

THE GREAT WOLF MOONS

A pair of young women embraced each other, looking up to the infinite expanse of twinkling lights within the swirling colorscape of Zardonarys; an utterly endless world locked above the one they called home. Never quite the same twice in one's lifetime, it remained as it always was; always within sight, always beyond reach, always beautiful. Their lives had been long lived- tenuous and trying in their couple decades- but as they clasped hands and watched the zardons dance in each other's eyes, they knew no other time than the present, longed for nothing more than that moment eternal.

"I'm gonna marry you someday," one said, taking her partner's hand and gently planting her lips to brand their love upon the other's ring finger. With a breathy release, and loathsome departure, she turned away to look up longingly into the beautiful face of her love. The light of two moons reflected in each of the jade-hued irises that sang sonnets with each shared second of silence. Lost in their shared gaze, both were equally mesmerized by each other as they were those astronomical bodies above.

"I know you are."

They kissed, adjusted to hold each other, the smaller of the two between the legs of her companion, veiled by a curtain of silver hair. With her head carefully nestled in her warm, full chest, she felt

wondrously at ease. There was a sense of belonging that came with the togetherness; a warmth that was stoked with every synchronized heartbeat and a happiness that had been truly foreign to them until they had found one another. Back to chest, crown to chin, entirely together.

Time- for all its cruelty- had done them this one kindness in bringing them together. As the moons and zardons danced beyond their reach, they found no greater happiness than being bound as one. It was the smaller of the two who finally broke the stillness, twisting and sliding her back lower against the other's chest, allowing her the chance to see her love and the celestial bodies in the same vision.

"Can you tell me another story about them?" She hadn't asked for a story in some time. In fact, they hadn't had an opportunity to speak much lately before tonight as circumstance had seen them separated by more than distance. For all they'd been through, the larger woman wouldn't spare a second together not enjoying it; in utter silence or enthralled in story.

"Of course," she mused, looking for a fresh tale to tell. "I think I've told you *almost* everything about Maxiluna and Truciluna." There was a sudden spark of inspiration as perhaps the single most important story of their favorite features of their home came to mind. "But I don't believe I told you just how they came to be your runners-up for the most beautiful thing in Rhyonis."

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Shortly after Angehlah blessed Rhyonis with Her Gift of Sentience, two groups of the First People used their newfound cognizance to wipe out the purest concentrations of Life Essence to

emerge from the Life Glade. Several beings like those slain have been known to walk the realm of Rhyonis; nature spirits composed of pure Life Essence that seek to act as forces of balance within the realm. These two, Fire and Ice, were sheer unequivocal elemental powers that- as good-natured and beautiful as they were- were just as terrifying and destructive to behold.

The more territorial of the two, Fire was a hot-tempered being of pure heat that scorched the land it roamed. Long before they were named, it giddily danced around the continent and connected islands that would become Qarte, charring the land it touched with blissful ignorance as it leaped and seared all in its wake. It was an orange and tan flame wolf-like creature that majestically shook its body with each bounding step. As it traveled, it rained golden flame tongues across the rolling fields of green, turning them marigold-brown ash, and painted the land with the acrid scent of smoking foliage.

Fire was described- by the dragons that wrote of it, being the only creatures with Sentience at the time it lived- as a truly wondrous entity:

With a radiance comparable to the light of Balasar, and warmth as palpable across the realm as St. Nihaan's love, Fire burns hotter than the flames of even the Infernheart Wyrms. It smells of ashen death and exuberant life, replacing one with the other as new growth is known to bloom from its tracks.

It's said- in the ancient texts recovered after the War of Draconic Divergence- that Fire initially taught the dragons the way of flame manipulation, and how to convert Life Essence into magic, being the physical embodiment of this element. Fire's mere presence and nature were things of educational wisdom that illuminated all it

touched. Even with its infectious happiness, it lifted spirits just as easily as it destroyed the land around it. Yet still, Fire terrified those that beheld it.

