

# **Born in Blood**

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1 James took the coffee from the barista and dropped a few coins into the tip jar. On second thought, he added another dollar. She was pretty, after all. He turned and headed over to the mixing station. A dash of cinnamon, a few drops of milk, and his morning dose of caffeine was ready to go. He grabbed a stirring stick and began to swirl it around. Ten times, exactly; he'd done it just so every day for the last three years. James was a man of habit.

“Would you please pass the cinnamon?” A voice asked from his right.

James turned, cinnamon shaker in hand, and his jaw smacked into his knees. This was definitely new.

2 Velaria woke up as a shard of moonlight pierced her eyelids. It was the middle of the night; her parents were still asleep in their tent. She had chosen to sleep outside in a sleeping bag. She wasn't afraid of darkness; she wasn't afraid of night. Unlike most children her age, Velaria didn't feel the presence of monsters in the absence of light. From birth she had felt close to the specks of starlight in the sky; she could recognize the faces of the moon. She knew the beauty of the night, and

kept it all to herself. No one else stirred, no one else saw. She was alone, but not alone. The grasping shadows of the trees caressed her, the wakeful night birds whispered lullabies in her ears as they chased their prey, and the cold wind of evening calmed her mind. The night was smooth, peaceful; unbroken by the chaos of the day. Not this night, though. This night, she heard things. She heard screaming. The lovely stillness was broken. Velaria scrambled out of her sleeping bag, and the wind that had brought her peace now took knives to her shivering flesh. It was cold, but she did not feel it. Her spirit was too chilled by what she saw to allow her to be distracted by the discomforts of her body. The canvas tent in which Father and Mother had been sleeping was torn open. The fabric was splattered with blood; the vital fluid was black and thick in the darkness. Inside, things moved. Velaria could hear the wet, meaty sound of tearing flesh; the click-clack of snapping teeth. Velaria stumbled backwards in shock, incapable even of screaming with her frozen voice. Her legs moved almost automatically. She wasn't paying attention to anything other than the moving forms in the tent. She didn't even notice when her foot snapped a twig. She did notice when the commotion in the tent turned still, though.

A black shape extended from the torn canvas, and Velaria heard a loud sniff. The black shape twisted and revealed dozens of silver daggers shining in the moonlight. The shape emerged from the tent, and Velaria saw that it had been the snout of a massive, pitch-black wolf. Its fur was wet and matted with congealing blood. It snarled at her, again showing off those razor teeth. They were not all silver, though. For the first time that night, she caught sight of red illuminated by a bone-white background. She had read about wolves before. This wasn't right. Wolves didn't track down and kill full grown people. They never killed without taking a meal. And they certainly were never the size of full grown lions. This... thing, or whatever it was, did share one feature with its more natural kin. Wolves never hunt alone. The black wolf stared at her with empty, hungry eyes. Its lips pulled back in an expression that seemed oddly like a grin, and it panted in a strange approximation of laughter. Then, it turned to face the moon and called out to the darkness with an endless, piercing howl.

“This way, child. Follow, if you would keep your life.” A voice whispered from the blackness, somehow audible over the wolf's dire howl.

Velaria didn't hesitate. The voice had galvanized her into action. She turned, and ran into the night. That howl followed her into the shadows.

3 "Is there something you need?" the girl at the other side of the mixing station asked as she took the cinnamon shaker.

"Uh, no. I'm just... never mind." James stuttered.

Damn, but this girl really had him by the balls. He had to blink a couple of times to make sure that he wasn't hallucinating. Maybe in movies he'd seen something like this, but in real life? No, this would definitely be a first. He could make out little of her features. Her eyes were shaded under dark sunglasses, and her mouth was covered with a scarlet scarf. Only a narrow swath of flesh that encompassed the bridge of her nose and her astonishingly high and delicate cheekbones was visible. She was white, but not white as in Caucasian; white as in freshly fallen snow. There wasn't even a hint of red in her cheeks. In contrast, her hair was shimmering black silk with a hint of some other color... red, maybe? Her clothing was of a similar dark shade; it consisted of an expensive looking dress and heels that accentuated a strikingly well-formed figure.

