

Science Fiction

Moon Dogs

By Michael Swanwick



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He went to a spa where, for a fee, they would drown you as often as you liked. You wouldn't actually die, because they put a shunt in your skull and kept the brain oxygenated, but your body didn't know that and your survival reflexes would kick in so that you'd choke and gag and fight for oxygen as you experienced the desperation of approaching death. You could thrash and struggle for hours. The water was ice-cold and as dark as tea. If you panicked and did too much damage to your body, there was a clinic nearby where you could rest while solicitous friends in white coats cured it.

After they had emptied his lungs, removed the shunt, and switched on a small fire, the counselors gave Nick a blanket and withdrew, leaving him alone in the woods to contemplate the experience in peace.

Shivering, Nick drew the blanket around him. He didn't feel any better than he had before. He hadn't experienced any kind of release at all. His mood was as bleak as ever. Life still felt hopeless.

A while later, he put on the clothing they had left him, folded up the blanket, switched off the fire, and stood. The night was quiet and dark, lit only by a low moon. There was a path over the hill that led to the lodge. He heard two of the staff laughing quietly over something one had said, just before their propane torches disappeared. But he didn't feel like going back to the lodge and their hired warmth and camaraderie. Not just yet.

Instead, he put the moon to his back and went the other direction, deeper into the woods, and was quickly lost. He did

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not care. The woods were tangled and random, a jumble of tree trunks and deadfall, some lying broken on the ground, others propped up by other trees. There was no pattern in them, he reflected, nothing to fix the eye upon. It seemed a perfect metaphor for everything.

It was then he saw the sycamores, pale in the moonlight.

The sycamores formed a ghostly ring around an empty darkness. They looked like a Druidic temple. He thought at first that they were former ornamentals—this had been a populous suburb not a century ago—marking the perimeter of a house long fallen to ruin. But then he saw how the ground within sank downward and realized that the bowl-shaped depression they marked was carved by the same small stream that had fed his drowning pool. At its center would be another ceremonial pool, perhaps, or else a minuscule swamp.

He walked closer and as he did so a pale white flame resolved itself into existence at the center of the darkness. He squinted, unsure as to its reality, and continued walking. Then he saw the white shape stoop, and heard a splash of water.

“Hello?” he said.

The shape flinched, turned, and in a woman's voice said, “Who are you?”

“My name's Nick. Do you want me to go away?”

“No, I'm about done here. You can dry me off.”

Nick walked to the edge of the water. The woman stood knee-deep within it. In the gloom she was hard to see. Her crotch was filled with shadow; her navel was the merest

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smudge. He couldn't make out her mouth or nose at all. Twin falls of long, dark hair framed eyes that mirrored the black water in which she stood.

"The towel's by your feet."

He was reaching for the towel when something came bounding out of obscurity. It was a gundog, long and as elegantly constructed as antique Swiss clockwork. "Touch the lady and you're a dead man," it growled. There was a clicking noise from its abdomen.

"Stand down your armaments, Otto. He's not threatening me."

With a mechanical whine the gundog sat. There were other machines in the woods, gray shadows that prowled and circled without rest. Nick tried to count them. Three, six—too many to count.

The woman stood before Nick and turned her back. "Well?"

Carefully he dried her off, starting with her hair and shoulders, moving down her back and over her rump. Her body had the sculptural perfection of a Brancusi marble. He crouched to dry the back of her legs, and when he reached the ankles, she turned around to face him. She was so close he could smell her: fresh and clean, with accents of oak-leaf and cedar.

She took the towel and did her front, then squatted and let Otto blow hot air on her.

When she was dry, the woman dressed in jeans and a shirt. She wrapped her hair up in the towel, like a turban, and said, "My house is just over the hill. Cocoa?"

"Why not?"

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* * * *

The kitchen was bright and clean. They sat at the table and talked. Her name, she said, was Selene. The gundogs came and went, patrolling the grounds, occasionally lying silent at her feet. Their metal nails clicked softly on the floor.

"Why do you want to die?" Selene asked, when they'd been talking a while.

"I don't *want* to die—it's something I'm trying to purge from my subconscious. But when you've seen your parents die, and your brothers die, and your sister die, and nine-tenths of the kids in the first orphanage die, and half of those in the second ... well. There's bound to be a certain amount of survivor guilt."

She studied his face. "No," she said at last, "it's not that."

"Then I don't know what it is."

"No. You don't."

"And you do?"