For some time, Fire lived alongside the dragons as a beacon of life that simply existed as a living law of nature and thrived in every moment it was afforded within the borders of its expansive home. It wasn't until the first tiny feet of the First People stumbled through the Bordering Wood into its home that Fire would know conflict. In the coming days, Fire's roving lifestyle amidst the wild and dragons would come to a carnal and horrific end, so the small folk could truly begin.

The dragons, busy with the brewing tensions of an encroaching age-defining struggle, paid little mind to the humanoids trudging towards Fire until it was too late. They- the gnomes first and halflings after- were odd creatures compared to the elves that came first of the First People. Where they were long and lithe and magically or naturally inclined, these more compact beings were instinctively resourceful and lucky, even blind as they were without the light of Sentience.

By whatever bizarre whim of circumstance that would see these people find passage safely, the gnomes would be the first to wander into the lands Fire called home. They would trudge through the ash it had abandoned, absent-mindedly kicking it up and painting the sky with grey-scaled clouds, smelling of unwashed grease and dry soot. This, of course, would be foreshadowing for the mark they would truly leave upon Rhyonis in the coming millennia as marvelous inventors and craftspeople. It was further north, past the mainlands of Qarte, that these stout and innovative beings would find home on the archipelago of this portion of Rhyonis. As it watched their journey, Fire

couldn't have cared less about the gnomes and tiredly spectated without interest as they traipsed in the charred remnants of its play.

Conversely, the halfling folk were a curiosity that caught even Fire's wild attention. Like all the First People to come from Rhyonis before the Gift of Sentience, the halflings came into the realm without rhyme or reason within their minds. In spite of this, they still possessed some sort of innate ability- akin to all those without Sentience- to navigate their new home, as per the designs of the Creation Gods. The halfling's natural abilities were bravery, curiosity, and, as it would happen, luck.

Though their outcomes may never present themselves plainly, outcomes for the halflings were typically found serendipitously. As was the way before the Gift of Sentience, the halflings just wandered, even getting swept up by the gnomes to whom they shared similar stature, but beyond that, very little. The gnomes had a sort of innate aptitude that would manipulate the world's magical weave, but the halflings simply came across their boons like pollen puffs drifting on the wind to land and seed where they may.

Their migration would see them stumble onto the land of Qarte, after the gnomes had scattered the collected ashen piles of remains from Fire's coruscating flames. While it watched, the halflings gazed upon the sprouting life beneath the cinders Fire had forgotten nor cared enough to remember. It had never stopped living, existing as part of its nature, or examined the results of its being. For what merit does what *was* have compared to what *is*, especially for a creature so free as Fire? Once its true nature was revealed by the halflings- that destruction brought new life- Fire wept, moved as it was for seeing *purpose* for the first time.

It would continue its observations for years as the halflings explored their new home. As a curious spark, always on the horizon, Fire was fearful to get too close to snuff out the new flashes of life to tread the land it had for centuries. From a distance at first, looming on the periphery of hillsides and sprouting grasslands, Fire would dim its flames, weary not to burn away the land that had new tenants with bright faces like blooming sunflowers. It began to fall in love with these aimless creatures. They seemed so pure- the halflings- innocent, and gentle with the lack of awareness they possessed; as natural as the buds sprouting through the softened soil that would cake the soles of their feet. It was a beautiful thing to see life just *bloom*, instead of burn.

For some time, things were perfect amongst the tiny folk of Qarte, thoughtless and under the eye of their brilliant self-appointed keeper. Their innate luck would see them avoid folly and survive until Sentience was bequeathed to them, all playing out before Fire to its joy. Soon though, the day that most Rhyonians would truly consider life started for the realm, a gruesome fate would befall the halflings and their observer.

Now, before we cast aspersions on the halfling people, we must keep in mind that they were simply pawns in a game wildly beyond their understanding. It was a dark time indeed across the realm as Sentience had yet to be spread to the First People. Despite the survival of those Fire watched over, a great many others would be torn down before seeing the world beyond the blood-stained Life Glade.