“Well, how about you stop staring and tell me your name?” she asked. It was rather commanding for a question.

4 “Do not tarry, child. Do not tire.” The voice whispered.

“I can’t!” she cried. “I can’t keep running like this!”

“If you have breath to complain then you have breath to run. Or would you rather the night wolves get their fangs in you?”

No, that she definitely did not. She could see the occasional flash of silver as claws and fangs scrambled through the night. She knew that they were just playing with her, waiting for her to exhaust her reserves. Their panting faces seemed to smile out at her from between the trees. They were enjoying this; enjoying the hunt. She could only imagine how they would savor the kill. Where had they come from, these demons in the darkness?

“They came from the night, child. The night of elder days. Your ancestors, long and long ago, set them to hunt these woods.”

“How are you talking to me? Where are you?” she huffed as she ran, her feet aching from beating against the ground.

“I am ahead of you, child. Come to me, and I will protect you from the hunters.

She didn't question the voice, only followed its command. She was a child after all, only twelve years old, and in her life her parents were gods. Other adults were lesser deities to which she paid almost as much heed. Her gods were dead now, though. There was no time to weep for them; she could only rely on instinct. When that voice spoke to her, quiet and assured and clearly older than she, Velaria listened.

“Foolish child. Do not heed me simply because you have no other voice to follow. I offer a path; it is your choice to take it. Is there not some anger in you? Is there not some spark that has roared to life, fueled by the spilled blood of those who brought you into this world? Will you run from fear, into nowhere? Or will you run to survive, to achieve some aspect of vengeance? Choose, child.” The voice, clearly male, made her shiver. Did he really expect her to have anything inside other than fear? No, he did not. He simply offered her the choice. Had the choice already been made for her? She was so cold; her stomach was an empty pit. Her mind crawled with terror, and in that terror was black fur and silver fangs. There was also blood, a

lot of blood. That fear filled her to the brim, until there was no space left inside.

She felt a pain at the back of her head, and reached back with a hand to check for blood. Nothing; she was not injured. Yet the pain continued to increase. What was happening to her? Velaria couldn't understand, not at first. Then, epiphany.

She remembered sitting in a field once, years ago, when she had barely been half the height of a grown woman. A few minutes earlier, a bolt of lightning had blackened the ground at her feet. It had come out of nowhere; with no storm in sight. She had ran over to investigate, and kneeled before the blackened ground. In the very center, where the sky fire had kissed the ground, there was the tiniest hint of light. She had drawn closer, and seen a small spark smoldering in the dirt. She could tell that it had little life left in it. Without some aid, it would die. It would become nothing. So, she lent a hand where one was needed. The lightning had dried the grass into kindling where it had not burned it to char, and Velaria had collected some. With gentle movements she had covered the spark in a blanket of dead grass, and given it some of her breath. It eagerly took to life, and began to consume the fuel she had given it. She

had brought it more and more, until it had swollen to an inferno twice as tall as she. For some reason, those memories were returning to her.

She understood why. The pain in the back of her head was not from damage to her outside, but from a quietly burning spark inside her mind. She knew how to feed it, and threw onto it all the fear and pain and blood. The spark ate everything, and grew to a torrent of flame within her. Her legs filled with a burst of speed, and she set her jaw in a firm line. The night wolves seemed to feel the change in her. Their movements became more hurried; more urgent. They had let the distance grow too great, though. The trees suddenly cleared before her, and Velaria found herself running through an open field. At its center was a tree of such great size that its branches vanished into the sky. In the center of its trunk was a hole as large as a house. It formed a cave within the living flesh of the tree.

“YES, CHILD! THIS IS THE WAY!” The voice roared to her.

She said nothing, only running on. She could hear the snarls of the wolves behind her. They were no longer grinning; no longer playing. Now, the hunt

had turned more serious. They wanted, no, they needed to get to her before she reached that tree.

