

Silver light shone through the canopy of trees, giving the forest a serene and mystical appearance. It was a full moon, and the night was almost completely silent, broken only by the soft padding of meandering footsteps on the mossy forest floor. Between the trees, between the enchanting light and the twisting shadows, life spun a slow dance.

Elves, nymphs, dryads - over the centuries, many different peoples would apply many different names to the creatures that, tonight, wove between branches, over roots, and around the wild animals that peacefully watched the performance. They did not speak while they danced. In point of fact, the dance *was* their speech, their language. They possessed no mouth, no vocal cords, no method by which to communicate spoken language. Instead, their distinct choreography conveyed their words, thoughts, and emotions.

And, oh, such emotion there was! They were an intelligent people, rational, but well in tune with the depth and complexity of their emotions. Not only their own, to be sure, but the emotions of their fellows as well. Humanity would later describe them as "slaves to their passions" and "empathic to a fault" but the nymphs did not see themselves this way. Their acknowledgement and understanding of emotion was key to their understanding of each other, of the world around them, and of their place in the grand scheme of reality.

They were making their way, slowly, toward a clearing in the forest, engaging in excited conversation as they moved. The night of the full moon was integral to their belief system. As they saw it, the moon represented the phases of their own lives, albeit on a much quicker scale. A full moon represented the hope of renewal, the blessings of light and life, the purity of the soul. The absence of light that came with a new moon, though opposed to the light of a full moon, was not seen as a negative.

The full and new moons were seen as an inseparable pair, each one demonstrating its own beauty as well as highlighting the beauty of the other. In their language, they were referred to as the Purity of Silver and Clarity of Black. Each phase in between was important in its own way, as their society at large cycled continuously from the bustling energy of the Purity to the calm reflectiveness of the Clarity and back again.

A lone elf waited in the clearing for her fellows to arrive, her face turned upward to bask fully in the light, eyes closed. She was notably different from her compatriots. She was generally taller the rest, though there were of course outliers that overtook her. Her hands and feet were missing two fingers and toes each - only five per limb as opposed to the usual seven. Her eyes were more distinctly humanoid than their squarish eyes with ringed irises. And, most notably, she had a mouth and was capable of spoken word.

She was the only one that had a name, Calomis, given to her by her mother before she was sent to this world to help shape the fate of the mortals that would inhabit it. She had been here long before her people had taken shape. She had planted this forest, molded the distribution of shrub and seed, chosen the animal species that would populate it.

She was a goddess.

Her people did not use such haughty terms. The only celestial being in their religious order was the moon herself - consistently characterized as female, for reasons that had long ago faded to history. Though they did not call Calomis their goddess or worship her as they did the moon, the elders recognized and respected her for her power and thoughtfulness. She was as close to holy as one could be in nymph society, and she had no qualms with that.

The dancers arrived in the clearing, each one pausing to bow to Calomis as they broke from the treeline. She felt their presence and raised her arms in an upside down arc, embracing the moon. The rest followed suit once they had found acceptable places with enough clear space around to move as their dance hastened and their arms swung and legs kicked with more and more energy.

The diverse conversations fell away and faded into a single, perfectly synchronized dance as they stared upward at the object of their reverence. It was not unlike a prayer. They prayed for continued peace, stability, and strength. They prayed for passion and luck. They prayed for their seeds to take root and grow into fine young saplings throughout the land. They danced their prayer of purity, and willed the blessings of the full moon on their people.

Calomis led the dance, as she had for generations, knowing full well that it was she who would be able to fulfill their wishes, not the distant and implacable moon. She held no grudge for her people, and certainly no ill will towards the moon. This was simply how her people had learned to see their world and to interact with it, and that was satisfactory.

The dance continued through the night, repeating the same handful of phrases every few minutes. As the moon descended from its zenith, inching toward the horizon, the nymphs' faces followed its journey, until it had vanished below the tree line.

They completed the current iteration of their prayer, then crouched down and leaned forward, foreheads resting against the grass. They remained still in this position until the first rays of sunlight broke over the tops of the trees behind them.

