

Red Night

Moonlight, clear and bright, wallowed in her eternal misery, for her back was always to the light; never could she indulge in his gracious showers. It was only as the night grew decrepit with age did she finally smile. It was only when the white invaded the corners of her blackened eyes that she felt truly alive. But this ephemeral alacrity melted as quickly as it had frozen. Her eyes were forced to shut; sleep is what she needed for the next night and a dreamless slumber is what she was given.

She was the mother of the night, cradling her child with what light she could muster. And although her child and grandchildren were endlessly grateful for this meager beacon she provided, she oftentimes hid her face from them in shame. Her grandchildren, the children of the night, had grown accustomed to the darkness, developing senses and traits that allowed them to live on. But in doing so, they forgot the translucent beauty of the sunlight. They lost the many diverse and illustrious colors of the world in order to simply *survive*. And while they retreated to their holes and caves to hide away from the elusive sunlight, their grandmother was there welcoming him on for her eyes had never adjusted like theirs had. Guilt, obviously, ran rampant within her, tearing at her every waking minute. She could not give her child or grandchildren the same emblazoned path that the sunlight's were given at birth. Instead, her kin was forced to *only* survive and never could they actually live.

Grey pelts shimmered together as they shot through the moaning pines. Not a sound was permitted, apart from the occasional snapping of a twig, as they raced with the autumn wind blowing at their backs. Eyes of crimson and azure, violet and orange danced like the wicks of a candle bobbing excitedly in the night. Suddenly, dozens of paws halted along with their leader's. They awaited his howl

before joining alongside, creating an eerie cry to be carried with the hollow wind. They scampered back to their previous speed at first sight of the possibility of being left behind. And so, they would run as one, their grey pelts melting together.

But there was one abnormality in the great expanse of grey that was dodging trees and leaping streams. There was one blotch of white within the throng of wolves, a female named Phoenix. Her pelt was like a glimmering pearl that attracted every light to her to waltz through each bristle of her fur. Her eyes, however, were much more intriguing. The irises were a pure silver with blue lining the inner edges and cutting into her pupils like a knife tipped with cobalt. When it became especially dark as the moon above her hid behind trees or for an entire day, the azure in her eyes would completely consume the black pupils leaving only a deep ocean.

High above Phoenix in the never ending stretch of sky, her grandmother sobbed her anguish away. Guilty of being inadequate and incompetent, she turned her shoulder to her child and grandchildren. The looks on their faces, the height of the successes, and the happiness filling their bones was too much for her when their cousins had accomplished so much more.

The moonlight looked to the sunlight pleadingly with droplets of water forming at the rims of her exhausted eyes. She opened her arms wide, blinded by the sunlight's sheer intensity, and cried out, "I cannot give my child what you have given yours! I cannot be there for my grandchildren like you can! My love is simply not enough!" Her frantic howls turned into sobs as she crumpled to the ground in shame.

The sunlight, however, seemed to understand. He held out his hospitable hand and helped the miserable moonlight to her feet. His smile was genuine and neither greed nor guile filled his intentions.

“Your grandchildren love you and are happy. You don’t need me. Yes, there are things my grandchildren have easier but the reverse is true as well. You are no *failure*.”

But the moonlight had made up her mind. Delirious coughs and wheezes overtook her trembling body. Her feet buckled from under her as the consciousness left her grief-stricken eyes. She convulsed in a pathetic hump at the sunlight’s feet, abandoning her duties, and thus leaving them upon the sunlight’s shoulders. If he did not take them, her child and grandchildren would surely die, which was something he refused to allow.

Down below, Phoenix’s cries and yaps of delight reflected throughout the shimmering trees and streams. It should be stated that it was what her eyes *did*, that was extraordinary. Her brothers and sisters around her did not see the true beauty of the world. She had been gifted with the eyes to tell apart the many shades of green, the way the frozen rivers twinkled, and the startling beauty of the rising sun. A wide assortment of colors twirled before her in its phantom brilliance with wisps of gray smoke trailing behind. She hollered and howled with delight for seemingly no reason at times. But to her, the world was jumping out with a box of its beautiful and lively creations. She basked in all its glory, worshiped its brilliance, and slept in its illustrious gardens. She could see the world how it was meant to be seen.

But this beauty that only she could see came at a price. She could only walk at night, never in the day. She was allowed to gawk at the red, orange, and yellow of the rising sun, but soon those colors shined brighter and brighter until white was all that she could see. She had learned this at a young age, luckily, when she stayed out for an hour too long. Blinded, she wandered aimlessly through the forest, running into trees and stepping in holes, until one of her brothers found her. She dared the day twice

more, a short distance from safety of course, and regrettably received the same result. Always did she wonder what lied beyond the sunrise but never did she realize that she was already experiencing it.

