

Winds always ran swiftest over the rocky moors. Smooth grey slabs and stones rose from the shallow dirt and short grass. Some stone carved into pillars and stairs from a civilization so ancient that none living remembered its name. Thus was the way of things, all would join Ozymandias's great city in due time. Ahead, a titanic, impassible mountain range funneled the wind into strong gusts across the short hills. Behind, a dark forest grew so squat and clustered, it formed a gloomy maze which had claimed countless explorers before, its few paths plagued by brigands and highwaymen. Further beyond the shadowed wood, the great city of Selomance grew tall and strong around the Fallow Church which founded it all.

Lynette pulled her shawl close as another gust blew past. Her black dress did little to guard from the cold. The sky above darkened, sun setting over the silhouette of the city in the distance, full moon rising over the mountains. The large orb shone a dull red like rosewater, lighting the land in pale glow. She shivered in the encroaching dark, envying the thick fur worn by northern folk. They knew well how to endure the elements, even if they were uncouth savages.

Blanketing the land as if shone through stained glass, the moon crested clear above the sharp peaks, appearing almost to be held up by the jagged stones. Back in her home city, a night like this was considered ill omen. Brave men would bar the windows and bolt the doors, hiding from shadows on the streets in fear of spooks and curses. They were fools, blinded and bound by age old superstition. Though if they saw her walking the hills on a night like this, she would likely be burned as a witch.

Orphaned as a child, she was raised in the Fallow Church. Lacking the skills to set out alone, and lacking the piety to take up the cloth, she was near forced to maintain the stables and apothecaries tied to the church. She knew well how to wander the forest and search the moors. Thus, they burdened her with collecting rare herbs for tonics and remedies. To save a few coppers on the market, they sent her along dangerous footpaths and lonely hills to rummage through dirt and collect sparse weeds. She worked harder and risked herself more than any. Yet woe be it the drunken alchemist or the 'saintly' sisters to look upon a lowly shop maid with even basic respect.

She flinched as strong winds howled through the ancient ruins, producing a dull, rusted knife intended for harvesting. These plains could be dangerous at night, wandered by redcats and packs of wolves. Though uncommon, she thought it best to carry a tool with which to defend herself. It would be safer to find a corner and rest for the night, but she lacked the supplies for a long stay and the moonbell flowers she sought bloomed only at night.

The little white blossoms seemed to glow as they reflected the pale light. A potent sedative and fever remedy. A small bushel of the herbs sprouted from around a pillar and statue of a great king, his features so worn he was hardly recognizable as human. Cutting the plants root and stem, she filled her bag with the herbs, almost finished with her search.

Standing, Lynette's dress caught on a snagging stone and tore. She grumbled as she inspected the tear, jumping in fear as she heard a rustle nearby. Her shoes ill-suited for the uneven ground, the motion made her stumble and fall. The rough stones cut her shirt and drew blood. A fallow deer strode past, startled by her sounds. She felt a hint of anger as the pain laced through her arm and the startling animal fled. Without any to chastise her for devil's tongue, she swore and cursed the stones and shoes. Her breath turned hot as rage welled within her. She neither shouted in rage nor struck at the land, simply seething like a pot over fire.

Though the trek made her weary, she enjoyed the time alone. Every moment she spent in that church filled her with a quiet rage. Paid but coppers for her work in the apothecary and treated as a rat by clergy. It seemed her every action angered them, every slight mistake a sin for which her coin was taken for penance. Even if not a sister, they demanded she pray for salvation through every waking moment, suppressing her instincts and humanity, forced to wear these horrid clothes even in the wilds. She would leave, but she grew up in those pews and knew little else.

Someday, she hoped to find a way out, to leave the city and never return. She knew not how or when, but until that day, she plodded through life and buried her emotions.

The sun fully set behind her, the red moon and dark sky dominated the land. She held her shoulders to ward against the cold and moved quickly, with little time before the light faded and her search ending. Climbing a small hill, she saw another cluster of the flowers growing in the shadow of a large stone table. She collected the herbs, but something about the architecture caught her interest.