They rose to their feet and bid their good blessings to each other before all departing to their various homes among the forest. Calomis gave her blessing to each of them as they left, and she was the last to leave.

She inhaled deeply, feeling as though she could taste the pure silver light the moon had shone down on them during the night. Then she walked out of the clearing, but not toward her home. She walked northeast of where they'd gathered, passing a few groups of her people as they lay down their heads for a rest.

A few miles later, she emerged from the treeline into a manufactured clearing. Once, months earlier, there had been an entire family of trees here, but no more. She frowned as she thought back on the difficult conversation she'd had with the nymphs that had lived here. The humans needed - or *believed* they needed - this space for a new development of magical research. Calomis, out of necessity, was the liaison between her people and those that communicated with spoken word.

The humans were adamant that this particular spot was integral to their research, something about being a key intersection between powerful mystical (and invisible, of course) forces. Calomis had learned long ago that when humans thought they needed something, they would not be swayed. An agreement was reached that the nymphs would cede an area of the forest for this magical research station, on the condition that the humans would never further encroach on their land.

Unfortunately, she had yet to be given reason to believe that a human's word was not inviolable.

She periodically visited the construction site, usually the morning after a full or new moon, to maintain good relations, ask about their progress, and offer assistance if needed. It had been slow going, but they were getting close. Although the humans were knowledgeable

about magic, they did not have enough knowledge or skill to use that magic to build. They used it primarily to keep campfires going through the night, or to send messages back and forth between the construction area and their village to the southeast.

Calomis was vaguely aware of the village, but it was far enough away that she'd yet to bother visiting. She made a mental note to find time to do that in the near future. The more effort she put into friendly communications with these neighbors, the longer they could maintain peace.

As she strode into the construction site, she was greeted by a few of the workers who'd known her from previous visits. She smiled and waved in return, but made her way to the foreman's tent. She'd learned that, despite the complete biological incompatibility, many of the humans she interacted with found the feminine curves of her body attractive, and that usually swayed conversations with them - particularly with the men - in her favor. The foreman, however, spoke to her as though he'd never even been confronted with the concept of sex, and in many respects, she preferred that.

"Good morning, Kabet" she greeted as she ducked into the tent. The foreman glanced up from scribbling a draft of a schedule on a piece of parchment next to his blueprints.

"Morn, Calomis," he replied, speaking around a pipe carved from bone that he clenched between his teeth. He took a couple puffs from the pipe and let the smoke slowly escape through the corners of his mouth.

He was short, compared to most of his workers, and a bit on the round side, but Calomis had seen him use that weight to full advantage in physical labor. He didn't seem to have any natural inclination in the magical arts, and no interest in learning them. Strength was his strength, though he was also skilled at envisioning the goals and steps involved in a construction project, like a puzzle, so that he could plan the movement of each piece as efficiently as possible.

"Full moon last night," Calomis said. Kabet scratched behind his ear with the piece of coal he was using to write.

"Mm," he grunted. "I suppose that means you've got plenty of energy to burn today?"

Calomis appreciated that he made a point to remember the meaning and significance of her people's moon cycles.

"I feel as though I could outrun the sun," she replied with a friendly smile. Kabet flipped through some of the pages of his blueprints.

"I can find some work for you today, if that's what you'd like. Most of the boys are still finishing up breakfast, so I haven't delegated out duties yet. You're welcome to join them, if you're hungry." Calomis raised an eyebrow when he glanced up at her. "Aye, I know, but you being around sort of, I don't know, *motivates* them. They work a bit harder when you're here and they like when you socialize with them."

Calomis rolled her eyes.

"Very well, Kabet," she said. "If it helps the work get done." She ducked back out of the tent and wandered in the direction of one of the campfires.

Work certainly did get done that day. With Calomis' help, physical and magical, they completed what would have been three days' worth of work, give or take. They finished for the day just after sundown, finalizing what they could by the light of campfires, torches, or magical

light. The workers gathered at the tent they'd designated as the mess hall. Calomis and Kabet returned to the foreman's tent. Kabet was in high spirits.