"I didn't say that. But if I had your problem, I would at least know what it was. I'll bet you live in one of the new city-cores. Neon, noise, smoky little bars. Everybody crammed as close together as they can get."

"Yeah, so?"

"So that's evasion. You want to understand yourself, you've got to experience a little isolation. Go off alone by yourself. In the winter, sometimes I go for weeks without seeing another human being."

"What exactly do you do out here?"

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"I hunt. That's what the 'dogs are for. I have a little money and so I hunt. Deer mostly. But I bagged a puma not long back."

"It hardly seems fair. All that machinery against one little deer."

Her look was unfathomable. "There's the couch. Get some sleep. I'll wake you in the morning and take you out with me. You'll see then."

The woods were misty and indistinct. Selene led him out into them, her hounds flowing about her like a river of quicksilver. She wore a Teflon jacket over her plaid shirt, and she carried a hunting knife on her belt. Amber goggles hung from a cord around her neck.

"Okay," Nick said. "So how is this thing done?"

"First we deploy the 'dogs." Selene swept out an arm and half the pack scattered into the surrounding woods. The remaining six stayed with her, alert and tireless. The sound of the machines thrashing through the undergrowth died away to nothing surprisingly quickly.

"What do we do now?"

"Enjoy the woods." She drew in a deep breath, let it out. "Smell those pines! The 'dogs will let us know when they've flushed something worthwhile."

"I think..."

"Don't. Don't think, don't talk, just walk. And listen. Try to appreciate how lucky you are to be here at all."

* * * *

Hunting, it seemed, consisted largely of walking. Selene moved unhurriedly, picking easy ways, going always deeper

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into the woods. Occasionally one of the 'dogs barked once or twice in the distance. "Just letting me know where they are," she said when Nick asked. "Now, hush."

Sometimes she strolled casually, heedlessly along. Other times she would tense, listening, watching, every nerve strained. Nick couldn't figure out the rhythms. Following in her wake, he stared at her long, long legs, her broad shoulders and fine back, her perfect ass. She was an Amazon. He couldn't figure her out. He couldn't help wanting her.

At noon they sent one of the 'dogs back to the house for sandwiches and a thermos of herbal tea. They ate sitting on a crumbled foundation wall, halfway up a mountain. One of the gundogs crouched at Selene's feet, staring out over the forest.

The trees went on forever. "Everything, far as the eye can see, used to be city. No place you've ever heard of either, just an endless sprawl of no-name tract housing, malls, petty manufacturing, sewage treatment plants. And now—"

"Turn off your 'dogs," Nick said.

"What?"

"Let's be alone, you and I. Turn off the 'dogs."

"No."

He picked up a stick, scraped a line in the dirt. "What are you afraid of?"

She looked at him again. Those unfathomable green eyes. "My husband."

"You have a husband?"

"It's a complicated story."

"Tell me."

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For a long moment she was silent, gathering her thoughts. Then she said, "You and I are alike in some ways. We're both orphans. Only my family didn't die of cholera or malaria or typhoid fever. They were killed by Sacred Vaccine."

"I don't—"

"It was a religious cult. There were dozens just like it. They thought the human race was facing extinction. So they decided to fight back against the microbes with human sacrifice. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Well, in a way, yeah. You're afraid, so you take control by becoming what you fear."

"My family was lucky—three kids, all healthy. My parents took us out into the country, to isolate us from what was going on. They had enough money to do that."

Nick nodded. He knew the type well enough. She was a plague heiress—one of those who stood at the confluence where several streams of inheritance ran together. She'd probably never had to work in her life.

"One day there was a knock on the door. It was our neighbors. They killed everyone but me. I was the youngest. They smeared their sacred sign on my forehead with blood and then married me to one of their members. Then they let me go. I was only five years old. Joshua—my husband—was seven."

"I'm sorry," Nick said.

"I'm not looking for your sympathy. I've had time enough to work things through. The bad times are over. I like my life. Only ... my parents were pacifists. I'm not." She balled a fist

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and rapped him on the chest with it, just a little too hard.

"Keep that in mind."

"So this Joshua—he's been bothering you?"

"He—"

A sudden baying rose up in the distance. Selene shot to her feet, listening. The baying was answered by a second, a third, until all the dogs were howling.

Selene quickly donned her goggles. "Isn't that a lovely sound?"

"Yes." It was.

"It's a recording. The breed that bayed like that died out during the plague decades. Lost, like so many things that lacked the people to keep them going." She scanned the horizon, matching mountains to her goggles' mapping graphics. Then she pointed. "That way. That's where they'll drive him. Come on—run!"

