LA DONNA CERVO

SPIRIT OF THE FOREST

Treatment — Revised Version 2026

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v 2.0

COLD OPEN — THE FOREST. NIGHT.

In the Roman forests surrounding ancient, now-dilapidated ruins, the atmosphere is gloomy yet evocative, stirring remote signs of ancient life. It is night, and the environment takes on a menacing appearance. In the thick darkness, a piercing scream shatters the silence, followed by muffled thuds resembling a stone striking the earth.

A man in his seventies wanders through these solitary grounds. He walks slowly, searching for something, his rifle pointed forward. Suddenly, the surrounding vegetation rustles as if an animal is running to escape an unseen threat. The man turns abruptly and fires. The brush immediately goes still and silent. The hunter advances cautiously toward the spot where he shot. He stops near a bush, completely unaware that a mutilated male body lies right at his feet.

EDOARDO'S APARTMENT — ROME. EARLY MORNING.

EDOARDO, a man in his late forties, is still buried beneath the blankets when the alarm rings at seven. He lazily silences it.

From elsewhere in the apartment comes the sound of drawers opening and closing — controlled, deliberate, the sounds of someone moving with purpose. SISSY emerges from the bedroom doorway, dressed and ready to leave. She is around thirty, dark-haired, striking — the kind of woman who doesn't need to try. She doesn't look at him.

Edoardo props himself up. He tries to say something — her name, an apology, the beginning of an explanation. Sissy picks up her bag and her sketchbook from the table. She pauses at the door for just a moment, long enough for him to see her profile, then leaves without a word. The door closes behind her. Not slammed. Worse than that… Quiet.

Edoardo lies back and stares at the ceiling. He knows he has pushed too far this time.

ARIANNA'S APARTMENT — ROME. SAME MORNING.

A different apartment. Smaller. A teenager's room — books on mythology, folklore, printouts of local legends pinned above a desk. ARIANNA, fifteen, is getting ready for school alone. She is bright-eyed, self-sufficient in the way that children of distracted parents learn to be. She holds a book with the cover depicting a beautiful woman with raven-black hair, bare-chested, emerging from a lake with a waterfall behind.

In the living room, music streams from a Bluetooth speaker while a muted television shows the morning news. Her father Francesco has already left for work. A note on the kitchen table: "Home late. Leftovers in the fridge. — F." She reads it. Folds it. Puts it in a drawer with others exactly like it.

CONSTRUCTION SITE — ROME. MORNING.

FRANCESCO, also in his late forties, says goodbye to his colleague at the construction site, leaving final instructions. He holds rolled-up blueprints and is still wearing his hard hat. He heads to his car, and as he puts everything in the trunk. The trunk closes.

EDOARDO'S APARTMENT — ROME. EVENING.

Edoardo has been out. He comes home late, carrying the faint traces of cigarette smoke and someone else's perfume — not enough to confirm anything, but enough for a woman who already suspects everything.

Sissy is at the kitchen table with her sketchbook open but her pencil untouched. She has been waiting. She looks at him as he enters and the quality of her silence tells him everything that follows will be difficult.

What begins quietly escalates. She has known about his flirting, his attention to younger women, the way he performs for any audience but her. She has swallowed it for too long. Tonight she tells him clearly: she is leaving. She has been half-out the door for months, and he has done nothing to close the distance. She stands up.

Edoardo's charm fails him. For once he does not reach for a joke or a deflection. He sees that she means it, and the fear that rises in him is genuine — he is fifty years old, and without her he will be alone in a way he does not know how to survive. He speaks without the usual performance. He asks her to stay. Not as a demand — as a question.

He proposes a trip, something. A few days outside Rome. Forests, fresh air, a chance to breathe the same air without the city around them.

Sissy says nothing for a long moment. She wants to say no. Part of her knows that a camping trip does not fix the real problem. But she is not yet ready to say goodbye, either. She sits back down.

"Fine," she says. "One trip."