As she had been, she would not have made it. Only the newly born fire within her had given her the strength to run as she did. Her heart beat a harsh, rapid tattoo in her chest. It was drowned out only by the roar of her blood through her ears.

The foremost of the night wolves, the one that had first come upon her family's camp, tore the dirt to shreds as it ran. A dozen others were not far behind. They were gaining, gaining, gaining. The lead wolf opened its jaws, and made a leap for her. It slammed into an invisible barrier as she ran into the tree.

5 "I'm James." He said, almost stuttering.

"Not the most original name." The woman commented.

"You make do with what you're born with." James muttered.

"So, I take it you're not from around here."

"No, I'm not. How'd you know?"

"Live here as long as I have, and you learn faces if not names. You're new."

“Yeah, you’ve got me there. I drove on by to meet a couple of friends and go hiking up Greran Mountain.”

6 Velaria sprawled in the dirt as she entered the heart of the great tree. She looked over her shoulder and saw the wolves snarling and howling outside, stalking the strange barrier that protected her from them.

“So, you’ve made it to me, child.” The voice said to her. Unlike earlier, it was no longer disembodied. There was a mouth to give shape to the words. In the center of the living cave sat a young man. He was twenty five, maybe thirty. He looked strange; anachronistic. He wore comfortable looking pants of brown leather, entirely without adornment or marking. His upper half was bare, and she could see well-formed muscle under his reddish-brown skin. His chest was striped with horizontal lines of an ochre red shade. Above those lines hung a thin cord onto which were strung little triangular chunks of obsidian. His hair fell over his shoulders; pitch black and thick. His face was covered in paint of a similar color, except for his eyes. They were rimmed with pure white, matching the whites of his eyes. His pupils were so large that there was no color to his irises other than pure black. The

pattern reminded her of the concentric rings of a hypnotist's wheel; black then white then black again.

He was sitting with his legs folded under each other, completely at ease though his back was rigidly straight. He motioned for her to approach, and she did so. Velaria sat facing him in the same position. She stared at him, examining his features in great detail. Her earlier estimate was revised. Whatever this man was, he certainly wasn't young.

"You see this tree, in whose heart we reside? Think of the ages that have passed over it. Think of the sunrises it has seen, the summers and winters. I have seen them all. Perhaps that might give you an idea as to my age, and my nature. I nurtured this great being from a sapling, and it has become my home. Though its heart is close and dear to mine, I would be glad to venture out more than I do." He said, as though reading the question from her thoughts.

"Why did you bring me here?" Velaria asked.

"I? I brought you nowhere. Your feet ache from the hard ground, not mine. You brought yourself. Why did you come to me, child? Why are you here?"

“Because you can help me.” She said.

“Help you to do what, child?” The man asked. He would offer her nothing that was not already within her.

“You’ll help me to bring it out!” Velaria shouted. “Whatever it is that you see inside of me, whatever I seem to be drawing towards tonight. Whatever it is that will help me kill those things outside.”

“It seems that what I saw in you has already risen of its own accord. You are a fae child, Velaria. I knew it from the moment you stepped into the woods at the foot of this mountain. I knew that in you there was a certain force, a certain clarity of will. Yes, death will come to those hunters outside. They will become the hunted. Yet, before it is done, you must make yet another choice. Do you fear pain, fae child? Do you fear it more than you fear the loss of your honor, of your pride, your revenge? Will you face pain in order to destroy your enemy?”

The little strands of hair at the back of Velaria’s neck stood on end, and her skin erupted in goose bumps. What did he mean? What was the pain that he was talking about? Yes, it did scare her. More than that, he scared her. There was something more than human about this man; something more

than natural or normal. In the end, though, that spark in the back of her mind began to burn away the fear. It left only a seething anger, and an iron determination.”

“What do I do?” She asked. Her voice did not waver.