* * * *

"Down this way!"

Selene had tied her jacket around her waist. It made a tail that leaped like a flag as she bounded down the slope of the ravine. Nick followed clumsily.

At the bottom, she showed him where to stand, between two trees. "The 'dogs will run him right past you. Be careful not to get in his way! Those antlers are sharp. The hooves can do real damage. Over here, the lead will present to him. He'll shy and rear. That leaves his throat vulnerable. I'll be aiming for his carotid artery." She showed him where it was on her own throat.

"Is that all you're using? That knife?"

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“When I’m running ‘dogs, yes. Otherwise, I use a bow.”

Nick barely had time to catch his breath when the woods erupted with baying ‘dogs. Something large crashed noisily through the brush, coming straight toward him. Then the stag burst from the bushes, wild-eyed and enormous. The ‘dogs were baying and snapping at its flank.

He stepped back automatically. The hunt swept right past him. Selene laughed, and stepped in its path.

She was magnificent.

A ‘dog slipped around front of the stag and, bracing its legs, cried a challenge. As predicted, the beast reared back.

Selene leaped at the animal, seizing its antlers. One hand went to her belt. The other pulled back, so that the stag's long neck arched. The gundogs were snarling and leaping. Her hunting knife slashed and slashed again.

Blood sprayed everywhere. Warm flecks of it spattered his shirt and stung his face.

When the stag died, the gundogs all fell silent at once. It was eerie. Selene stepped backed from the beast, taking a deep breath. “Look at that—a six-pointer.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you all right?” she asked. “You're trembling.”

I think I'm in love, he wanted to say. And, no, it's not all right, it's not all right at all. But instead, “No, really. I'm fine.”

Selene laughed. “It's always like that—your first time.”

* * * *

Selene gutted the beast, then slung it over her shoulders. When Nick offered to help, she laughed at him.

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Back home, she hung up the carcass to cure on a frame behind the house. "Come on inside," she said, "and we'll get cleaned up."

When Selene came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair, she wore a baby-blue bathrobe, loosely cinched. Just looking at how her body moved within it made him hard.

"Well," Nick said. "I guess it's my turn at the tub."

She looked at him steadily, wordlessly. Without warning, she hooked an ankle behind him and gave him a two-handed shove. He fell back onto the couch.

Then she was on top of him, pushing up his shirt, tugging at his belt, shoving his trousers down to his knees. Before he knew what was going on, she had him inside of her and was humping him, humping him, humping him.

It was almost rape. He wasn't at all sure he liked it at first. Then he was, and wanted it to last forever. And then it was over.

Then she took him into the bedroom and they made love again. More slowly this time.

"Don't expect much," she said afterward. "I don't like entanglements."

"Entanglements?"

"Men, then. I don't much like men."

"Do you want me to leave?" Nick asked.

"Oh, stay till morning. I'll make you breakfast." She rolled over and went to sleep.

The 'dogs padded quietly, alertly, in and out of the room, on constant patrol.

* * * *

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Nick got up in the middle of the night. Selene was still asleep. Moonlight flooded the room.

Silently, he put his clothes on.

The central command unit for the gundogs emitted a hum in the 330-hertz range. He was sensitive to things like that. He used the sound to find the unit, disguised as a lingerie chest, and flicked the kill switch, deactivating everything. The hum died.

She had never bothered to ask him what he did for a living. This was what he did. He sold and installed security systems.

He picked up her hunting knife.

There was a slight rustling noise. He turned and saw Selene looking at him.

Quietly, she asked, "Is there something wrong?"

Nick could feel her fear. He wanted to put down the knife and reassure her. Instead, he said, "Get out of bed."

Selene pushed the covers aside and stood, naked and vulnerable. She knew who he was now. "Joshua..."

"It's Nick now. I changed my name when I was released. I wanted to put the past behind me."

"Nick. The plagues are over."

"That's what I used to think. But diseases mutate. They can adapt too fast for man's technology to keep up with." He found that talking gave him confidence. He felt that he was on the right track at last. "That's what brought on the great die-back: arrogance, pride, and broad-spectrum antibiotics. For a century, every disease was fought back to insignificance with drugs so widely prescribed that people thought

epidemics weren't *supposed* to happen. Then the diseases adapted, resisted, and returned.