It was the moment that Angehlah released Her Gift of Sentience, whispering "*Life is yours for the taking*," that a vicious change ravaged the simple minds of Fire's charges. That world-altering whisper- which would set forth the motions that rewrote the Fixed

Moment Timeline as Malirica had intended- was woven into the dreams of those in the Life Glade to ripple across the entirety of the realm. Those ripples, rife and overflowing with godly, draconic magic, would echo and reverberate in awakened minds at random until the ignorance of sheer instinct was completely eradicated by thought and perceptive comprehension.

As some of the First People were awakened, this power would overwhelm them; their addled minds unable to resonate with power and the awareness of Sentience. Within them, Seeds of Madness- Remnants of Power- would take hold and transform these beings with the nightmares of fallen Gods from another realm.

They, the less fortunate, would become wild, crazed, violent, and ravenous. Fire watched, horror struck as the split between the Sentient and the Mad tore a schism across the charges it took beneath its light; it would seem the halflings' luck had finally run out.

Fires flames flickered as it sobbed and witnessed the beings it came to love scream in fear as their companions would wildly flail and bite and lash out at one another. For all the carnage Angehlah snuffed out within the Life Glade with Her Gift just a few thousand miles to the south, the beings Fire now looked upon burst into an irrevocable, ubiquitous chaos.

Blood and viscera rained around the once verdant fields and Fire knew action needed to be taken or else nothing but death would persist where life was meant to flourish. Between corpse and flailing form, Fire darted and released gout after raging torrent of flames to quell the violence around it. With golden cinders and amber flame tongues, it valiantly fought to protect those spare few saved from these bouts of Madness but it was a losing battle.

In a blink of Fire's ancient eye, so much darkness and terror had blanketed the land and it seemed to be the only light that remained. Through its fervent dashes, it would spin on its heels, kicking up blood-soaked mud to rear back and bare its fangs against the frightful scenes plaguing its home. As it flailed in protest, golden flames and searing red waves of heat poured from its snapping jaw in a violent surge of solar rage. Were it capable of speech, Fire would have screamed for peace, for sanity, and a return to the simple time before Sentience cursed its muses. Life had been so simple, yet it had transformed into a purposeless carnal farce. It wept supernova tears, exploding with incinerating agony as it exhaled these sweeping aurum pulses over the Maddened small folk and their once vibrant fields.

In the grand scale of events of Rhyonis, including those of such magnitude to be woven directly into the Fixed Moment Timeline without Malirica, this one was brief but sickeningly prolonged. The brilliant and luminous form that was Fire fought against the storms of thrashing and terrified beings it loved and longed to save from themselves. It wailed, howling, crying as it snapped and breathed and burned. In agony, it raged against the battering, clawing hands that bubbled and burst in crisping blisters as the halflings fought to tear Fire to shreds. Until, finally, they had.

In its dying moments, there were screaming wails and Fire heard the echoing howls of adult and child alike as they clutched their scalded palms against throbbing skulls, unreeling with knowledge their minds couldn't contain. They were screams of pain, fear, agony, sadness, anger, and countless other senses they nor Fire could fathom but were forced to endure.

Fire lay dying to the dirge of Maddened cries and slaughter, finally knowing the touch of the beings it longed to live alongside, only to die by it. Its final moments stretched into a lasting, final vision, of a prismatic blast of scintillating light that coated the land it longed to illuminate for all eternity. This light, seemed to wash over the halflings that recoiled at the intense brightness, still addled and raving against the unfettered Seeds of Madness within their minds.

Fire, now a fading speck of coal that once roared with such incomparable vibrance, smiled to itself as it bore witness to the halflings purged of their anguish. They, and it, finally would know peace as they looked at one another for the first time, eye to conscious eye.

