

The Old Moon

High on the hillside above the market town of Tippering, a wolf appeared. For three consecutive nights, she returned to the hillside to howl at the harvest moon. And so, the lunar cycle was broken. Each night the moon, bigger than before, appeared and sat low on the horizon, holding the town in thrall. The wolf's lament became the soundtrack to the townsfolk's fragmented sleep. For those who believed in such portents, and in Tippering that was more or less everyone, this signified impending catastrophe. Townsfolk became twitchy. All talk centred on the wolf, the moon, tomorrow and escape.

On the fourth night, unease bled into panic. The Mayor, a practical woman with an excellent record in public office, managed to convince the townsfolk not to bolt to the wilderness beyond Tippering. She knew there was more to fear out there than wolves.

By the fifth night, not even her wise counsel could stem the wave of hysteria that gripped the town. The townsfolk struck out into the surrounding wilderness in any direction that took them away from the wolf. They carried their essentials wrapped in checkered cloths tied to the end of long poles. The Mayor could only watch as people hurried off into the bush as they were unprepared to risk another night without a new moon. For miles around, all she could make out were the multicoloured packs moving away from Tippering.

By the seventh night, the Mayor was very concerned. The moon and wolf towered above the town; the wolf's silver fur glinted in the gluttonous moonlight. The winding streets of Tippering were empty save for a few disgruntled hens pecking for scraps between the cobble stones. Shops stayed shut. No one tended to the parks around the town square. The church bell had not rung for days, unable to compete

with the sonorous roar of the wolf. Something had to be done. Only a handful of her constituents remained, mostly the infirm and depressed. They counselled the Mayor to leave and follow the rest of the town. It was clear that the end was nigh; soon the moon would swallow Tippering whole.

But, despite their warnings, the Mayor knew she had to take action. As the peak of the seventh night approached, she strode out alone towards the wolf and the moon. The few townsfolk watched as her tiny silhouette was lost in the long shadow of the wolf. The wolf was easy to find as she dominated the view. She was enormous, four or five times the Mayor's height.

The Mayor arrived at the wolf's feet. The wolf stopped mid-howl and looked down at the figure before her. Sharp canines gleamed in the moonlight that shone as bright as day around them. Long, rakish claws stretched out before the Mayor, but she looked up and addressed the wolf.

"Sister wolf, what ails you? May I help?"

"No one can help me now." The wolf replied, her voice low and gravely. A tear slid over her sleek fur and landed with a splash at the Mayor's feet. The Mayor swallowed but stepped closer.

"Please, Sister wolf. Let me assist you. We are blessed by your presence above our humble town. But..." she took a deep breath, "your lament has trapped the moon here and driven my people from our town. While you grow strong on moonlight, we fade and falter. One more night of this and I fear we shall all be lost. Your song gives the moon unnatural life."

The Mayor looked down, bracing herself for the impact of claws. But when she opened her eyes, the wolf had lain down before her so that the Mayor was level with the wolf's head.

"I am sorry to have caused such unhappiness." The wolf said slowly, the human words sitting heavily on her tongue. "I am not here by choice. That moon stole my cub and I am trapped here until the moon lets him go. I have to follow its bidding." The wolf whimpered and began to stand. The Mayor looked up at the brutish moon behind them and understood.

"I am so sorry this has happened to you, Sister wolf. What a cruel, greedy moon!" the Mayor spat. "I can see it has trapped you here in order to sustain itself. But it has wreaked enough havoc. It is time it passed on and a new moon was born."

The wolf stood tall before her and another tear splashed down next to the Mayor.

"I must continue," she said with a low growl. "I dare not think what will happen to my cub if I do not."

"Wait!" the Mayor cried. She scratched her head and an idea came to her. "I may I have a solution. Please, trust me. Sing no more."

The wolf blinked, then sighed back down onto her forepaws. "I will give you one hour. Then I return to my song."

The Mayor hurried back to the town and to the Tippering Vaults burrowed deep beneath the town. There was only one object that the Mayor could think of that could defeat the moon. She found it in the oldest vault beneath a century of dust. She grabbed it and hurried back to the wolf.

"A mirror?" the wolf said, taking in the small hand-held mirror in the Mayor's sweaty hand.

"Well, yes and no. If my intuition is right, it is the solution to our problems." It was silver but bruised and tarnished with age. Ornate shapes surrounded the oval surface and ran down to the handle, which curved into a crescent moon.

The Mayor held the mirror out towards the wolf. "Breathe on the surface," she said.

Dubious, the wolf breathed onto the mirror.

"Ok, let's see if the stories are true. Go back to your song. Howl at the Moon, Sister"

The wolf tipped back her head and howled, her voice stronger for her rest. The Mayor grasped the mirror with both hands and thrust it up at the Moon. The mirror reflected the moon back to itself. It resisted, buckled and heaved, it's full grotesque face leering over them. But the wolf's song ensnared the moon's light into a single channel that tore straight into the mirror. The Mayor held on until, with a final wrench, the bitter Old Moon was gone.

They were plunged into darkness as the night sky rippled out before them. Stars, masked moments earlier, sparkled overhead. On the horizon, the New Moon popped gleefully into being and swung gently as it settled itself into the night.

The wolf barked with joy, as there, on the curve of the New Moon's sliver, a small cub lay sleeping. The wolf reached out and took back her cub. The cub nestled in by its mother's legs, licked her and went back to sleep. The wolf inspected him. Satisfied that he was fine, she turned to the Mayor.

“How can I thank you?” The wolf asked.

“No need, Sister. Although I would be grateful if you would ask your friends to not bring the moon to our hillside again. I am not sure I could handle another week like this.”

“It is done. Thank you” the wolf nudged her cub to his feet and then with a nod towards the Mayor trotted off into the darkness.

The Mayor looked down at the mirror in her hands. It pulsed and raged. She knew that as long as the mirror existed, the malevolent Old Moon did too. She walked back down the hillside and stopped at the edge of the lake that bordered the town. The lake was older than the town and no one had ever found the bottom. In the welcome dark, the surface was black, save for the crisp outline of the new moon in the centre. The Mayor lifted the mirror overhead and hurled it deep into the lake, where it was swallowed and never seen again.

In the days to come, the townsfolk of Tippering trickled home and the town began to look like itself again. Shop keepers stood chatting before the morning rush. Farmers came back and forth with the richest harvest seen in a decade. The late summer flowers bloomed in the park and children prepared themselves to return to school.

From then on, each month on the birth of a new moon the townsfolk gathered in the town square. They wore silver crescents on their clothing and raised a toast to the new moon and each other. From time to time, the wolf and her cub were spotted on the hillside, but she had the good sense to only pass through in daylight. The Mayor was celebrated for her bravery and action. The townsfolk of

Tippering wanted to raise a statue in her honour, but the Mayor would only accept one reward, a bright new flag for her townhouse. On it was a single image: a silver wolf with her cub.

Word Count: 1500