The man smiled, and she saw his teeth. They were incredibly bright; polished to a luster as shiny as those of the wolves outside and almost as sharp. He pointed between his crossed legs, and she caught sight of something that she had not noticed before. There was a knife buried near to the hilt there; he had been sitting around it, as though nurturing the weapon like a child of his blood.

“Take it.” He said.

“Give it to me.” Velaria countered.

“I cannot, nor would I if I could. The choice is yours, child. Always yours.”

Velaria made her choice, yet again moving down the same path to whatever conclusion it might bring. She grasped the hilt; it was made of bleached white bone. In contrast, the blade was solid obsidian, blacker than black. She held it out to examine it, and simply looking at the blade hurt her eyes.

It was impossibly sharp, impossibly smooth and dark. Despite being buried in the earth, there was not a trace of dirt on it. It was pristine; unmarked.

“Not quite, child.” The man chuckled. “That blade is many things, but unmarked it is not.”

She held the blade out, point towards him. He made a flipping motion with his hand, and she reversed her grip. The tip was now pointed towards her chest. She began to understand. His large, calloused hand rested over hers, but she could not feel it. She realized that he was not of flesh, but rather ethereal. It made sense. He could not push her to do this, even with his hand. The choice was all hers. She slowly inched the weapon closer to her chest.

“A tribute of blood, child. A tribute of life.” He whispered, a current of excitement coloring his words.

The blade touched her nightshirt, and parted the fabric as though it was never there. She could feel a prickling of cold on her skin, but that soon turned to fire. It hurt, and it hurt badly. Not a drop of blood fell from her chest. She realized that she had been wrong about the blade. It was not of solid obsidian; rather a thin channel ran through its core

and into the bone handle. The man bent his head to it, and stuck out his tongue like a dog about to lap water from a puddle. The first drop landed on his ethereal tongue, but did not fall through. He flicked it back into his throat, and swallowed with a sigh. His mouth opened again, and he bit down on the bone handle, drinking from it as though from the breast of his mother. He sucked greedily, growing more solid by the moment. Velaria stared, open mouthed, at the strange figure. At least, she did until all light faded from the world.

When vision returned, she was somewhere else. She looked around, and saw a small village. It was built of lean-to's and teepees, with the occasional fire pit interspersed. It was perfectly quiet; not a single bird whistled in the trees, nor did a single insect buzz about her face. It was an idyllic scene; the perfect image of a Native American village from days long gone, an image entirely without sound. No, not quite without sound. There was a sharp, shrill tone slowly building in volume in her ears. It grew and grew, until it became a screech of absolute terror. From between two tents a woman in leather and fur sprinted out, almost falling to the ground as she made a rapid turn in Velaria's direction. The woman's hair whipped around her

face as she ran, but it did nothing to obscure the mindless, primal horror in her. It was not a human fear, not at all. This was the blind animal terror of prey that didn't want to get eaten.

For a moment, the woman was the only other living creature in sight. Not for long, though. Velaria soon saw what the woman was running from. It was massive; its shoulders as level with the head of the largest horse, its jaws large enough to offer a small child room to stand, its eyes the size of grapefruits. The wolf dwarfed anything that she had ever seen before, and put to shame those hunters that she had feared earlier. Its fur was white as snow, as pale as death. There was not a hint of color to it; the pure white of the creature reflected all light, absorbing none. The light simply bounced off from it, never able to enter. Only its eyes were any different; they were absolutely black, the pupils massive and empty and cold. They seemed to be sucking the life from everything around the monstrous wolf. It was casually following its prey, not even trying. It could have overtaken her easily; perhaps the chase was more pleasurable than the kill. None the less, it was gaining. The woman was less than ten feet away when the creature caught her. It leapt forward, and snapped its teeth over

her head. Her body stumbled along for a few steps, spurting blood from the stump of its neck with the last beats of its heart. The wolf threw its head back, and the woman's severed head flew into the air. The expression of icy terror had never left her face. Now, it never would. Specks of blood flew everywhere as the head rotated in the air, and began to come down. The wolf caught it again, and with a crunch crushed the skull. It swallowed, and shivered in delight. Now, it had color. Now, there was red over the white. It loped forward and began to tear into the woman's corpse, devouring flesh and bone and blood and leather and leaving not a thing behind. As it ate, it stared at Velaria, and to her shock she recognized the creature. It was him; the man in the heart of the tree. This was his other self; his true self.