After Edoardo leaves the room, Sissy sits alone at the table. She opens her sketchbook and picks up her pencil. Her hand moves across the page almost without direction — the lines that emerge form the shape of a woman. Dark-haired. Bare-shouldered. Standing at the edge of something. Sissy studies what she has drawn. She does not remember deciding to draw it.

BAR — ROME. NIGHT.

After handling his responsibilities, Francesco is on his way home. Spotting a bar, he stops for a drink. The establishment is almost deserted. After a few moments, a door at the back opens and the female bartender emerges alongside a man, both trying to adjust their clothes and regain a dignified appearance. The man is Edoardo. Francesco does not recognize him at first.

Leaning against the counter, Edoardo examines the engineer with interest. Irritated, Francesco is about to react when the man utters his name. The two discover they are old childhood friends who had lost touch for many years.

They spend the evening reminiscing. After exchanging brief summaries of their respective lives — Francesco being a widow now, raising a daughter alone, both men carrying more than they show — they decide to spend a few days camping together, the way they did when they were young.

Edoardo mentions he could bring his girlfriend, Sissy. Francesco suggest bringing his daughter Arianna. Edoardo proposes Monterano: dense forests, historic ruins, not far from Rome, and as it happens, a location where Francesco needs to conduct land surveys for an upcoming project. Francesco accepts enthusiastically and tells Edoardo to head out the following day with Sissy — he will join them as soon as he has wrapped up a few matters.

ROME — NIGHT. FRANCESCO'S APARTMENT.

Francesco falls asleep with his glasses on. His sleep is tormented. He dreams of a young man around twenty years old, soaked beneath a pouring rain, weeping and repeatedly saying how sorry he is. Francesco thrashes in his sleep but cannot wake up. The nightmare reveals the young man's hands covered in blood.

MONTERANO — THE CAMPSITE. AFTERNOON.

Edoardo and Sissy have arrived a day ahead. They have set up the tent, arranged a fire ring with stones, and lit a campfire. The campsite sits at the edge of the ancient ruins — abandoned walls swallowed by oak forest, moss thick on the stones. Sissy sits apart from the fire, sketchbook open. She is drawing, though she does not look up when Edoardo calls to her. The drawings are beginning to resemble the woman she drew in the kitchen. Edoardo makes a romantic move on Sissy, but they end up sleeping in their own sleeping bags far from each others.

The following morning, Francesco's car pulls into the clearing. He and Arianna climb out, stretching after the drive. Edoardo strides toward his old friend and embraces him — the full warmth of a friendship that picks up exactly where it left off, without self-consciousness.

Arianna hangs back slightly, taking in the location. Then she notices Sissy — still at the periphery of the camp, sketchbook in hand, watching the reunion with detached composure. There is something about her that Arianna cannot immediately name. She is not like the women her father usually knows. She is cool in a way that is not performance. Arianna approaches her.

Sissy looks up from her sketchbook. For a moment she says nothing. Then she tilts the book slightly so Arianna can see the drawing — the dark-haired woman at the treeline.

"What is that?" Arianna asks.

"I don't know," Sissy says. "It keeps coming out."

The men, standing by the fire, are deep in conversation already — laughing, talking over each other, the ease of people who share history they don't need to explain. Neither notices what passes between the two women at the edge of the camp.

THE WOODS — MONTERANO. NIGHT.

Night has fallen over Monterano, and the ruins deep within the forest take on a grim and mysterious aura, amplified by the unsettling calls of nocturnal wildlife. Among the trees, a human shadow observes an old, dilapidated convent, while the bellow of a deer echoes through the darkness.

In a nearby shack lives the old man, ALLY, seen at the beginning of the story — weathered, solitary, a man shaped entirely by the forest and what he has seen in it. He survives by renting mountain bikes to tourists. Matteo, a local youth and friend of the old man, comes to visit with a companion. They want to rent bikes for an excursion, but the old man tries to dissuade them, warning that something dangerous has been roaming through the woods recently. Scoffing at his warnings, the two boys take the bikes anyway and quickly disappear down the forest trails.

