veins are rivers of ice. My hair is spun from the same crystals that make up the snowflakes. My skin is frosted marble. My eyes, so I've been told, resemble the frozen waters of a fathomless lake. I wasn't always like this. Or at least... I think I had some sort of life before this one. I remember being... warm. What does it mean to be frozen if you've never known warmth? But now, it's all cold. I don't mind. I enjoy the chill of the winter air rushing past me and the crunch of the snow beneath my bare feet. The cold cannot hurt me if I am one with it. We are old friends, caressing each other, letting one another know we are there without having to embrace or speak. The animals of the forest where I live are wary of me. Not frightened, but they scatter as I approach and watch me move amongst the leafless trees, their eyes wide with curiosity. They understand that I'm not human, and therefore not a threat, but their instincts are still cautious. I don't blame them for their suspicion. I speak softly to them, telling them to go underground and find a place to burrow so that the winter will pass them by and leave them be. Sometimes they scamper after me as I glide along the snow-covered forest floor, occasionally getting close enough to step on the long train of my dress.

The snow is my main concern. If I had my way, every snow would be a magic snow. The kind that sparkles like a blanket of tiny diamonds under the moonlight and

gives way to feet without any resistance. But alas; not every snowfall can be what I want it to be. There are reasons why some snow must be the lightest of powder, or sharp and icy. This isn't the place to get into all those reasons, and most of the time, the decision is made for me, but trust me when I say it's all a matter of balance. The world cannot exist without balance, you see. And when the natural course of things throws off that balance, well... there are those of us who have been put in place to restore it. We don't do this for payment or accolades. We do it purely for the benefit of existence. But what are we to do when the existence of the very beings who keep this balance intact is put into question? What do we do when we feel our own lives, such as they are, are out of balance?

Remember how I'd said that I remembered feeling warm? I don't remember when I was warm; I just know that I had been once. That is why when I felt Him, it stopped me in my tracks. Warmth. I felt warmth. And I remembered the sensation, though not the specific circumstances under which I'd last felt it. But this time, it was here. In the middle of the forest. I felt the warmth... moving. I followed it, half elated and half terrified that if I got too close, I'd melt completely. But I didn't. I drew closer and closer to the source of it until... I saw him. A being made of flame, hopping gleefully from branch to branch in an abandoned campsite. He was laughing the most joyous laugh I'd ever heard, and the very

sound of it sent sparks straight through me. Was he some sort of fire sprite? No, too tall for that. And he was clothed in spectral attire, just as I was, though his garb was all black, as though coated in a layer of soot. I stood hidden behind a thicket of birch trees watching him for a long while, basking in the warmth of his presence. Then suddenly, his laughter stopped. He'd spotted me and was staring straight at me with the same sort of vigilant wonder as the forest animals.

"Forgive me," I said, as I left the cover of the thicket. "You were enjoying yourself and I didn't want to interrupt."

"Who are you?" he asked in a voice that was at once deep and resonant while also light and lively.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "Who are you?"

"I don't know either," he replied with a carefree shrug and a grin. "I'm just... here, and I don't know why."

"I think that's the same for all of us."

He made a step towards me and then stopped short. "You're cold."

"I am. But you needn't be afraid of me. I don't mean you any harm."

“I remember feeling cold.” His arms came up and crossed themselves in front of his chest on instinct. “But when? When was I cold? How could I have ever been cold?”

“I remember being warm. And that’s what drew me here to you. I’m not sure what it means either.”

He held up his hand to me and slowly moved forward, bringing an aura of light with him as he did. I returned the gesture and stepped further away from the thicket. We were very near to touching when the sensation got to be too much for both of us and we simultaneously retreated.

“Are you alright?” he asked after a moment.

“Yes. My hand is... burning a little.”

“Mine too.”

“Perhaps we should not touch. But I would like to be your friend, if you’d allow it.”

“I would like that very much. Should I call you by a name?”

“Whatever you wish.”

“I will call you... Shine. For there is light in you as there is in me, but your light has no heat.”

“And I shall call you Rush. For you make the same sound as the wind, but you bring warmth instead of chill.”

So Rush and I became friends. Every morning we would meet at the campsite and he would walk beside me as I made my rounds through the forest. We’d laugh together at the scampering creatures, we’d ford the icy streams side by side, and sometimes we’d make things together. Little houses out of sticks or garlands from fallen leaves. Though we could not touch each other, we found that we often moved and thought in sync. His boundless joy and wonder at everything I showed him was infectious, and there were many things he was able to show me that I’d never considered before. We talked a lot about this and that, but at other times, we were happy to just be with one another, and could walk silently for miles simply admiring the snowy landscape around us. I came to adore his warmth as much as I treasured the cold, and I missed the feeling of him whenever we were apart.