"Calomis, you are truly a miracle worker," he said, hanging his toolbelt on a rack near the entrance of the tent. "I think, after today, we may be able to wrap up the construction side of this before the next new moon." Calomis smiled and gave a shallow bow.

"I am glad to be of assistance," she replied. "What happens after construction is completed?"

Kabet rubbed the stubble that had started to grow on his chin and sat heavily in the wooden chair behind his drawing table.

"I suppose the mages and their ilk will move their research tools into it," he said. "Books, decanters, alchemical apparatuses, you know the kinds of things they like."

"And you and your 'boys' will return home?"

"Aye. If the mages have any heavy lifting they need us for, they can contract us, but otherwise, we won't be bothering you any further." He had a sad smile on his face, as if to say he'd miss her company without so many words. Calomis nodded and mirrored his expression.

"I will return after the new moon, in case my help is needed one last time," she said. "If I do not see you at that time, be well, my friend."

They shook hands and Calomis exited the tent. She did deign to stay for a bit longer, socializing with the workers during dinner, but returned to the forest after an hour or so. She was a bit sad that the construction project was nearly finished, but that meant the research could begin, and that also intrigued her. She would not mind joining the mages for research. Perhaps she could learn a thing or two that would aid her people as well.

Ten more nights passed and then it was the night of the new moon. Calomis led her people in a different dance of prayer that lasted from sundown to sunrise. This dance was slower, calmer, almost a type of meditation, as they prayed for the safe passage of their ancestors' spirits and contemplated the frailty of mortality. Somber, yes, but not solemn. For their people, death was part of the cycle of life. It was treated more like the changing of the seasons than the end of anything.

True to her word, in the morning, Calomis walked the few miles to the construction site. She walked slower this time, in part because she expected the humans she'd known to have gone back home, and in part because the moon phases had cycled, and the Clarity was a time for calm, peacefulness, and conservation of energy.

She arrived in the clearing and was met by the sight of bustling scholars. It irked her, somewhat, seeing the hustle and bustle as the humans brought their furniture and tools into the new research station. She knew the humans did not adhere to the same traditions her people did, but the sudden liveliness of the work site evoked a sort of knee-jerk reaction of annoyance. She closed her eyes and focused on the feeling of the wet morning grass beneath her feet.

When she opened them again, she noticed a few of the scholars had noticed her and were staring at her. She smiled at them and started walking toward them. They backed away from her, one of them dropping the box he was carrying, and she paused. She looked over her shoulder in confusion, but nothing had followed her out of the forest. She looked back at the men, and realized a few more had taken notice, and all of them regarded her with a look of fear.

"Good morning," she called out, hesitation making her voice quieter than she meant. She inhaled slowly and tried again. "Good morning." She smiled again, but did not move towards

them. "My name is Calomis. I represent the nymphs - or maybe you know them as dryads - of this forest. I helped Kabet build this research station, and I was hoping I could trade knowledge with you scholars."

The mages glanced at each other and seemed to relax. The one cautiously walked back to the box he'd dropped and started stacking the contents back inside. Another gave her a nervous smile and waved his hand slightly.

"Calomis," he said, "I am At'kyier. I will be one of the directors of research here. Did you say you represent the dryads? I was under the impression they had no spoken language, and looked...well, not like you."

"Both are true," she replied with a slight chuckle. "I am not, myself, a dryad, but I serve as liaison, since I am the only one capable of human speech."

"Allow me to fetch the magistrate of this archive so you can discuss some things with him," At'kyier said. Calomis bowed and waited as the young mage swiftly walked away. The others nodded at her and returned to their business, casting wary glances when they thought she wasn't looking. At'kyier returned a few minutes later with an older man in decorative robes. The cleanliness and shape of the robes indicated he'd not lifted a finger in helping to move any belongings into the building.

"This is she?" the old man asked as they approached. At'kyier nodded.

The old man slowly ran his eyes up and down Calomis' body, and smiled at her. He bowed slightly and she returned the gesture. As they straightened, she noticed his eyes flicked down to her body before returning to her eyes.

"Greetings, Calomis," he said. "I have been told you represent the dryads. I hope I am not remiss in saying so, but your, eh, *form* is much different than the dryads I have seen in artwork."