THE FOREST — LATER THAT NIGHT.

Late in the evening, Matteo and his friend light a fire, eat sandwiches, and swap stories about their romantic adventures. As Matteo pulls food from his backpack, he fails to notice that his friend has been snatched by something and is being dragged downhill through the dense brush. Only when he turns to offer a sandwich does he catch a glimpse of his friend's feet vanishing into the foliage.

Turning on his headlamp, Matteo discovers his friend's lifeless, mutilated body further down the slope. Beside the corpse stands a naked female figure with long raven-black hair, her hands clutching a blood-stained stone. Panicked, Matteo runs.

THE CAMPSITE — THAT EVENING.

The gunshot from the old man's rifle earlier carried to the campsite, but the group gave it no weight — poachers, probably.

Edoardo steps away from the fire to smoke a cigarette and scout the surroundings. In the thick brush, he notices something moving in the shadows. He edges closer — too dark to see clearly.

Back at the fire, Arianna blasts Celtic music from her portable speaker, dancing with closed eyes, her movements loose and unself-conscious. Sissy watches her for a moment, then joins. At some point she passes Arianna a small joint. Francesco, sitting in a lawn chair, falls into an agitated sleep — sweating, unable to wake.

The music carries to Edoardo, who turns back for a moment, drawn by the sound, before advancing again toward the movement he spotted. He trips into a hollow. His hand lands near a hole in the ground — a large stone has recently been extracted from it, the soil still fresh and damp. He stands, wiping his hands. Suddenly, screaming erupts from the direction of the camp. He sprints back.

The girls recount frantically that a beautiful woman appeared during their dance, visible for only seconds before vanishing into thin air. Francesco, woken by the screams, saw nothing. Edoardo suspects the marijuana and tells everyone to sleep.

THE CAMPSITE — DEEP NIGHT.

Francesco cannot rest. The images from his recurring nightmare press against the inside of his eyelids. He slips out of the tent and sits by the dying fire. The memory of that night — a young man, rain, a terrible decision — will not leave him alone. He grabs a flashlight and walks.

He finds an old ruin and steps inside: cold walls, empty spaces, the smell of stone and time. He exits and continues. A rustling in the bushes stops him. He listens. Walks on. Then a cry — close, immediate — freezes him completely. He spots a cave just ahead and slips inside, pressing his back to the wall. Two eyes advance through the dark toward him. Gripped by panic, he gropes the ground, finds a metal pipe, and swings it wildly. The eyes vanish. He runs.

THE CAMPSITE — DAWN.

Edoardo finds his friend sitting beside the dead fire, shaken to the core. Francesco tells him they must leave immediately — they are in danger. Edoardo tries to dismiss it, but Francesco goes to the car and attempts to start the engine. It won't turn over.

'You will never leave this place.' The old man steps between them. He says that if the Deer Woman has returned to action, it means someone among them carries a sin they have never confessed — and she is furious. Without waiting for questions, he walks away.

THE OLD MAN'S SHACK — EVENING.

Matteo visits the old man to unload his terror. He still doesn't fully believe — he thinks the old man has invented the Deer Woman to make sense of losing his son years ago. The old man opens two beers and tells the legend once and for all.

Serafina was murdered in the woods outside Monterano: assaulted, abandoned, and forgotten — as men of that era forgot women they used. No burial. No memory. No name carved anywhere that survived. But Serafina remained: she fused with the forest, with the animals, with the light that filters strangely through the trees at twilight. She is a deer that watches without moving. An owl that appears before a man commits a sin. A dark-haired woman standing at the edge of the woods who vanishes when you look directly at her. She looks inside men and finds the weight of violence they have never confessed.

THE CAMPSITE — THAT SAME NIGHT.

Francesco cannot accept the dead engine and continues tinkering under the hood. Edoardo teases him from the fireside. Irritated, Francesco slams the hood and goes to sleep.

