**Lucie and the Moon**

She had never seen the woods so dark.

On cloudless nights, when the world was so brightly moonlit that she could see bats winging through the leafy canopy above, Lucie liked to walk the woods alone. But tonight was different. Warning clouds roiled across the sky. Rough fingers were pressing into the fleshy place just above Lucie’s elbow, urging her along the path. She breathed steadily in and out, focusing on the beam of the torch lighting the forest floor. She had to keep a clear head.

They were passing the badgers’ sett when the man who lead her tripped on a branch. He swore loudly as the torch beam flipped up, startled a hoot from an unseen owl, then disappeared. Lucie looked anxiously to the sky. The clouds were tightly woven together, like a woollen blanket, obscuring the moon and stars entirely. They were in total darkness.

‘Here,’ the man slurred. He was pulling on her arm now, trying to force her down onto the bracken underfoot. ‘Here will do.’

He was very drunk. She could smell it, sour and sickly-sweet and rank. Lucie’s father had watched him drink a whole bottle of brandy that afternoon while she watched the sky from her window, waiting for darkness to fall. Father always made sure the men were bleary-eyed and unsteady before they took her into the woods. He said it was less risky that way, because their reflexes were dull and their minds fuzzy. In some ways it was worse, because she had to breathe their drunkenness in, taste it in the back of her throat. The sound of her father easing the stopper from the bottle brought her back to these nights now, made it hard to swallow, hard to breathe.

‘Not here.’ Lucie spoke in a whisper, unwilling to interrupt the silence. ‘Let’s go further in.’

The man muttered something foul under his breath. ‘If you think you can run away,’ he said, his words thick and garbled with drink, ‘You have another thing coming.’

His grip tightened and she knew that finger-shaped bruises would form there later, like the stripes on a tiger.

‘I won’t run,’ Lucie replied. ‘I just…’ She swallowed dryly. ‘We’re too close to the cottage. I don’t want my father to hear.’

She could not see the man’s face, but she could feel it changing. He chuckled softly, and the sound snatched at her throat.

‘Your father is an old fool.’ The torch came back to life, and he threw the beam into her face, making her wince. ‘He didn’t put too high a price on you, my dear. Still, you’ll pay his debt well enough.’ He shifted the beam back onto the path, and Lucie gave an inaudible sigh of relief as they began to move ahead again. ‘Alright, then. Take me to your usual spot - I know you have one. It’s not your first time at this.’

It was not her first time. Lucie couldn’t remember much of the first time. It was just after The Change, when she became a woman. The worst part of The Change wasn’t the bleeding, the sudden, violent pangs of anger and sadness, or even the pain. It was how her father reacted.

He had never been a kind man. He was quick to anger, and when anger came cruelty often followed. But the change made things immeasurably worse. Her father had not been in the company of a woman since mother had died when Lucie was very young, and her new body seemed to frighten and disgust him. He rarely spoke to her now, oscillating instead between thorny silence and fits of violent, all-encompassing rage. He stayed in town for days at a time, drinking and gambling in equal, reckless measure, and with every game of cards his debts grew. Lucie was used to poverty. It had been part of her life for as long as she could remember. But she did not realise that her father had finally run out of ways to repay his debts until the first man came.

She remembered father gripping her shoulder so hard she winced, telling her to go into the woods with the man and not to return before morning.

She remembered another pair of hands on her shoulders, the black slice of night beyond the back door, the woods coming to swallow her up. Then nothing, until the sun found her lying naked in a thicket of trees, aching and bloodied, her stockings in shreds. Still, in her pain, in her heartbreak, she knew that the consequences of returning to the cottage before daybreak would have been far, far worse. Father would make sure of that.

There was a break in the clouds, and a slip of sky was suddenly visible. It was small, but it was enough. Lucie pulled the man into a clearing and hurriedly undid the fastenings on her travelling cloak. It slithered fluidly from her shoulders, landing in a dark puddle on the forest floor.

