**Fiction (Horror/Fantasy) by Tyler-Lynn Tavares**

Blood Moon

Hayden’s feet came down strong against the pavement. Her shoes hit the puddles, and water kicked back up to splash her bare legs. She shivered, thinking idly that it was too late in the season for shorts. It wasn’t her first mistake, but it might be her last. Cold raced across her skin like the prickling of tiny needles, sharp and defined. It made her feel numb from the knees down. As she ran, her hair slashed through the wind behind her. It whipped through her peripheral vision, almost white as it flashed in and out of sight.  It reminded her too much of the early morning sky, the same color as the pale light that provided shelter from the night’s dangers. It teased her with the reminder of the sun’s safety.

*The sun*. Its refuge was way too far off. The thought that she’d be lucky to ever see dawn break across the horizon again came unwelcomed, dark and all too real. It spiraled from there, and she found herself consumed by the increasingly gruesome visuals of what was to come. She forced herself to stop thinking. Instead, she channeled the power of her racing mind to her legs, refusing to focus on the ever-growing likelihood of her death. Her breathing was labored, and the burn in her muscles called for reprieve. Yet still, she ran. Every nerve in her body was high-wired and alert. She didn’t bother looking back to see if *that thing* was still following her, she knew it was. It didn’t give up easily. She just continued fast and frantic down the long winding road ahead.

The night around her was unnaturally silent, echoing in her bones like the phantom pain of a lost limb. There were sounds that she couldn’t identify that she knew were missing. It was strange, knowing that something was missing but not knowing what that something was. It was strange but not entirely unfamiliar. Her own past was a jigsaw puzzle riddled with missing pieces, and she often ached for the things she didn’t remember. Still, even if her memories failed her and a lot didn’t make sense, even if faces blurred and she didn’t always know the when or the where or the why, she knew what frightened her.

This peculiar night was the culmination of everything she’d ever feared. Loneliness, death, darkness. She was too aware of herself, nothing there to distract her from the danger. The sky was empty, no stars shining down flickering their distant comfort… just empty. There was, however, a sight that stuck out, although it wasn’t at all reassuring. The unsettling and most noticeable feature was the shadow that loomed over the orange-tinted moon. It was peeling back, like a veil slipping away to reveal something precious. Or something deadly.

The air smelled of rain and, soon enough, Hayden was blinking away the droplets as they poured from the black abyss above her. Aside from the roughly paved road ahead, the land was barren. For miles on either side of her, there was nothing but untouched wilderness. Although the land was clearly deserted, dim street lamps flickered along the edge of the road. She wondered how electricity even reached this place, this slice of nowhere.

Chills ran down her spine as she glanced back at the moon. *So close*, she thought. *The Blood**Moon is so close.* Danger and urgency hung heavy in the air as it grew nearer. Tonight, it was more than a feeling. This year’s blood moon had already delivered on its promise. The demon was on a warpath and she couldn’t hide from it.

This was all her own fault. She’d left herself exposed and vulnerable all because she couldn’t bring herself to admit defeat. She just couldn’t allow herself a moment of wounded pride to save herself from the inevitable darkness. Morana had told her that she couldn’t make it in time to beat the Blood Moon. In order to catch up with her friends, she needed to cross three town borders with a city in between on foot in just three days. Nidra had agreed that it just wasn’t possible. Hayden had taken that as a challenge.

They told her to just find her own place to hide, that it wasn’t worth taking the risk to meet them. They would be together once the Blood Moon was over, she just needed to wait. She should have listened. She should have sought out sanctuary at the halfway point of her journey. Of course, she’d ignored all of the warning signs and pushed onward in spite of all reason. She’d pushed on even though she knew her friends had only been trying to warn her. She’d pushed on even as the moon’s shadow grew visible in the daylight, and by the time she knew that there was no possible way to make it to her destination, she still believed she could outrun the danger.

*Idiot*.

Hayden’s eyes searched the darkness ahead, desperately hoping that an easy escape method would reveal itself. She was not so lucky. Luck had abandoned her hours ago. All that lay ahead was more of the same road she had been running on for the past half hour, the road that stretched endlessly to nowhere.

That was when she heard it again. A hiss. It was the sound of a serpent speaking its strange and dark language.

***Kill, Kill****,* it seemed to say. Its raspy voice pierced the sound of the rain and the rhythmic pounding of her feet. Hayden sped up, heart in her throat. She heard the giant serpent slithering down the wet road behind her, amplifying the soundless void of the night, overpowering her sense of self. Her ears began to ring, time slowing. The hissing, her heartbeat, the rain-- all echoed through her mind. Suddenly, she understood what the serpent was saying.

***Blood Moon***, the serpent hissed. She ran.

***Blood Moon****.* She felt like a small animal, running from the inevitable fate of being devoured by its hunter.

*There’s no way out!* A voice in her head cried. *It’s coming! It’s coming!* Panic surged through her, and a breathless scream escaped her lips.

***Blood Moon****.* The hissing of the serpent was louder now. If possible, it sounded pleased by the thought of closing in on its prey. The streetlamps went out.

*Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!*

The rain came down relentlessly. Hayden’s lungs felt as though they were going to explode in her chest. She had been running for too long. It was all over. She was out of time.

Suddenly, her legs were on fire. She slammed onto the pavement, the slimy scales of the demon coiling around her ankles, moving up to her knees, tighter and tighter.

***Blood Moon****.* She clawed at her belt for her dagger, but just as her hand grasped the hilt, a sharp pain shot through her arm. She tried to cry out, but the sound died in her throat, the snake inching upward, its body entwining the wrist it had just bitten. It slithered around her as she thrashed. She was fighting even though it was useless. The rain was still steady and strong, matting her hair to her face and pelting her exposed skin, relentless. Even the rain wanted her to lose.

***Blood Moon****.*  Hayden struggled fervently to escape the serpent’s hold, panic welling up inside her. But her efforts failed and it twisted itself into a more confining spiral around her. It was constricting her waist now. Her arms were securely pinned, fingers crunched uncomfortably against her sides. She couldn’t slip free, couldn’t lash out.

***Blood Moon****.* In spite of herself, her tears joined the rain on her cheeks. She could hardly breathe. The running had left her gasping for air, and now the heavy pressure was crushing her chest, the creature’s body pushing her ribs in toward her lungs so she couldn’t take a breath. Finally, the dreaded moment came. The serpent’s head came up, its yellow eyes outlined in red met hers, and she was paralyzed.

***Blood Moon, Blood Moon****.* Hayden had just enough time to wish that she’d listened to her friends before its jaw unhinged.

***Kill for the Blood Moon!***

It lunged at her throat.