"It is fair to say so," Calomis replied. "I am not a dryad myself, I merely speak for them, since they have no voice."

"Ah, yes, that makes sense," the old man replied. He paused for a moment. "And, if you do not mind my asking, what is it that they would say?"

"They greet you and your people with open arms, in peace. We had a peaceful agreement and diplomatic relations with the contractors who built this place, and are willing to share our knowledge, both magical and mundane, if you will share yours."

The old man scoffed.

"Oh, I apologize young one," the old man said. His voice had a tone of condescension - had it been there all along and she had not noticed it until now? "I simply cannot believe there is any benefit for us to share knowledge with such a... primal society as the dryads."

Calomis was taken aback. She frowned.

"You say 'primal' but I take your meaning to be different. Say the word you mean. Human language uses too many words with alternate interpretations."

The old man hesitated, and At'kyier slowly backed away from the pair, pretending to return to his duties.

"You are right," the old man said. "We twist our words to use other meanings, and it sometimes loses all meaning to other people. 'Primitive' is the word I mean, Calomis. The dryads are a primitive society, beneath us. They have no knowledge to offer that we do not already know or cannot find out ourselves. There is no benefit for my people to work with yours."

Calomis was silent for several seconds. Finally, she gave a shallow bow and turned to walk away. She would not let her anger get the better of her, not on the first day of the Clarity. She returned home to think on the exchange with the magistrate, realizing that he had not even had the courtesy to give his name.

Ten more nights passed. The night of the full moon arrived, and Calomis and her nymphs returned to their clearing to dance their prayer of purity.

A little after midnight, she happened to glance out into the treeline just in time to see the flicker of firelight. She continued her dance, but frowned and scanned the treeline with her eyes. Every time she thought she saw another flicker, it was gone by the time she focused on it.

She continued watching for the lights for a few minutes before finally ceasing the choreography. The nymphs all stopped with her, confused and concerned. She turned in a slow circle, watching for the tell-tale flames in the trees, and finally caught sight of one. She pointed at it, and every nymph turned to face the same direction.

The fire was quickly extinguished - or covered, she wasn't sure from this distance - but it was clear they were being watched. She strode toward where the fire had been, stopping once she was in front of the crowd of nymphs.

"Who disturbs our sacred ritual?" she called out. She heard shuffling and the cracking of twigs as bodies moved in the darkness, but there was no response. She felt the anger rise in her as she remembered her previous exchange with the magistrate. "Are you the humans from the research station? From the archive? Show yourselves. We are a peaceful people. We wish you no harm."

She saw the flicker of firelight just inside the treeline, and a moment later it came whistling out into the clearing. An arrow, the head wrapped in cloth, soaked in alcohol, and ignited. She whirled around to follow the arrow's course and saw it slam into one of the nymphs, splashing some of the combustible fluid over their body just before the flames caught.

The nymph rolled backward and swatted at the flames as they spread across their wood skin. It was eerily silent, the nymphs not possessing the capability to scream in fear, until a volley of the flaming arrows came whistling into the clearing from all directions.

Not all of them hit their targets, of course, but even in the moisture of the grass, the alcohol allowed the flames to take hold, and the crackling of fire roared to life as the nymphs tried to escape or, failing that, extinguish themselves and their fellows.

Calomis used her magic to try to contain the blaze, but every time she thought she was getting ahead of it, another volley of flaming arrows made the situation worse. One arrow connected with her shoulder, but the cloth around the head was wrapped so thickly it failed to pierce her flesh. Her magic extinguished the flame before it spread across her body, but her shoulder at the point of impact was charred black.

After over an hour of dodging the arrows and fighting the fires, Calomis watched the last of her children collapse to the ground, burning to ash. She fell to her knees and screamed in anguish as tears streamed hot down her face.

From the treeline, finally, the aggressors moved in, tightening a circle around her, arrows lit and nocked. She glanced around at them as they closed in, but their faces were concealed beneath metal plates, with holes drilled out for them to see through.

"Why?" she asked. One of the soldiers held up a hand and the rest stopped moving while he alone approached.