The image began to change. The sky darkened, the village grew, and smoke filled the air. She realized that she had seen only a small part of the actual scene. That village was not a gathering of a few tents; it had been home to at least a thousand people. Nothing was left of them except their wrecked and broken bodies. The woman had been lucky; there was nothing left of her. Velaria could see the legs of... someone. Whoever it was

had no face, nor any body. Just two legs loosely joined by torn flesh, and a few strands of gut and viscera. Slouched over a nearby tent, a man lay dead. His chest had been flattened by a massive paw, and the shattered remnants of a rib cage pierced through the remaining flesh. The spine was missing. Farther off was a child, a boy no more than three, with neither arms nor legs. Those bodies were joined by hundreds and hundreds more; those not consumed by the demon wolf were soon to be consumed by the fire that raged through the village. The scene changed again; a completely different landscape, a different sky, a different village. The only constants were blood, death, fire, and the wolf. The scene flickered, and changed. A new village, and again, another, until they flickered past almost too quickly to see. The wolf was there every time, staring at her as it dripped blood. How many had it killed? Tens of thousands? Hundreds? More?

The image changed one last time, returning to the original burning village. To Velaria's surprise, there was still movement between the tents. There was still life. A score of warriors, their faces painted white except for circles of black around their eyes, stalked through the flames. Each had completely

white eyes, as though blind. They were clearly not, though. They surrounded the vicious creature, bows in hand and bone knives with obsidian blades at their hips. The wolf reared back on its haunches, ready to spring. There was no fear in its eyes. It was as though the creature knew that the hunters could not pierce its hide with their weapons. Despite that, all of the hunters raised their bows and drew back thin, bone arrows with obsidian tips. One of the hunters loosed, and the arrow raced off towards the wolf. The creature did not even move. It felt no need to avoid the shaft; as though it would bounce off. When the arrow sank into the wolf's side, its mouth gaped in surprise. The wound was like a bee sting to it, but even that pain shocked it into fury. It had not expected this. It leapt at the man who had shot it, and tore into him. A talon as sharp as the most piercing despair cut the man in half, splitting him from collar to hip. He fell in pieces to the ground, and when his heart fell from his open ribcage the wolf snapped it up. The wolf spun around, snarling at the hunters to fend them off. It didn't faze any of them. Either they controlled their fear perfectly, or they truly did not care if those talons and fangs tore the life from them. Velaria sensed that it was the latter. Neither life nor death mattered to those

white faces, only their mission. More arrows flew, and sank into the monster. It howled in fury and pain; enough bee stings can weaken even the great. It was hard to tell, though, if it was just weakened or merely infuriated. It tore into the nearest hunters. They fell in flashes of white and red, cut to pieces, crushed, eaten, or some combination thereof. The ground turned to mud as it mixed with blood and pulped flesh. For every hunter that fell, however, a new cut opened in the wolf's body. Blood poured from it as the hunters swarmed over it like ants, their bone knives cutting away with obsidian blades. The volcanic glass sank into the wolf with absolute ease. It began to stagger and slow, the blood draining from the creature taking life with it. It was still a killer, though. It kicked and clawed and bit the hunters from its back, flinging them off and tearing them apart. A heave of its head and shoulders threw one hunter into the air, and its claw slammed into the man with enough force to cave in his chest and send him flying. A powerful kick of its back right leg removed the hunter clinging there, and tore his guts open, but not before he cut into the wolf's hamstring and crippled it.