Curiosity was discouraged back at her home, the sisters believing it temptation and that literacy was meant only holy books of the four gods. For a moment, her years of conditioning kicked in and she turned away. But she quickly remembered her solitude and looked back. A coy smile forming in the corners of her mouth, she sat on the table and surveyed her surroundings.

Knowing little of history or architecture, Lynette could only make vague guesses. The crumbling walls showed a large room surrounding the table, almost as if the tablet were an altar or stage. Remnants of archaic runs covered the sides, faded to become unrecognizable even if any still spoke the language. Grooves on the roof of the table led inward to a wide, shallow bowl in the center of the table. Strangely enough, dark stains coated the trenches, almost as if blood were poured and guided into the bowl for some demonic ritual. Curiously enough, against the eastern wall stood a rusted iron rod, mounted atop was a glass prism inscribed with arcane runes.

Strangely enough, the rising moon shown perfectly through the crystal. Rising red light forming a faint beam. It traveled along an engraved line on the table, soon to pull closer and fall directly into the basin's center. It was fascinating, a window into customs from times long past, their traditions forgotten. Darkness falling around her, she knew she ought to find shelter for the evening, but the old ritual site fascinated her.

Seeing the ray nearing the center of the table, she remembered stories from outsiders she heard as a child. Tales of hidden treasures and dungeons revealed only through esoteric rituals and monuments. She climbed atop the table and moved to the center, peering through the glass, expecting it to point out some temple on the nearby mountains.

For a moment, the light flashed in her eyes. Stepping back, Lynette saw it about to reach the basin's center by her feet. She looked through the glass, but saw nothing against the stone, only the grand, red moon rising before her.

Perhaps fatigue was reaching her mind, but as she looked off into the night sky, she found herself entranced by the glorious rising moon. All else seemed to vanish until she stood in a sea of darkness with only the moon shining above.

A bolt of pain snapped her from her stupor, shocking her legs and knocking her to the ground. Shaking her head to clear the fog, she found her bag spilled, flowers and her food scattered across the dirt. Cursing, she began picking up the herbs from the table. She would have stepped down to collect the others, but noticed the dim ray shining directly on the center of the basin. It was clear this only occurred for a moment on nights of the full, blood moon. Some sacred ritual would presumably be performed at this moment, had its people still lived. The light capturing her attention again, she went limp and lay atop the table. She could almost hear their strange chants, the sound of blood flowing down the gullies into the basin where she lay.

Curious tingling filled Lynette's core where the beam touched her. Yelping in surprise, she jumped away, inspecting her stomach before leaving the tablet. Pulling aside her clothes, she saw the skin of her stomach growing red and flushed. Baffled more than scared, she attempted to rise, flee from the profane place. Crawling for the table's edge, the wind was knocked from her and it felt that someone had kicked her in the gut.

She fell to her side, curling into a ball as the pain spread. Her spine cracked, and a ringing filled her ears. She raised her hands to block them, her hair falling from her scalp at the touch. Panicking, she rolled from the ledge, crawling desperately for safety. Heaving, she vomited a mouthful of blood. Her chest and gut rounding and organs shifting to match.

*It was a mistake coming here.* Retching and groaning, she lamented her curiosity and foolishness. Her teeth fell to the dirt, hips and shoulders snapping as her skin writhed. Crying out plaintively, her own voice sounded strange and alien as her throat thickened. In that moment, she lamented her curiosity and sins. Remembering all her lessons at modesty, piety, and suppression, she now wished she followed rather than scoffed off. Perhaps things would be different if she had, her own flesh and bones twisting agonizingly and turning against her.

Bones breaking and realigning, she attempted to run. Failing, she tried at the very least to kneel, but was limited to an awkward, quadrupedal state. Much of her clothes tore and fell from her shifting form. Hips, shoulders, and torso forced her to a beastly stance, even if her limbs were ill suited.

