

Inky – The Gods Will Not Be Watching

Success. Something Sharon never seemed to be able to get used to, even after an entire week of sold out shows. And to celebrate the entire week being a resounding victory, she and Annie helped arrange a huge party. Everyone helped in their own way, and the tent held such joy Sharon couldn't process it fully at the time. Cheers, smiles all around, the clinking of glasses and mugs... the stimulation served almost too much for her heart during the height of the party. And as such, she took the role of team mother, to clean up after the party.

Standing just outside the main tent after the fact, her heart pounded. She couldn't handle things, even now, the anxiety pushing to the fore. Sharon managed to hide it well enough before, during the festivities. Didn't fuss when Annie took her younger brother Evan, the most youthful of the cast, to bed. Had to keep him sober and hydrated enough not to fall ill, she couldn't blame Annie for attending to her brother's needs. Certainly not over her own anxiety.

Thus it had fallen to herself, Harith, and Cecil to make clean the main tent, at least enough the place would be functional the following day. The two made strange bedfellows, akin to most of them; a dragon in human form and a spirit, neither bound to the circus. And yet here they stayed, much akin to Sharon herself. Where else could they go? Wandering alone, unsafe, possibly hunted or killed by the general populace. This was not a forgiving world unless one lay birthed from the Mother goddess herself. And no one could say they were, not now. The sight of those stands, the memory of crowds cheering them all on and basking in the glow of the eccentric freak show, twisted in her mind over and over.

All she could hear started to warp and change, cheering to boos, a raucous and happy crowd to a bloodthirsty one. Memories flooded back to her, as she'd watched those stands, the sight of happy spectators morphing into the memories of public executions. Cheers, jeers, what

could be the difference when one was a witch?

“You will only be granted forgiveness in death, should thou be an aberration in Her Name,” the old words used to go. Her mother uttered it on more than one occasion to Sharon herself, even knowing the girl was a witch, held the accursed form which marked her as a target for all her days. Such spawned her anxieties, those worming and writhing pains which wrapped about her heart, crushed it, made her hyperventilate.

Sharon took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. She walked forward from the entrance of the main tent, leaving the fabric red and white body of its form behind. Moving to an isolated spot nearby, nary a tree in sight, she sat down. Her heart seemed to slow its pounding as she stayed alone here, quiet in the dark.

The stars shone down, their light faint and glimmering. Sharon knew the moon lay behind her, out of view, planting the soft seeds of moonlight on the ground before her. Sitting outside, the grass under her felt soft, luxurious. She savored every sensation of the late eve. Focused on nature, tried her best to attune to its calm. The cool breeze, with the faded and smoldering embers of a campfire providing the mildest spice, made her breathe deeper still. Intoxicating, in its own way, it reassured her, made her relax. The safety and surety of this place made her close her eyes, basking in the moonlight for a moment.

Everyone was asleep, all but her. Or passed out drunk. They made sure to have plenty of alcohol at the party, after all. Sharon didn't have much to drink, herself. Something about it didn't agree with her. The velvet tableau of stars kept her focus, by comparison. She imagined each star held its own story, close to its metaphorical breast. And wouldn't she want to know them all? But much like here, down on the ground, she couldn't expect to meet them all, know them all. And not with how poorly those could be mistreated by the gods.

But then, what bitter irony, that those deemed unfit could come together. And yes, she had a great deal to do with it, as did Annie, but she still felt her stomach turning in knots. The week went off without a hitch, show after show. And the last show of the week, another resounding success, closed only a few hours prior. So why her anxiety? Why did she sit here, gazing up at the stars, wondering if she'd done something wrong? Why did it consume her so?

Because that's what people like me do. It's all we can afford to do, stepping on eggshells because of the ill tempered around us, she mused to herself. People. The word stuck in her mind. The world didn't see her as such. Witch. Villain. Animal. *Aberration*. The first word resonated in her mind. The reason her parents didn't want anything to do with her. The reason she could even do all this. But the last word sounded in her head like a bell tolling, a funeral dirge. Her existence was itself a death sentence. But she could make the most of it. For the first time since she came outside, Sharon looked down at her hand. Youth was on her side. She examined the tiny creases, future wrinkles she might form in the future. Flexed her hand back and forth.