Then one day, we found another being. A girl in the middle of the forest; her hair wild with tangled branches and leaves, her skin golden and sparkling from under the emerald garments she wore. We both stopped to watch her, as she bent over and examined something on the ground. From beneath a pile of dead and

crumbling leaves she plucked something and held it up. As we watched, a tiny green sprout shot out from between her fingers, and it curled slowly upwards before beginning to bend towards us. That was when she saw us, and she gasped in fright.

Rush smiled at her. "We mean you no harm. We just aren't accustomed to seeing anyone else in these woods."

The girl's green eyes flicked from one of us to the other, searching our demeanors for signs of danger. The sprouting seed she held continued to grow, arching fully towards Rush. All of us fixed our focus on it.

"It likes your light," she said to Rush. He reached out for it, but she pulled it away from him just as two leaves unfurled from the top of it. "Not too much, or you'll kill it."

Rush held out his hand, and the girl moved her sprout towards him very gingerly. One leaf after another unfurled, roots emerging from the base and starting to twist themselves down her arm, until the thing she held was a proper sapling. Rush was grinning in absolute delight.

I moved forward to get a closer look at the little wonder, but it stopped its growth the moment I approached. One of the tiny leaves shriveled before my eyes and

began separating from the plant entirely before finally fluttering silently to the ground. The girl withdrew her hand and the sapling with it, now looking at me with genuine fear.

“I... I’m so sorry, I didn’t know that would happen.”

“This is Shine. She means well.”

The green girl seemed unconvinced. “I should go find a good home for it,” she said.

“Can I accompany you?” Rush asked. “I would like to give it some light and warmth to ensure it will grow and be healthy.”

The green girl smiled back at him. “I would like that.”

“I’ll meet you in the morning, alright Shine?” Before I could respond, Rush and the green girl were moving off together through the woods.

He was indeed waiting for me in our usual spot the next morning, but this time when we walked, he walked farther away from me. Not much, but just enough that I felt the lessening of his warmth. Halfway through our walk, he announced that he needed to go meet Kindling (this is the name he had given to the green girl) by the riverbed to help her clear some of the dead wood there. She’d shown

him how to consume the dead wood and turn it into ash, which she could use to feed the plants.

“I never knew wood could be so delicious!” he said, his voice full of mirth and excitement.

“Of course. Enjoy your time with her,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

And so it went on. Every morning I’d meet with Rush, we’d walk farther and farther apart, and eventually he would leave to go and help Kindling. I understood that my presence would disturb their work, so I never asked if I could join them.

And then one day, Rush was just... gone. I knew it from the moment I woke up, because I couldn’t detect his heat anywhere, but I convinced myself that I was imagining things. I went in search of him, but he wasn’t at the campsite. He wasn’t by the river bed. He wasn’t spooking the rabbits that lived beneath the old oak tree. He was nowhere. Kindling was gone as well, and that’s when I understood that they’d gone somewhere else together where the cold wouldn’t impede their work.

Without Rush’s warmth, my heart began to frost over like the morning dew on the grass. It froze hard until it cracked right in two. I felt the very moment it did so. In my anger and sadness, I went about the forest destroying everything we’d made

together. The intricate village made of twigs. The wreaths and garlands we'd hung across the barren trees. The blocks of ice he'd helped me shape into fantastical creatures. I ripped and pulled and stomped it all out of existence. The animals were frightened of me now, and they all ran from me out of the woods entirely. I tried to chase after them, to beg them to stay so that I wouldn't be alone. I'd even frightened myself. But then I saw where the animals were rushing to. Just outside the borders of my forest was now a flourishing meadow, resplendent with a rainbow of flowers. I knew that if I took one more step, I'd destroy the sanctity of that place, and I while destroying my own creations was one thing, I couldn't bear to do it to someone else's.

So here I stay in my forest of cold, tending to the snow and the ice and making sure everything stays in perfect balance. I do what I am meant to do and nothing more. But still, at times I go back to the edge of the forest and look out at the sprawling green meadow, wishing there was a way for me to engage with it. I'll see Rush and Kindling on rare occasions. And sometimes, Rush will raise his hand to me from far across the hill, but he never gets any closer than that. Even still, I treasure that tiny bit of warmth I feel whenever I see him.

Perhaps one day I will find another friend in my forest. And perhaps the next time it will be another who shares my own nature so that I may embrace them, and we may find our own kind of warmth between the coldness of our hearts.