Above her boots and stockings she was naked. Her skin was pale and unblemished, save for the purple-back fingerprint bruises on her arms and neck. The man’s eyes widened as he slid the beam of the torch like a probing hand over her white breasts, the dark hair growing between her legs, her soft, slender thighs. Lucie did not feel the man’s gaze. Her eyes were turned up, watching the thin strip of brightening sky steadily opening up overhead. In the moment before the full, shining orb of the moon broke through, Lucie looked for the first time into the man’s face. His eyes were misty and unfocused, his mouth pursed in concentration as he fumbled pathetically with his trousers. Her chest tightened. She always pitied them, in the end.

‘I’m sorry,’ she tried to say, but then the moonlight touched her, and she could no longer speak.

Deep in Lucie’s belly, something wrenched and contracted. She was full of hot poison and it burned, it chewed on her guts and roasted her innards, it made her moan and howl. Her skin sizzled and darkened like animal hide stretched over a fire. When the pain was beyond bearing and she thought she would surely die her skin suddenly split open, the seams of her body unpicked and unravelling from her face down to her feet. The pressure inside her subsided; her human hide peeled away like the used-up outer scales of a snake, and her raw limbs began to shift and grow leaner, powerful, more canine. Claws had burst through her feet and erupted from what had been her hands and she was suddenly on all fours, her hindquarters bulging with dense, twitching muscle and her long, newly-formed tail defensively raised. By the time her body had healed into this new shape Lucie’s humanity had receded. She was beyond speech and thought. She was half-Lucie, now, and half-beast.

The fingers of new, primal desires pushed into Lucie’s brain - *hunt, run, kill, eat*. The man had urinated and now he was scrabbling through the ferny undergrowth like a rat, trying to escape. She followed the scent, her snout low to the ground, the forest floor cooling her burning paws. He was near the badger’s sett when she caught up with him. He had snagged his foot on the same protruding root that had tripped him before and now he was on his belly, trying to get up but far too petrified to manage it. The part of Lucie that could pity this blubbering creature was far away and faint, a thin echo. She locked her jaws onto the soft, fleshy part of the man’s shoulder and tugged sharply on it until he was on his back. She felt it dislocate in her mouth. He screamed and thrashed, and though it was distant, the human part of her knew that, from here, her father would be able to hear it. The thought took the form of a picture:

*father sitting in the living room with a glass of cognac, waiting for the moon to fade into the light of coming dawn, his hunting rifle propped against the table*

*father rising with the sun, donning his coat and gloves and entering the woods*

*father searching the body, taking money, tobacco, a silver snuff case, using a small pick to lever gold fillings out of old cavities*

*father leaving the body there for the locals to discover. the locals are afraid of wolves. they find the body. they stay away from the woods after dark.*

*except for the men. nothing will stop the men from coming.*

Lucie unlocked her lupine jaws, lifted her bloodied snout, dug her paws into the damp earth. The moon watched as she snapped her teeth round the man’s neck. He gurgled and squirmed painfully. He tried to scream. He still believed he might live. Then, with two sharp jerks of her head, Lucie ripped out his throat.

Silence fell again, settling over the woods like dust. The man was dead. Lucie didn’t have any strong feelings about the man. She was not hungry, so she left the body where it lay, still trickling blood. She listened to the tiny *plash-plash* of drops landing on leaves while she licked the blood from her paws. Then she rolled in the grass to dry out her coat, looking as she did so at the sky, cloudless now and full of stars. There were hours of unobstructed moonlight ahead, and it would be a long time before the magic waned and the transformation was reversed. Lucie did not fear the reversal. Pain was a simpler, cleaner thing now that she was no longer human. The pain was as animal as she was. She would endure it.

Lucie nosed at the badger’s sett. It was empty, the badgers likely still foraging deeper in the forest. She wandered back to the thicket where her boots and stockings lay discarded and sniffed them, understanding the scent to be her own. She disturbed a family of hares. She urinated in a nettle patch where she picked up the stench of a male fox. Then she lay down, lowered her head onto her folded paws, and dreamed of her mother.