Though nightmarish and devastating as its end was, not all was lost for Fire. The ash of its flames revitalized the land as it fizzled to its untimely end. This would create wildly fertile soil and ultimately be the foundation for the greatest gift it could have ever left for the halflings it so desperately longed to know. Its Life Essence- so vast and palpable and wild and free as the energy it was- infused the land with all the power it would ever need to provide for the entire realm.

It was from there that the halflings- never fully aware of the sacrifices that built the basis of their marvelous home- set to tend the bountiful lands around them. In their case, ignorance truly was bliss as they happily cared for their fields and feasted on their plentiful harvests. Later, with the assistance of the gnomes, they would share the fruits of their labors with Rhyonis at large; all because of Fire.

Past Fire's resurgence within the Farming Fieldlands of Qarte, St. Nihaan took pity upon the spirit who only sought to shine as it was.

To reward its sacrifice to the realm, He would see that its end would only lead to *Zoul*; new beginnings.

The Light Father, Creation God of Light, Love, and Familial Devotion would take the fading embers of Fire into His hands. He stirred the ashes that remained after Fire's death and cast the still glowing cinders skyward. When He blew them into Zardonarys, they fell into Maxiluna- the Orbital Moon of Rhyonis- to shine so long as the realm itself lived.

Its spirit and Essence would be granted a never-ending life, where it could roam and move freely, to see all the realm and bless it with its radiant glow as it had always wanted. Now, at peace and free to shine and observe all the First People that intrigued it so- who are now sustained by the crops grown within the soil it nourished- Fire sparks curiosity, inspiration, and wonder, in all those whose eyes look upon it in the sky above.

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Opposing the heat and radiance of Fire, that scorched the lands of Qarte, there was a force that nearly froze over the southernmost reaches of Ish-Gahn. This spirit's name was Ice.

Where it would glide to dissipate and disperse, a sharp searing would assail the senses from scent to taste as the intense cold bit through all it touched. With these unpleasant sensations, crisp, natural beauty was found around every icicle, filtering light through the limitless landscape as Ice was equally captivating as it was execrable.

It was truly a wonder, even to the dragons that witnessed it, fully aware of the danger its crisp, blizzard-like form posed to them and the First People. As a massive, formless storm on the surface, Ice tore

through all of Ish-Gahn as a pure white wolf within these hoary clouds of frost. Though it roamed as it wished with reckless abandon, Ice always paid reverence to the Life Glade protected by the Dragon's Spine Range where Rhyonis, the Spring Tree of Life resided, and where Ice dared not tread.

To the south, just where the range breaks off into jagged icy cliff faces, Ice favored a frigid, misty valley as its true home. Even today, this region is still referred to as the Myst Valley due to the lingering fog and snow crystal heavy ravine found here. These mystifying phenomena were caused by the power Ice suffused into the land, water, air, and the ancient people it has defended for millennia, even after its demise.

Exactly like all of the other First People to emerge from the Life Glade, these humanoids were void of Sentience and wandered the realm without cause or direction. These folk, exceptionally rare as they are in the realm today, are not counted among the First People. Gifted with an ability to alter the moisture in their bodies, the soil, and the atmosphere that hummed within their valley home, they, as it would turn out, were not created by the Spring Tree of Life, but Ice itself.

Without initial intention, Ice's Essence was blanketing this inhospitable and barren portion of Ish-Gahn with a swelling tundra storm. Every snowflake that was left in its path contained enough Life Essence to create life forms, just as Rhyonis did. But as very little could withstand the intense harshness of Ice's aura, there was much less ceremony with its creations than those of the massive oak. As these frozen fragments fell, the people of the valley- the Mistavians- would grow from the snowflakes. In their Sentienceless way, they would wander and catch more snow in their hair and on their skin,

absorbing the power within as the only creatures capable of enduring these extreme conditions.