And so, she darted along, alone, bounded for an unknown destination that was sure to harbor an unknown beauty. Her irises had disappeared into the blue waves that devoured them as the moon was nowhere in sight. All that could be seen above was the occasional twinkle of a forlorn star or planet.

She almost raced off the side of a cliff twenty feet above a large lake, skidding to a sudden halt inches away from a perilous drop. Her feet sent tufts of dirt over as she marveled at the scene before her. The lake was mostly circular with the cliff bordering half of its perimeter. The water was crystal clear and peaked at two feet deep in certain areas. A clearing of bright green grass lay next to the lake with a strange outcropping Phoenix had never seen before. There were long skinny trees lying on their sides stacked up to make a square with their branches, leaves, and bark expertly carved away to reveal the smooth wood underneath. On one of the sides of the square was a stack of stone, also ingeniously smoothed and carved into, with grey smoke drifting into the sky. Most peculiar of all, though, were the strange creatures splashing away in the glimmering water. They were tall and lanky with pinkish skin without hair on their bodies apart from on the tops of their heads. She heard their indiscernible laughs, whistles, and hollers of an unknown tongue from where she stood.

Phoenix cocked her head to one side as she dared a cautious step forward, the tips of her forepaws over the edge. The creatures before her confused and intrigued her, scared and welcomed her onward. They seemed benevolent and benign at this distance, but a suspicious hand tugged at her to *remain* that distance from them.

That safe margin she kept between herself and these odd creatures, however, would not matter. She had failed to recognize an anomaly in the sky. It was not time for the moon to hide away for an entire night as on the previous day, the moon was half-full. Why had the moon forsaken its normal cycle?

A point in the sky suddenly burst into a yellow flame, consuming the black around it and replacing it with a blue day. The hands of the sun stretched out in all directions, burning away the remnants of the night until they reached the horizon. And then they invaded the land owned previously by the night. The tops of trees glimmered in green brilliance, tiny streams began to thaw, and the earth groaned awake from its slumber.

Unfortunately, the light reached Phoenix. White and yellow rays blared into her blue eyes until all that she could see was an eternal white laid out before her. She yelped in pain, her eyes seemingly burning inside of her skull, as she jumped up in total panic. Her heart roused to a worrisome beat as confusion ran rampant through her mind. Because of this, she forgot how her body was positioned prior to the blinding light's entrance. When she jumped back in panic, she put her weight into the tips of her forepaws. There was no earth for her to kick off from as she had walked to the edge to peer down below. Her chest struck the ground as her legs flew forward from under her, dangling over the edge. Confused and panicked, she tried to regain her footing in her blinded state but in doing so shifted her weight forward.

There was a time of weightlessness she experienced before the tug of gravity grabbed hold of her which was accompanied by a loud splash mere moments later. She twisted and thrashed in the water before realizing that her feet could easily touch the bottom. Its icy touch pricked at her paws and under her belly, causing a pathetic whimper to escape from her. Luckily, she hadn't injured herself in anyway during the fall.

A loud cry reminded her of reality. A loud cry in a tongue she did not understand or recognize reminded her of what was *previously* in the lake that she was now in. She could hear multiple creatures splashing their ways towards her.

She whipped her head blindly about, snarling and spitting in the direction she *thought* was toward them. Their advance seemed to be halted momentarily as all was silent, but then she heard them talking to one another once again. Unknowing of what to do, she backed into the corner, still baring her teeth at the creatures in front of her.

They all quieted again, but then one of them spoke out, its voice trying its best to be soothing and smooth. Phoenix could hear it taking a reluctant step forward and felt the ripples it made in the water as they lightly patted her chest. Completely untrusting and still blinded, she kept up her hostile stance.

The creature approaching her was obviously not an intelligent one as it continued to advance. It did not read Phoenix's panic even though her bared teeth and tensed posture should've rang a few bells that were quite obviously broken or missing altogether. Phoenix could hear it getting closer and closer, the louder and louder its coercing voice became. Her nose twitched as she became aware that it had its hand outstretched and was slowly inching toward her.

When she could feel the hand only a couple of inches from her snout, she lashed out, biting down into the creature's hairless arm. Warmth trickled from her teeth down her neck as desperate cries filled the air. The other creatures around her jumped in shock and ran toward Phoenix, leaving a disturbed wave behind them in their stead. They grabbed at her fur, ripping it out even, and began to tackle her into the water. All the while, she was too afraid to do anything but keep her mouth firmly clamped down into the creature's pink flesh. Jabs and punches, kicks and thrusts rained down upon the poor, frightened wolf until her body succumbed to the pain and her jaw loosened.

Regardless, however, the onslaught continued. The strange creatures that Phoenix had never seen before continued to beat and pummel her until she wasn't sure if she conscious any longer. When they seemed finished with their assault, one of them dragged her by the scruff of her neck to shore,

almost drowning her in the process. They tied something around her snout and her legs, leaving her completely helpless. All that she could do was whimper and cry to herself in the blinded world she was in. She couldn't even yelp and shout for her family to come find her as her mouth was held tightly closed by some foreign object she had never felt before.

