

Blood Moon

By SP Wright

The sun sets as Stephan gathers his brood before him.

One by one the children kneel and grow silent. They look into his eyes with glee and excitement. They are eager to begin their adventure.

Stephan makes the children sit throughout the remainder of sundown. They grow restless and wriggle a bit, but they wait.

"My children," his voice calm and unwavering, "J'Har'Tin has arrived!"

The brood cheer as they toss aside their clothes.

"Tonight, you hunt."

His robe slides to his feet as he rises.

"Tonight, you kill."

More cheering, though guttural now, as the children change, and new muscles bulge outward. Their faces growing feral as fangs began to appear at the corners of their maws.

Sunset now complete, the evening is bathed in an ethereal red light, emanating from the monstrous blood moon hanging swollen in the sky.

"Tonight, you are reborn!"

Leaping from the porch, the children gather in the snowy yard. Raising their snouts to the heavens, they keen into the night.

A louder, deeper, more visceral cry overpowers theirs. It echoes through the night and reverberates within the very ground itself.

From the porch, their father – now transformed himself – leaps into the evening air. Landing heavily, he straightens to his full height, and growls forth a command. "Now, Go!"

Filled with energy, excitement, and determination the wolf-lings race into the darkness.

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Brianne drinks from a cup of steaming tea. Setting the cup down she grabs her book and resumes reading while classical music drifts through the home. Sighing in contentment she lowers the book and stares vacantly into the fire, the hint of a smile upon her face.

A scream pierces the night, startling Brianne.

Rising quickly, Brianne races to the front door. Reaching the entry, she stops with her hand on the doorknob. She looks to the photo of her long-deceased sister, LeAnne.

Her hand shakes violently as she holds the doorknob.

All is quiet, the night is still.

Dropping her hand from the door she relaxes and releases a breath.

Returning her gaze to LeAnne's photo, she reaches toward the picture...

A scream, louder than any prior explodes from outside.

Closing her eyes, Brianne prays, before opening the door and peering into the night. The cold air envelopes her as she steps onto her porch. Dim red light from the moon bathes the world.

Across from her home stands the lone streetlamp in the area. Old, and failing; flickering lazily, it still manages to illuminate a creature as terrifying as death itself. The hairy beast towers above a shaking figure lying in the snow.

All heat drains from her body as Brianne beholds the beast. When the lamp fails, she gulps for air and staggers backward, unsure of what she had seen. Brianne takes another step backward, waving blindly for the door.

The lamp reawakens briefly, illuminating the nightmare below. Slowly, the mongrel's claws move toward the figures' head...

The lamp goes out once more.

Brianne can no longer see the beast or its' victim, but she doesn't need to. In her mind, she sees a similar event from long ago. Back then she had only watched, too terrified to move or make a sound.

Her hand finally finds the knob and she rush inside to safety. Her hands tremble as she slides down her door to the floor. Breathing heavily, she struggles to find her center. She can't get the image of the monster looming over its prey from her mind. But she also recalls a very different monster from days long past.

Taking a steadying breath, she raises her eyes to the image of her sister. Looking deep into LeAnne's frozen gaze, she finds strength to rise from the ground.

Another scream reverberates through the night.

Realizing that she cannot fail tonight – as she had done so many years ago – she thrusts her feet into a pair of boots. Recalling the swings of the monster from years ago, she tosses the blanket aside in favor of a thick coat. Remembering her fright as LeAnne moved less and less with each attack, she grabs a thick cane and thrusts it into the air. She hadn't gone to her sister's aid those many years ago, but she would help this person now.

Touching her fingers to LeAnne's picture briefly, Brianne steels herself for what she is about to do. Taking in a deep breath she launches herself into the night.

Crossing her yard swiftly, she moves towards the beast.

The light snaps into being again, dimly illuminating the area. In the center of the light is the creature, still bent over the cloaked figure.

Brianne quickens her step, raising her cane high overhead as she charges.

In a blur of movement, the creature pivots, rising to its feet. A low growl emanates from its throat. Its emerald eyes race to find the incoming threat!

Taking a step back, the creature begins to change. Silhouetted by the dim light of the lamp, its fur clumps and falls from its skin. The tail shrivels and tears from the body, landing with a thump. The claws recede, until they resemble human hands.

The face changes most of all. The glowing emerald eyes, shrink in size, dimming to a dull hazel. The snout slurps back into the skull, leaving behind a squishy nose, and frail human lips. The fangs, the last vestigial change to the cranium fall to the ground.

Brianne finally sees the being before her.

A child!

The boy smirks briefly before vanishing into the night.

The streetlamp sputters and dies ... again.

A howl shatters the night, and Brianne realizes that she is completely vulnerable.

Moving to check on the victim of, Brianne realizes it is a young girl. Reaching down to check on the child she is relieved to find that there are no obvious wounds.

The girl groans as she awakens. Her eyes snap open and focus on Brianne. Seeing her the girl gasps and rises quickly. She scans the night for any signs of her attacker, before returning her attention to Brianne.