Ice hadn't paid mind to any land it crossed; it simply did as it pleased. It would deem all outside the Life Glade to be its domain, but where Fire was enamored with the halflings, Ice was almost combative with the Mistavians. As they traipsed through its Essence, it grew insulted that they persisted in the face of frigid adversity and was wholly unaware that it created them. The hoarfrost that rolled off its icicle furred form pushed into and against the Mistavians, but they were equally unbothered by the cold as the obfuscated visibility. Determined as they seemed to call the valley they discovered home- before they could even comprehend the meaning of the word- Ice desired nothing more than to prove what a force it was and lay claim to that which it previously had little to no mind to care for.

Still without Sentience, the Mistavians stoically endured the relentless battering storms that Ice released. The pieces of its Essence that would collide and bombard them with zealous fervor would be but absorbed as they would move their limbs, strumming the mists like a masterful harpist. This back-and-forth game- almost like rehearsed theater- would see Ice forget the rest of the realm it had once explored whimsically, concentrating its full ire on the Myst Valley. It took the resilience of these people as a great affront to its power, but it secretly enjoyed the companionship and began to delight in just watching the Mistavians and their mastery over the Myst, leaving the rest of Ish-Gahn to thaw and prosper.

One day, Ice's intrigue took a turn against its norm. With a silencing yawn, Ice recalled its storms, curious as to what the Mistavians would do without the howling gale of sleet and snow.

Unfortunately, the moment it did, Angehlah's Gift of Sentience rang out across the realm, echoing the horrific events that would befall Qarte and the halflings. Simultaneously to the breaking of the blizzard and sudden Sentience, Balasar touched the sunless skin of the Mistavians. Their eyes burned with the immediate exposure to a blazing light and their minds bloomed with consuming Seeds of Madness. In a flash, sheer bedlam burst through the permafrost tundra beneath their feet.

Unaware of the devastation ripping their minds apart, Ice dashed to look upon the Mistavians. It was thrilled, riveted even, to learn what they were capable of without its interference. In its lupine form, Ice darted towards them, leaving frozen patches of slick ice with each bounding leap. Little did it know just how capable the Mistavians had become at utilizing its Essence and it would soon come to face its own fury, tenfold.

Deep within the Myst Valley, Ice sublimated from its physical form into that of a cloud of fog; shedding its fur to ascend and cast itself throughout the entire Valley. It surveyed the land it had shrouded from Balasar since it first emerged from the Life Glade, filling the air with the cooling scent of petrichor and the stinging sharpness of chill. For the first time in all of Rhyonis' history, this land would see the sun, simply from a spark of curiosity to observe as Ice removed itself from the sky above to traipse along the dewy ground below. But there is always that old saying about the cat and its curiosity. So too would be the fate of Ice.

The Mistavians, struggling against the blooming Seeds of Madness, weaved their hands through the air wildly. They grasped for the Myst that had abandoned them, pleading with the nothingness

around them to shroud their minds from the pain within and the searing shock of light. Their fingers would burst from the now moistureless air rebuffing their attempts to manipulate it, and in fear and confusion, they screamed against the chaos. Ice would look upon their agony and howl along with their wails, suddenly flash freezing the Valley in a tumultuous gale of guilt as it believed itself to be responsible for their suffering.

Caught within the blizzard itself, Ice would be bound to the ground in its misty form as the Mistavians danced wildly, weaving icy winds like orchestral conductors with their fluid fingers. They had harnessed the ability to thread the mists laced within Ice's Life Essence without Sentience, but with the rattling resonance of overwhelming consciousness bleeding to Madness, this power was amplified and they wielded it with the utmost efficacy.

Like chunks of colossal hail, Ice's form went through immediate deposition, careening into the ground, even crushing some of the beings that willed this upon it as they clawed for salvation from the light. Returning to a physical form in pieces, Ice wailed as it tried to shift and collect itself from the scattered remains melting into rivers of pink with snow and viscera as it was torn asunder.

Fighting against all odds for its very life, Ice roared and reared, gathering its Essence into a truly legendary storm. This would be the first casting of the spell *Silynvos*- Freezing Silence in Rhyonian Common- that Angehlah, ironically enough, would use centuries later to truly end the War of Draconic Divergence that She initiated with the Gift of Sentience. Though not as powerful as the event of history, this casting would push back even the deepest Seed to an eternal hibernation.