Drømme Show, built by these hands, actually found success. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. They *did* it. But it still didn't feel real, and more than anything, guilt tinged all her euphoric feelings. Sharon owed so much to Annie. How could she not? Taking her in, making her part of the family, as it were – even hiding her away as needed from the watchful eyes of those same gods she now contemplated. Though she couldn't be sure of their presence, she likened it to a panopticon, always with eyes upon her, but no way to confirm. She curled tight, dread forming in her chest. How could she be sure any of this would work out?

A crunch of grass underfoot made her jump up, and a soft, playful giggle echoed into the night. Annie's voice, and Sharon turned to see the blonde girl approach. Despite the mirthful sound of her laugh, something about her tonight seemed more calming than one might have

expected.

“I didn't mean to startle you.” Annie smiled at her, warm and welcoming. Sharon drank in Annie's appearance, much the same as she knew Annie did to her at this moment. Blue, beautiful eyes, always so kind, so adventurous, drew Sharon in and made her smile back. The blonde hair, trimmed short, gave Annie more of a sporty look than Sharon's comparatively longer red hair.

“You didn't,” Sharon fibbed, her heart still pounding from the momentary alarm. Or was it the anxiety, still looming?

Annie snickered. “Uh huh. I'm sure.” She came closer, standing next to Sharon. No casual contact, her hands clasped behind her back. “Admiring the stars?”

“I guess. Is Evan asleep?”

“Like a baby,” Annie said. “He got a little to drink. Nothing too much. But I wanted to make sure he didn't overdo it. Sorry if I missed out on helping you clean up.”

“It's fine.” Sharon kept her gaze fixed on the stars, away from Annie. Bitterness didn't become her. And she adored Annie. Loved her more than anything. It spoke volumes she could be this vulnerable with her, even to feel upset momentarily over Annie's attention being given to someone else.

Annie didn't say anything for a moment, just looking down from the sky to Sharon. When she did speak, this time she put a hand to Sharon's back. “Tell me what's on your mind,” Annie said, her voice low. Sharon hesitated. Any upset dissipated, leaving her exposed. The touch felt like it reached into her, caressed the bare nerves of her body.

“Do we deserve all this?” Sharon bit her lip. “I know. We put in the work, we did it ourselves. We carved our own path. But something still feels... wrong.” She tried to bite back tears, her eyes watering. “The gods...”

“Aren't real and can't hurt you. They're long gone.” Annie's voice seemed harder with those words. Trauma? Not like Sharon's. Not when Sharon had to run away from her parents or be sold into slavery. Taken in by the good graces of Annie's family, folded into it, as if always a member, even if she herself felt she would always be the black sheep. And even then, danger could still come to them. Being a witch could not be ignored. *And after all, all aberrations not borne of the primordial goddess must die...*

Sharon turned, taking Annie's hand. The faintest flush came to the blonde's cheeks, and she leaned into it, letting Sharon come closer. Sharon took the hint, grabbing onto Annie's whole arm, burying her face in the other girl's shoulder. No words for a few moments, Sharon burying herself in her partner's arm. Annie waited, patient. She brushed those red locks on Sharon's head with a finger, comfort without patronizing.

“I can't be sure.” Sharon didn't bring her face up, speaking into Annie's shoulder. The former nuzzled her, as if savoring the softness of Annie's form. “Look at what we've done... they'll be appalled, they'll try to hurt us...”

Annie scooped Sharon into her arms, holding the other girl against the warmth of her bosom. Sharon squeaked in surprise, but settled into the embrace, wrapping her arms around Annie.

“They won't. Nothing can touch what we've done. What we've accomplished. And even if someone tries, I'll protect you.” Annie tightened her grasp on Sharon, pulling her closer still. Sharon nuzzled into Annie's core, burying her face into the other girl's neck. No words need be exchanged between the two as they stood beneath the stars, embracing one another. Annie let one hand drift up to Sharon's hair, her fingers brushing it. They swirled to her scalp and stroked along it. Sharon's body stilled, and for the first time since the final show of the week, she truly relaxed.

The wind picked up, the taller grass moving in tandem with their skirts, and Sharon finally looked up at Annie. Her eyes, mournful pools of light green, seemed so hopeful. Desperate, almost, as she gazed upon Annie. Could almost see herself reflected, so blue were those glassy orbs that met her stare. And after the briefest of hesitations, as if unsure how best to respond, Annie's face broke out in a tiny smile.

“It's okay. I'm right here.”