"Are you Calomis?" he asked. She glared at the eyeholes in his face covering but did not respond. "You will come with us, willingly or otherwise." As he finished speaking, he held up a set of manacles, and she could feel an unfamiliar magical aura emanating from them. They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, then the soldier tossed the manacles on the ground in front of her.

She slowly picked up the manacles and affixed them over her wrists, the metal latch clacking into place as the magical aura washed over her. She felt her anger fade into an odd forced calm, and had to fight not to fall asleep.

The soldier cautiously approached and pulled her to her feet. She did not resist. She let them lead her all the way back to the research station in silence. The magistrate was waiting for them as they emerged from the treeline. Calomis was semi-aware of a wooden block near where the magistrate stood, lit by magical light from the mages. The soldier led her to the magistrate and pushed her down to her knees. Her gaze rested on the manacles for a minute and she felt her anger once again, but it was like a single drop of blood in an ocean of calming water, and she was pacified once more.

"Welcome back Calomis," the magistrate said. She raised her eyes to look into his. There was no anger, no hatred in his expression. She couldn't think of how to describe the look in his eyes. Duty, maybe?

"You say 'welcome' but I take your meaning to be different," she slurred out. "Say the words you mean... you fucking coward." There it was again, that drop of anger, manifesting itself into a single insult before fading back into dull serenity.

The soldier slapped the side of her head, hard enough to sting, but not hard enough to knock her prone. The magistrate merely laughed.

"Your people were primitive, Calomis," he answered. "Primitive, but strong. They were a threat. I had heard something from our contractors about some sort of agreement you thought you had - something about us not 'encroaching' on 'your' lands?" Calomis' mind was moving too slowly to formulate a response before he continued. "Well, if you're all dead, you don't have any lands, do you? So the agreement has not been breached. This land is ours, as is the magical energy that flows through it. Our Archive of the Moon here will benefit greatly from the research we do, especially now that we will be unimpeded in searching the area for magical reagents. Who knows, perhaps your body may even be of use to us."

Calomis made a disgusted face.

"I'll never allow you to use my body," she muttered. "Not so long as my breath is warm on my lips."

The magistrate smiled, and there was no kindness in it. He nodded at the soldier and Calomis was yanked to her feet, shoved several steps over, and pushed back down to her knees. The soldier pressed down on her shoulders and she felt the wooden block on her neck. Fear started to well up inside her, but like the anger, it was quickly drowned by placid acceptance.

"You shall not breathe much longer," the magistrate replied.

Calomis saw a pair of heavy boots approaching from the corner of her eye and took a deep breath, trying to concentrate on something, on anything.

"If you kill me now," she finally croaked out, "my spirit, and the spirits of all my murdered children, will return as a great beast and destroy all you hold dear."

The magistrate laughed again. The heavy boots stopped just to her right and shifted their weight.

"Try not to move, child," the magistrate said. "I hear it hurts more if it takes more than one strike."

The executioner's axe swung down and cut into Calomis' neck. The combination of wood and flesh resisted the axe. It was a mercy the first strike managed to kill her, so she did not feel the second, third, or fourth that it took to sever her head from her shoulders.

As soon as her severed head thudded against the ground, a cold gale blew through the camp, extinguishing all sources of light, magical or mundane, and a deafening cracking sound rang out all around. The mages and soldiers covered their ears, and some fell to the ground in pain. The echoes of the sound faded and the magistrate slowly staggered to his feet. He looked upward and froze. The rest of the camp followed his gaze.

The full moon had cracked in the sky, and the two halves were falling slowly, one half descending far to the eastern horizon, the other half to the western horizon. They watched in horror as the two halves vanished below opposite treelines and they were suddenly immersed in complete darkness. For several minutes, nobody moved. Then they heard the faint echoes of the crashing moon pieces colliding with the sea as the sound wave reached them.

The magistrate cast a spell to illuminate the area. Everyone was frozen in place, in shock at what they'd witnessed.

"Our research continues," he whispered. The soldiers got to work relighting the campfires and torches, and the mages returned to their studies. The magistrate stared into the empty sky for a long time that night, searching for the right words to describe this event to future generations.