"Now you think that because we've suppressed the germs and viruses again, we've got the evil under control. But it's only come back with another name. Look at you! You're infected with the great dark thing called *fear*. You're so rotten with it you're shaking. My family was right. It never goes away. You can hide out here in the woods, you can surround yourself with gundogs. But it knows where you live. It knows when you're helpless. Sooner or later, it comes for you." Nick gestured with the knife. "Let's go outside."

He walked her out to where the deer carcass hung curing. The ground beneath it was dark with blood. "That's far enough. Stay there, with your back to me."

She obeyed. This was what fear did to you. She was stronger than he was, and faster too. But she obeyed.

"I suppose you're going to kill me." Her voice almost broke on the penultimate word, but otherwise betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

"No." Nick drew in a long breath, exhaled. "I'm going to kill myself. I thought you'd want to see it."

Astonished, she spun around. He had the knife to his throat by then. The carotid artery. He'd seen how well that worked.

"They said I was cured, and released me. I got a job. I even had a girlfriend for a while. But then I started sending you those letters. The disease had returned." The knife tickled his throat unpleasantly. "I've been thinking about this for a long time."

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"Why involve *me*? What are you doing *here*, goddammit?"

"It took me years to understand what my parents were trying to do. It's called the ceremony of triage: Inoculate the healthy. Leave the dying to their fate. Shoot the infected. Okay, it's loony. If you think of it as a way of minimizing pain, it makes a lot of—"

"Pain! What do you know about pain?" She splayed her hands across the flesh under her ribs and twisted around so he could see the scar between them. It was puckered and deep. Somehow, he hadn't noticed it when they'd screwed. "I was gored by a buck. He shoved his fucking antler right through me. Do you have any idea how much that hurt?"

"You—"

"It hurt a *lot*. I almost died then. I was lucky to make it back to the road. I was lucky that somebody came along in a car. I was lucky he stopped. I was so god-damned lucky I had no business complaining when it got infected and almost killed me a second time. But I did. Because—you know what?—it hurt like hell. And you've got the nerve to talk about pain!"

Nick didn't know what to say.

"When I got out of the hospital, I was afraid to hunt. The pain had been that bad. Afraid to hunt! So you know what I did?"

He shook his head.

"I went out and tracked down that exact same buck, and I killed it. I was terrified, but I faced up to my fear. I faced up to it, and I conquered it."

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She was ablaze with anger. "You've got a problem. You're afraid. Well, join the club! I didn't give in to my fear. I faced it down. Why can't you?"

Nick took the knife down from his throat. He looked down at it, heavy and useless in his hand, for a long moment. Then he tossed it away, into darkness.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I'll leave now."

* * * *

On the road from the house, Nick felt a strange sensation seize him. He had no name for it. But, though the woods were dark and silent about him, they didn't oppress him.

A sense of futility still clung to him, and he knew he had a long way to go. But suddenly he knew what that nameless thing was called.

Hope.

The lights came on behind him. He heard the whine of gundogs powering up, and then the frantic sound of the machines running for their appointed guardposts.

He thought how easily the devices could tear him apart. They'd do that on command. But he didn't look back. He wouldn't give in to the fear.

Never again.

Nick took a deep breath, and for the first time in his life felt free. He wanted to laugh and caper. He wanted to turn right around and make love with Selene again. The night was no longer threatening, but dark and filled with promise.

Selene was right! He could face down his fears. Someday he might even master them.

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Metal paws sped through the night. A gundog sped past and, wheeling, sat waiting for him in the road.

It was Otto; he knew by the markings. The 'dog opened his mouth. What emerged was not the gruff mechanical voice Nick expected, but Selene's clear, calm soprano.

"Turn around, Nick."

He turned.

Selene stood in the yard before her house. In the light that spilled from the windows, her face was white as bone, her eye sockets black as ink. She'd thrown on a blouse, but hadn't bothered to button it. He could see pale flesh all the way from her neck to her crotch.

She held a bow in her hand.

Shadows swarmed about her feet—gundogs, eager for her command.

"Selene—"

"You can't give in to what you fear," she said. "You have to face it down. And kill it."

There was a strange noise, like cloth tearing, and an arrow appeared in the dirt at his feet.

"I'll give you a head start. If you start running now, you just might make it back to the spa."

She nocked another arrow into her bow.

Nick took a step, another, found himself running. The road was flat and empty before him. He turned, and plunged into the brush at its side. Twigs slashed his face and grabbed at his clothes. He paid them no mind. He thought only of escape.

Behind him, one by one, the 'dogs began to bay.

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