Left alone, Edoardo lights a cigarette and walks to a waterfall nearby. He pauses to admire it — then notices something: a bare-chested woman near the water's edge. He looks away to roll a cigarette. When he raises his eyes, she is standing directly in front of him.

She looks at him with an expression he reads as invitation. Edoardo does what Edoardo does — he performs. She shoves him violently to the ground. He still doesn't understand what is happening. She kisses him and he cannot pull away; he feels his strength draining, his body paralysed. Her expression transforms. Edoardo is consumed by panic. Just as she is about to deliver a fatal strike, her gaze locks onto the tobacco pouch that has spilled from his pocket. Inexplicably, she flees into the woods. Completely drained, Edoardo collapses into a deep, heavy sleep.

THE CAMPSITE — MORNING.

Sissy wakes first, makes coffee, and knocks on the men's tent. Francesco emerges; Edoardo is missing. They find him by the waterfall — slowly waking, staring at his hands. He is clutching a lock of black hair.

He makes his way back toward camp and runs into the old man near a shed. The old man sees immediately what state he is in. Edoardo opens his hand. The old man's expression changes. He urges him back to the group at once.

THE FOREST PATH — MOMENTS LATER.

On the trek back, Edoardo does not realize the Deer Woman is following him, crouched in the vegetation. He passes within meters of her. The moment he is a few steps ahead, she rushes out emitting terrifying shrieks. He runs. She overtakes him in a single leap. He falls, grabs a sharp stick, strikes her in the flank. She licks the blood from the wound and lunges back. A gunshot stops her. She collapses, unconscious.

The old man Ally brings Edoardo back to camp and joins the group. The Deer Woman is tied to a tree, still unconscious. The group debates — kill her, or call the police. Edoardo approaches her, unable to believe she is real. She is beautiful; the hair cascading over her bare chest is an intense black that, under the firelight, occasionally catches blue reflections.

The old man takes a leather pouch of powdered tobacco and scatters it over her legs — tobacco, he explains, strips the creature of her ability to fight back. Trusting him, the group agrees to rest while he stands guard.

THE CAMP — BEFORE DAWN.

As the hours pass, the wind builds. The tobacco on the woman's legs slowly blows away. The old man's eyelids grow heavy. Without realising it, sleep claims him.

With the tobacco gone, the Deer Woman opens her eyes. She shifts form — from woman to hawk — and takes flight.

The old man wakes to find her gone. He raises the alarm. The group must flee. With great effort, they start the car and pile in. Sissy is the last to get in, resisting until the final moment. She leaves her sketchbook on the ground. The old man picks it up and turns through the pages — drawing after drawing of the dark-haired woman, rendered with an intimacy and precision that stops him cold. Sissy is the creature's spiritual vessel.

THE ROAD OUT OF MONTERANO — NIGHT.

The car speeds away. The hawk follows from above, unseen. It overtakes them at the end of the road, drops to the ground, and reassumes its female form in the brush ahead. Francesco drives as fast as he can. The girls are silent, not understanding the full weight of what is happening. Edoardo sits in the back beside Sissy.

Francesco watches him in the rearview mirror — the way Edoardo curses, urging the car faster. The cadence of it. The tone. Something clicks loose in Francesco's memory. One last glance at the mirror, and he slams on the brakes.

The memories arrive whole: a young girl in the company of Edoardo and Francesco — an accident — an attempted assault — and the girl dying by the side of the road while they drove away, too young and too afraid to do anything else. The images petrify him.

The Deer Woman steps into the headlights.

Francesco orders everyone to stay in the car. He opens the door and approaches her. With tears on his face, he begs her forgiveness for what he did as a young man. The car windows are down; the others hear everything, though they cannot yet understand what he is confessing to. Arianna and Sissy exchange a look. Edoardo, hearing it too, steps out of the car to stand beside his friend.

The Deer Woman begins to trample Francesco. He offers no resistance — lying on the ground, accepting the punishment, still begging for forgiveness. At the edge of death, Arianna jumps from the car and drives a small survival knife into the creature's side. The Deer Woman does not retaliate against the girl — she simply pushes her aside with something that looks almost like confusion.