Flashing back to her sister's attack from so long ago, she recalls hoping desperately that

LeAnne would stand, or lift her head, or simply blink. A faint smile spreads across her face as she realizes that she interrupted this monster, and that unlike her sister this little girl would survive.

Brianne instructs the girl to return to her house and her family. Without hesitation the girl races off into the night.

Brianne searches for clues. The lamp is off, but the red light from the moon is enough to see the footprints in the snow. Brianne follows the prints into the night.

Not long into the hunt, Brianne sees drops of blood in the snow between steps. Various sizes, and inconsistent spacing making them impossible to identify. Becoming wary now, she realizes that this beast is more than capable of harming her. Tightening her grip on the cane she continues to follow the prints and spatters.

Brianne spies something odd ahead. Approaching cautiously, she realizes what it is.

The pup she pursues - the one who accosted the young girl - is not alone. Here he was joined by two others. One was smaller, and lighter on its feet than he; while the other was larger, and more powerful. The three had met, and jointly continued east into the woodland.

Gasping for air she collapses to the ground where the three beasts had converged. Flashes of memory dancing through her thoughts. Blood flew from her sisters face as the man attacked her. The thick, red fluid pooled beside her body as she faded from this world.

Crying into the snow, Brianne realizes that her hand is covered in blood. The color of the liquid fills her sight, mind, and being; fueling her purpose. Forgetting her fears, and burying her doubts, Brianne regains her footing - making her way into the woods to face the werewolves.

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From high in the trees, Stephan watches his children return.

Moving from branch to bough, he looks beyond the pups, to the world around them. Stephan is startled to see a young woman. She is hesitant and unsure of herself, but she is tracking the pups!

He watches as she stumbles upon the location where three had converged.

She falls to the ground and weeps in the snow. He looks to the children far in the distance, romping in the snow, excited after their adventure. Eager to join them, but wary of the human he returns her attention to her.

He sees the frightening determination in her eyes as she rises to her feet. He recognizes the power fueling this woman's quest. He feels the energy of her conviction as she strides boldly into the dark forest beneath his feet; completely unaware that he follows silently above her.

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Brianne follows the trail of her prey.

As before in the park, more prints appear in the darkness. Nine new trails, each accompanied by drops of blood had converged upon the trio.

She pauses to wrap her mind around the concept of eleven monsters with razor fangs, claws, and glowing green eyes. Pulling her arms apart she draws a long, sharp blade from within the protective shaft of the cane. Armed now with the hollowed metal cane, and a slim sword, she charges into the night after the beasts.

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There before her is the wolf pack. Running through the snow, laughing, and playing in the red glow of the swollen moon, hanging low in the sky. At the base of a tree near her is a pile of canvas bags. All hand-made, all full, and all stained with blood.

Seeing the bags of bleeding bodies, Brianne realizes she has failed to protect the people

around her once again. She could not help her sister all those years ago, and now, countless lives have been lost.

The red light of the night fills her. No more thoughts. No more cares. No more fears. Only anger, and a desire to attack!

Screaming into the darkness she launches herself across the open area. Crazy with anger, desperation, fear, and self-loathing she brings the sword forward and moves to strike.

Mid-strafe she is felled.

She finds herself lying on her back surrounded by the others, several are still transformed. Brianne knows her time has come. Closing her eyes, she smiles, and lets herself relax. Serenely, she whispers, "LeAnne, I'm coming."

From the trees comes a deep and powerful roar that shakes the ground.

Brianne's eyes snap open as the roar reverberates through her body. Her eyes search the tree line until they find ... him. Simmering emerald eyes, glowing in the darkness, are all that betray him as he stands in the trees.

He roars again, and the pups fall into kneeling positions behind Brianne. Confused, and terrified at what is transpiring; Brianne is also transfixed and unable to look away.

The mighty man-beast springs into the air. His leap takes him far above the canopy of the woods, before gravity reasserts itself. Stephan angles his body toward the human woman. He lands inches from her, his claws digging deep into the ground. The heat emanating from his body washes away the cold of winter. The stench from his hot breath nearly causes her to vomit.

This close to one another his eyes penetrate her soul. She feels naked, and exposed.

"Now," he rumbles, "why are you here?"

Mouth moving, but words not forming, Brianne points at the beast, then the bloody bags, then the children, while maintaining a death grip on the cane.

Laughter erupts from the beast as he instructs one of the children to step forth. Setting the bag at Brianne's feet the girl retreats back to the group.

Stephan motions for Brianne to open the bag.

Hands shaking with terror she manages to open the bag, and after taking (and holding) a huge breath she peers inside.

"What?" she stammers in confusion "... a skunk?"

"Yes, a skunk," he replies.

"We hunt them," the young boy she had been tracking steps forward. "We eat the rodents; the vermin; the carrion of the world." He refuses to meet her gaze. "We've never hunted humans."

Brianne stares at the bags, then looks to the boy, "Then what were you doing to that girl?"