Ice, now eviscerated into fractals of its former self, wept as it limped its broken form through the Valley to find all of itself that it could. The crystal-like encasings that surrounded the Mistavians-locked in various forms of twisted terror- were beautifully haunting and Ice knew itself to be responsible for this. As Ice caught its reflection, cast over the creatures within, it looked up and howled at the Stationary Moon of Rhyonis that, too, was frozen in place; Truciluna.

The whole of the Myst Valley had become still, Ice and its echo the only things within. It sat for some time, staring at a pairing, two women holding each other close as they were washed in sleet and snow. They were as beautiful as any humanoids Ice had seen. They were, as it realized, the first and only it ever had.

Ice contemplated a long while, watching these two frozen by its spell as Dawn bled to Dusk then to Dawn again. It studied their features; lithe, angular, silvery pockless skin, embraced, and tragic. For as many eyes of storms it had inhabited, for all that it saw in the wide world of Rhyonis, Ice *looked* for seemingly the first time. It examined every minute detail as Balasar would rise in the distance, shedding an intense, cleansing light over Ice, the frozen Mistavians, and all else that stood within the Myst Valley.

In its broken form, Ice felt the heat of Balasar wash over it, unfiltered through a cloudless sky, refracted through crystalline prisms, broken, like itself, into countless fragments. For the span of a full day, ten hours of uninterrupted light, Ice melted for these beings it froze. When all that was left of the frigid form that was Ice's remains, and the thawing bodies of the Mistavians, these two women took a shared, gasping breath. Their first conscious thoughts with Sentience

free of torment, they took in the final moments of the life of the creature that was responsible for all they were, in body and ability.

Together, they were the first of their people to regain their senses, free of their icy cocoons and fungal, corroding Seeds of Madness. They held each other and laughed, crying within the relief of the freedom they felt at once accompanied by a deep questioning sorrow. Their hands would unwind and draw the final pieces of Ice from their still encased companions, and that which swam within the puddles at their feet.

In an elegant, commingling, stitching motion of their outstretched hands, they wove their lengthy fingers entwined with one another. Free at last, the Mistaviant women twisted and guided Ice's Life Essence outward over the valley. The entirety of their people, a whole valley of once frozen fey-like folk, pet their hands through the mist- Ice's being- and dispersed it once again as the icy mist for which their home gets its name.

To this day, in the 7549 years of Rhyonis' long history, these Mistaviants live, undisturbed beyond this horrific end to Ice. The Myst that fills the Valley is the defense and weapon of these people and their masterful Threaders. They've lived at peace, untouched by the chaos of the Wars of Draconic Divergence and Claiming, the Quelling of the Fire Worn Spires, and even, until most recently, the invasion of the Vampires. All because of Ice and its ultimate sacrifice.

To honor Ice, so that it may live as part of the realm forever, St. Nihaan, would find a new life for this spirit as He had with Fire. For Ice would do what the Creation God of Light and Love failed to do Himself yet sought to do with everything He encompassed; provide a safe home for those it helped to create and love. Dipping His hands into

the Myst Valley, St. Nihaan withdrew a collection of diamond dust snowflakes from the obscuring mist to sprinkle it upon the moon Truciluna. This moon, too, found itself frozen in place, a deep desire to sit and ponder and observe.

Much to the chagrin of the Creation God, though, this would not be the final tragedy to befall Ice and its lunar home. Millennia later, with the passage of wars and eras, Malirica would seek to halt Balasar over Theurgius in Their move against The Mistress. In their conflict, Truciluna and Ice within would find itself a casualty, broken and scarred once again. Now, it serves as a haunting reminder of what those with power are capable of, looming as a bleeding halo over a land cursed even more so than Fire and Ice; The Dark Continent, Theurgius.