Edoardo hurls himself at the creature and is flung against a tree, injuring his shoulder. The Deer Woman raises a large stone above Francesco's skull. Just as she swings it down, a cloud of tobacco blankets her face — Matteo, arrived just in time. She roars and vanishes.

Francesco is badly injured. Matteo and Edoardo load him into the car and retreat to the old man's shack. He is laid on a cot, bandaged, sleeping. The group gathers. Questions surface in the settling silence: why did she only go for Francesco? Why didn't she retaliate when Arianna stabbed her? Why does she exist? Who was she, really?

THE OLD MAN'S SHACK — LATER THAT NIGHT.

The old man returns and explains what can be done: the Deer Woman cannot be killed permanently — she is a spirit — but her vulnerability can be exploited when she takes animal or human form. They must devise a trap. Matteo will act as bait, staging a convincing assault on one of the girls. When the Deer Woman appears, they will close in together.

The girls listen to all of this. Initially they feel a complicated sympathy for the creature — they understand what she is and why she exists. But when Arianna asks directly why the Deer Woman went specifically for her father, the old man is silent. He looks at Edoardo.

Edoardo takes a breath to confess — but Francesco wakes. He interrupts. He takes it all upon himself. He tells them what happened all those years ago: a young woman, the accident, the assault, and what he and Edoardo chose to do in the rain on that road.

Edoardo is struck still. He never knew the girl had died. Francesco had always lied him she had run away. That night, while Francesco wept in the rain saying he was sorry, there was a deer at the edge of the road, watching everything.

Arianna runs from the shack. Sissy follows.

Outside, in the dark, Sissy finds her and holds her — not with words but with presence, with the steadiness of someone older who has also had to reckon with the people she trusted most. She takes a motherly approach, the kind of comfort Arianna has not had access to for a long time. Arianna confesses that in her heart she has also blamed her own father for her mother's death — an absence that has never been explained to her satisfaction. She knows that family bonds are complicated. She says: for a child, it is never easy to see a parent fail, to discover they are capable of something unforgivable, or simply to understand that the people you believed were immortal heroes are only flawed and frightened human beings.

Sissy says nothing. She understands it from a different direction.

THE RUINS OF MONTERANO — NIGHT. THE FINAL CONFRONTATION.

The trap is set at the ancient ruins — the roofless church, the crumbling walls consumed by forest, stone arches open to the sky. Matteo stages the false assault in the nave, the moonlight falling through the open ceiling, silence all around.

The Deer Woman comes. What follows is ferocious. In the struggle, the old man loses his life — taken down by the creature before anyone can reach him. It falls to Sissy, her spiritual vessel,

to halt the avenger's wrath: she steps between the creature and the others, and something passes between them — a recognition, a pause, a breath held on both sides.

The survivors catch their breath in the ruins. Francesco grips a knife and moves toward the pinned Deer Woman. Consumed by grief and something that has been rotting inside him for thirty years, he raises the blade. The Deer Woman closes her eyes. She waits.

Under the gazes of Arianna and Sissy, who cover their faces — and the grim stillness of Matteo — Francesco's hand trembles. The knife hovers. Then he screams. He screams out everything — the guilt, the fear, the twenty-year-old boy in the rain who could not be brave enough. When there is nothing left, he pulls the blade back and drives it into the earth.

The Deer Woman opens her eyes and looks at him.

Francesco tells her she is free. He asks that she continue to exist — because it is right that she does. He asks only that in the future she might cease her personal hunts for revenge and instead watch over all women who fall victim to violence. That she become something larger than the debt owed to her.

The Deer Woman narrows her eyes. It is not forgiveness — it is understanding. An agreement between a spirit and a man who has finally stopped running and came clean.

She turns and walks slowly back into the darkness of the ruins. At the threshold of the forest, she reassumes the form of a deer and disappears running wild into the dense, ancient wilderness.

— END OF TREATMENT —

La Donna Cervo — Spirit of the Forest

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