He shuffles nervously, "She fainted."

"But she was screaming?"

"She wouldn't stop. The moment she saw me under the light she screamed."

"Multiple times?"

"She kept passing out," turning he addressed the leader. "I kept waking her, and the instant she would see me ... another scream. I couldn't get her to stop."

"Liar!" Brianne exclaims. "I saw you dragging your claws on her and drooling over her."

"No, I was trying to help her."

"Stop lying to me," Brianne bellows as she swings her blade at the boy.

Moving in a flash the leader shoves the boy away and accepts the blow himself. It does no harm, but he is enraged. Lifting Brianne by the neck, he roars in her face, spraying her with spittle. He raises his hand, preparing to gut her with his claws.

Suffocating, and knowing that his attack would be her end, she accepts her fate. She, like her sister, would have her life taken from her, at the hands of a monster.

"Father, stop." The boy from before, and the girl who had brought the skunk hold his arm back, while the others pull Brianne free of his grip.

He drops the woman into the snow and turns on his children. "She hunts you," he growls as he reaches for her blade. "She attacks you." He looks to the children, "Why would you protect her?"

"Because she is human," replies the girl.

"Because she is ignorant," says another.

"Because we are better than that," states the boy.

Looking at his children, the anger recedes from Stephan's eyes, replaced with pride.

The leader begins to transform. Like the child's change earlier his fur clumps and falls to the ground, his body shrinks, and his muscles dwindle.

Now human, naked, and radiating heat he offers his hand to Brianne. "I can explain, if you should like to join us for the evening."

Confused, disoriented, and terrified, Brianne stares vacantly at the offered hand.

"Or they can take you home," he gestures towards the children.

Frozen in the moment, Brianne struggles to comprehend what is happening. Her eyes wander to the children, then the bloody bags, then the cane lying useless upon the ground, and finally upon Stephan's naked, steaming body.

Brianne sucks in a steadying breath before reaching out for the proffered hand. "I'll listen."

###

The red glow of the night envelopes the troop as they move through the woods. The children lead the way, each carrying their sacks. Stephan and Brianne (blade sheathed once more within the cane) bring up the rear.

"Our ancestors were hunted," he explains. "We were driven from our homes and forced to hide."

"Why?"

"The world feared we ate humans."

"Did you?"

He chuckles, "No. We have never consumed man."

"Never?"

"Never," he sighs, "but because we are huge, covered in fur, and have fangs..."

"We fear you because you're scary looking?"

"Isn't that why you feared my son this evening?"

She chooses not to respond to his question. Glancing around the woods as they walk, her mind wanders. She realizes that Stephan is right. Her fear had triggered the memories of LeAnne's attack. She had been filled with the need to destroy the creature.

As they trudge through the snow, she realizes that she had acted foolishly. Blinded by fear, pain, guilt, and obsession she had hunted a group of children. She had planned to kill them.

She freezes in the snow, "What is that?"

"That, my dear, is our home."

Nestled within the forest, sitting at the base of a waterfall is a large Victorian mansion. Light spills out into the woods from the windows, and the area is infused with the aroma of incense and burning wood.

"You live here?"

"You were expecting a cave, perhaps?" he retorts.

"Honestly, yes." The awe in her voice is evident.

The troop cross the remaining distance and enter the clearing surrounding the home.

As she takes in the clearing, Brianne follows the family into their home. The door opens and she sees that the wolves live in comfort.

Her eyes land on a painting which steals her breath. She cannot fathom what she sees. It isn't possible. The painting shows her dead sister LeAnne, but she is older. She is shown embracing Stephan.

Brianne turns to Stephan and gestures to the portrait.

Stephan nods and sits on the large sofa. He motions for Brianne, and all the children to sit as well. "Brianne," he begins, "you do not know your story. Much is forgotten, or hidden."

"What was hidden? Why is there a picture of my sister in your house?" she demands.

"We are your family," he says calmly, "and it is time you knew the truth. You and your sisters come from an ancient clan," he intones. "Your clan lost the ability to transform, but you retain many abilities which are beyond the average human."

Taking a breath, he continues, "You see the 'family' that found you as children realized what you were and what you were capable of."

"They knew?"

"Yes, in fact they thought they could beat the beast out of you. They attempted this with your sister and failed."

Brianne's mind is filled with the imagery of men beating her sister.

"Failed," she looks to the painting with tears in her eyes. "But they killed her."

"No, she survived."

"How?"

"She was found by my family and brought here to live."

"Why didn't..."

"She wanted to tell you, but she didn't want you in danger. You were safer not knowing."

Nodding slowly, Brianne looks to her sisters' image, "Where is she? when can I see her?"

Looking down Stephan whispers, "You can't, she's gone."

Tears well in her eyes as Brianne struggles to ask the next question.

Quiet sobs come from the corner, and the smallest of the children moves to stand before Brianne. "Mommy got sick, and one day she didn't wake up." She collapses into Brianne's arms and wraps her in a hug.