From memory, she prayed to the four gods, her expanding tongue making speech impossible as it hung from her mouth. Mentally, she recited the sermons and prayers, feeling no greater sense of belief, only doing so for the incredible dread rushing her heart.

Casting her eyes to the sky, she saw no light of aid, felt no reprieve from the churning and agony perforating her every inch. Instead, only the grand moon above greeted her in the darkness. Heavenly peace flooded her, the beautiful moon filling her vision and entrancing her. Her breath steadied, and her pain eased, that wonderous orb distracting from her twisted form and the surrounding cold. A thought formed in her mind, one she fought, but found unwilling to die. Naked in the moonlight, despite her form, she felt a newfound sense of freedom. In this form, she could never return home, but this brought her no distress.

Lynette turned away, realizing the lunar presence to be what forced the monstrous form upon her. The decision subconscious, she wept as the pain returned. Yet more tears fell for relief as brunt of the agony never returned. Things still hurt, but it was nothing compared to the previous suffering.

Her skin writhed, and white flecks shone across her surface. A whimper escaped her throat and her flesh parted, hair growing swiftly into a soft, snowy pelt. Flesh itching her bones seemed to scrape the inside of her flesh. Her fingers drew inward, palms hardened into pads, and nails dug into her flesh as the sharpened into claws. Ankles and knees rose, her legs now built for her stance.

Able to stand decently, she looked back at her pitiable form. Furred and monstrous, but still recognizable as a being once human. Terrible pressure formed on both Lynette's ends, the base of her spine and her jaw stretching out. She buried her face in her new paws, sharp teeth stabbing through her gums and jaw rounding into a canine muzzle. Soon, her spine seemed to burst, extending swiftly into a tail before the fur grew in.

Whining pitifully, Lynette felt a warm tingling wash over her underside, focusing into eight sensitive points. Her nose flattened against her snout, wetting as her mind flooded with new scents. Worryingly, her own sweat and blood that of a wolf. Further, the grass and land around her and all the creatures upwind.

Her hearing and vision suddenly ceased, she stumbled helplessly for a moment. Clawing at the sides of her head, she felt her ears stretch out into pointed tips, eyes seeming to churn in their sockets. All at once, her senses returned, the night lit in sharp detail, sounds crisp and loud even when miles away. Glancing around, her ears rotated and focused on crickets or the footfalls of distant beasts. Tiny details stood out in sharp clarity, from blades of grass rustling in the wind to the silhouettes of wandering animals.

She winced at a crunching noise as her skull reformed, her brain shifting to match. Forming thoughts grew difficult, her mind scattering as her instincts altered. A faint scent graced her nostrils, eyes catching a small rabbit a short distance away. Baser behaviors took control as she

sunk low to the ground, springing swiftly and snapping her jaws around the small animal. With a satisfying snap, sweet, warm blood filled her mouth and ran down her throat. She drank the invigorating fluid, violently shaking the rabbit between her fangs. Smiling as much as she was capable, she threw aside her old inhibitions as she satisfied years of pent up hunger and rage.

Retaining her old memories and most of her intelligence, but little human instinct or training, she looked back and scoffed at her former self. This new form brought release, freedom from the shackles civilization had placed upon her. Bare in the moonlight, she cared no longer for the modesty forced upon her in the city. Her emotions leading her along, she ran across the windswept hills, loosing her pent wants and aggression.

*Damn them all!* She cheered internally, giving in to her animal instincts and forgetting her human face and all those from her past. Her will made manifest in her beastly form. A wolf, but with a keen glint in her eye, she cast aside her old self and embraced a new life.

The predator once called Lynette, stalked silently on the moonlight, pouncing and sinking her fangs into the neck of a fallow deer. Ravenous after the strain of changing, she tore at the soft, savory meat. She glanced at the distant city, turning away to the splendor of the moon. Raising her snout to the sky, she howled joyfully into the open air. Her call echoed as others of her kind answered. Almost forgetting all else, she ran to her kin, raised as their blood boiled on the thrill.