The moonlight yawned and stretched her drowsy awakening away. She looked around herself in confusion, unknowing of what she had just done. When her stress and strain had finally bubbled over her breaking point, she completely blacked out. She remembered not the grave atrocity she had committed.

She looked at the sunlight's back and remarked that it was still night. Why was he here? She looked down to the Earth below her and noticed that it was lit up with the sun's spectacular rays and not the moon's warm glow. Wasn't it supposed to be dark? And then she looked closer and saw a pathetic bundle of white, bound and tied. It was Phoenix. She was blind when the sun came out, and she had lost her way from the rest of her family.

The moonlight leapt forward and tugged at the sunlight's sleeve. Fresh tears poured down her face as a greater feeling of regret coursed through her veins than ever before. "Stop it! Stop it!" she cried. "I regret what I've done! I regret everything! Phoenix needs me! My family needs me!"

The sunlight turned to her and held out his hand. She accepted it graciously as he helped her to her feet. A knowing shined in his eyes that he would never have to help her up again.

When she was standing, she spread her arms out wide and allowed the night to return.

Phoenix's side groaned and her throat yearned to cough up red muck, but she could not open her mouth. She whimpered and cried and tried to roll her broken body around but she had not the strength to do so. Scarlet matted her soaked fur, dyeing it a deep red from its previous illustrious white. The bones underneath were either cracked or broken at varying degrees to which Phoenix could not tell. Red swirled in her vision. Finally, she could see a color other than white, but she wasn't sure if this was what she preferred.

The creatures were still nearby, she could tell, as their voices lingered in the air. They seemed too distracted with something else, leaving Phoenix alone. Some of their voices sounded high-strung and afraid while others were more composed. The sudden change from night to day must've shocked them as much as it had Phoenix. This confusion, however, was obviously not enough to spare Phoenix any pity at all. They left her completely alone, to whimper and possibly die without a second thought just because she too was afraid and acted on impulse.

"Fear not, my child," a warm voice whispered into her ear. "I have wronged you so. I have abandoned you and this is what happened. I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am and how guilty I feel. All that I can tell you now, though, is that it will never happen again. I will never leave your side for as long as you live."

A hand groped around Phoenix's paw and squeezed with a welcoming fervor. The hand ran down her back, patting her matted and bloodied fur back down. As it went, the red clung to the tips of the fingers and collected in the palm. When it reached Phoenix's tail, her fur was sparkling with purity once again. The hand returned to her face and wiped away the last remaining traces of red, healing Phoenix's wounds and easing her suffering in the process. But the blood did not disappear, so it clung to the hand that washed it away from Phoenix's fur.

“Open your eyes, my darling.” She did not realize that she had her eyes shut this entire time. When she opened them, the blinding white stretched out before her had vanished and was replaced by the crystal-like glimmering of a half-moon. Even though half of it was shrouded in darkness, it beamed brighter than ever before. Her eyes opened, blue lining her black pupils, and she all but cried in pure joy.

The hand moved downwards back toward her bound paws, and she felt the binding be cut away. The hand moved next to her mouth, and she felt her jaw go agape from its release. The last rope tying her back legs was cut and finally she was free. She stood, wearily at first, unsure of whether or not her body could handle it, but her bones had solidified and her bruises had been washed away.

“Run,” the voice whispered into her ears once more. “Run, my child, and be free. Run and never return. Run and go back to your family. Run and go back to where you belong.”

And so she did just that. With her previous strength returned to her, she bolted from her captors, leaving them none the wiser. She flew from the clearing and into the familiar expanse of trees she called home. She raced through the undergrowth, making not a sound with her decisive movements. She leapt over streams, not so much as a doubt in her mind. And when she found herself back to the great stretch of grey pelts, she was welcomed back with tearful eyes and exclaiming brothers and sisters. She was safe. She was home.

Moonlight, clear and bright, smiled with a twinkle of relief, for her child was safe in the loving arms of family; never would she embark on a more perilous journey again. It was only when her fur turned grey with age would a similar fear grip her. It was only when death was right around the corner would Phoenix tremble and shake like she had that night. But the moonlight, her grandmother, would

be waiting for her with open arms. She would light the way for Phoenix with an illuminated path to the eternal oblivion of blissfulness that lie beyond.

Those arms, however, those hands, to be more precise, would be painted with red. They would be painted with red for an eternity as neither the moonlight nor the world would allow her to forget what she had done. It was a mark she would carry as a reminder. It was a reminder of the red crime she had committed that could never be undone. Her hands would always be stained with the blood of her grandchild.

Her hands were forever tainted with the blood of Phoenix, regardless of what amenities she made thereafter. No water could wash it away. No rag could scrub it off.