Mother came easily to Lucie in this form. She appeared as a series of soft, greyscale images:

*mother pressing her fists into bread dough, flour up to her elbows*

*mother darning her favourite dress, pins sticking out from between her pursed lips*

*mother singing sweetly to Lucie as she lay in bed with stomach-ache*

Mixed in were darker, harder pictures, no less vivid than those that came before:

*mother pressing a cloth to her swelling lip, blood running down over her chin*

*mother darning her petticoat, her tears soaking the cotton*

*mother singing sweetly to Lucie as she rolled an ice cube over her bruised eye*

And below these memories lay other, more puzzling ones, visible only by the light of the full moon:

*mother lifting Lucie by the scruff of her neck, cleaning Lucie's face with her rough, pink tongue*

*mother curled around Lucie, keeping her warm on cold winter nights*

*mother bleeding on the forest floor, her breath rasping weakly against Lucie's skin, her eyes closing*

In her sleep, Lucie twitched. Something long-buried was rising to face her, like an unearthed corpse. She was a child again, clinging to her mother’s neck for dear life. They were running through the trees. They were leaving and it was for good this time, mother had promised. Lucie saw the unfriendly shadows cast by the moon, heard their pursuer’s thudding footsteps behind them. It was a man, and Lucie was terrified of him.

The whip-crack of gunshots, three in quick sequence, made her mother crash into the undergrowth like a felled tree. She tried to stand, but her fur was blooming red and her breathing was weak. Lucie kissed her mother's soft face, clung tight to her chest as her heartbeat slowed and faltered. The footsteps were slower now, but they were getting closer. Tears rolled down Lucie's cheeks as she gently bit her mother's muzzle. It meant I love you. It meant goodbye.

Something cold and hard touched Lucie's temple. She could smell scorched powder, and beneath that the familiar odour of alcohol and stale sweat. The barrel pressed hard into her skull and she squeezed her eyes shut, wondering if she would hear the shot or if she would be dead by then, wondering if her mother would reach heaven before her. It never came. The rifle was drawn back, and then familiar, rough hands were lifting her into the air and carrying her back along that dark, tree-lined path. A weak howl reached Lucie’s ears, and she wept.

She opened her eyes. The moon still hung overhead, pale and swollen, an engorged breast. In the silence a vixen shrieked, a sound like the grief of a human woman.

Lucie’s throat opened and a long, low howl of mourning rose from her belly. She mourned the mother who had loved her, who had tried to keep her safe, who had dreamed of starting afresh in the forest where she might live free from fear, never to be held captive again. She howled again, louder, as something new and urgent stirred inside her, something that had awoken while she dreamed. Human Lucie emerged with sudden, astonishing clarity, like a fish rising to the surface of a murky lake. She was with her now, vital and urgent, like a beating heart.

*Go,* she whispered.

Then Lucie was running, her feet taking her down the forest path and back to the cottage, head low to the ground, her thoughts a procession of vividly-coloured images.

*the rifle that killed her mother stands, loaded and polished, against the dinner table. father sits next to it, sipping his cognac, waiting for the sky to pale and*

*Lucie is so swift he does not hear her. she enters silently through the cellar door. he reaches for the bottle, he pours himself another glass and*

*the bottle crashes to the floor as she enters the kitchen, mouth drawn back in a snarl, eyes mad, eyes burning and*

*he is too horrified to move. her fur is bloodied. Her gums are bared, her teeth hold scraps of human flesh and*

*he finally raises the gun to his shoulder as the muscles in Lucie’s hindlegs bunch and contract. she launches, agile as a hare, true as an arrow. his finger finds the trigger. it is already too late.*

There will be no more visitors. There will be no more drinking and gambling. Lucie will leave behind the woman she might have become. She will roam unbounded on full moon nights, the queen of the forest. She will fear no man, drunk or sober, father or stranger. She is wolf-Lucie. She is untameable. She is beholden to no-one.

*‘It’s finally over,’ the girl whispers.*

*‘It has just begun,’ the wolf replies.*