The remaining hunters converged, and the wolf

fought with the desperation brought on by encroaching death. Its will to survive was as strong as its will to kill. It thrashed in a flurry of talons and teeth, killing with almost every motion. It was not enough. One last hunter, either skilled or lucky enough to not have yet had his head ripped off shoved a knife into the wolf's throat. A torrent of blood rushed out; it was a fatal blow. In retaliation, the wolf spent the last of its strength to finish its murderous rampage. It tore into the hunter's side, biting through his guts, his blood mixing with its own. Both fell; the hunter dead instantly, the wolf heaving its last breaths.

A new figure appeared from the chaos and flames. The man was impossibly old; bent and wrinkled and white-haired. There was a force to him, however; a vitality that age could not contain. He walked with stiff determination, a gnarled wooden cane impacting the ground with every step. His leather jerkin and pants were festooned with odd symbols and markings, and his neck was weighed down with pendants of bone and obsidian. His face was painted with streaks of red and black, giving his old face a haunting appearance. The dried lips peeled back in a snarl as he stood beside the wolf.

"I imagine you don't relish the heat of earth-fire

glass in your hide, do you Winter Wind?"

The wolf's figure shimmered, and shrank. The weapons fell out from it, tumbling around the bleeding and broken body of the man to whom Velaria was giving her blood.

"No, but the blood of your sons on my tongue more than makes up for it, Elder." The man hissed. "You know death won't hold me forever? I will be stronger when I wake from the long sleep, and I will gorge on the meat of your children long after you and your magics fade from this world."

"We will see about that, demon boy. I know that the taste of human flesh has not left you since you became one of the Night Hunters, but your broken teeth will neuter you." The Elder walked closer, and slammed his staff down on the man's crotch. "Conveniently enough, neutering will also neuter you. Die in defeat, demon boy."

The man on the ground grimaced, and began to move. The Elder wasn't quick enough to stop him. The man jerked his hand to his mouth, and something roughly the size of an acorn dropped between his bloody teeth. He swallowed with some effort through his torn throat, and then convulsed. A small sapling burst from his chest, covered in

blood. It took the man's last breath with it, but he died with a smile. The old man hissed in fury, and stepped over the corpse. There was nothing that even his magics could do now, except perhaps one thing. He walked to the bodies of the fallen hunters, each in his turn, and drew runes on what skin was left to them with a mix of ash and their own blood. He stood, and whispered an incantation with a wave of his staff. The bodies shivered, and began to change. From the bloody corpses emerged a score of black wolves. They were the very same ones that had chased after Velaria through the night.

"Watch him well, my boys." The Elder sighed. "Do not desert your posts. Watch him, and do not let anyone wake him."

He stepped away, limping towards the place where Velaria's eyes stared out from the air. He knelt down, and looked her straight in the eye.

"Do you not see what you have done, idiot? My people sacrificed their blood to end the White Wolf, and now you bring it right to him. You let him drink of it! Yes, there are a few drops of our blood in you, though diluted over the years. Your grandfather's grandfather gave child to a woman

of my people, and it is from her that you are descended. I charged my sons to keep guard over his sleeping spirit; to stop anyone from reviving him by any means possible, including murder. Your father had our blood; he was also a danger. Your mother was innocent though, and for her death I apologize. My boys have grown wild over the years, and their hunger has sharpened. Yet this does not excuse your actions. Return to your time, and enjoy your damnation.”

Her eyes closed, and opened to a different world. She was on the ground now, fallen to her back from weakness. The man, Winter Wind, the White Wolf, was draining her. She had not realized that he would take so much. A few drops, a little pain, these she had accepted. This was something more, though. He was taking everything, leaching every scrap of life from her. His eyes began to glow with demonic fel-light. At last, he drew away and pulled his knife from her empty body. He dropped it beside her limp right hand, and took a few steps forward towards the barrier shielding the heart of the tree from the black wolves outside. There were more now; the full score were all present. Winter Wind did not fear them. In him was nothing but the sharp cold fury of his namesake. He began to

convulse, and change into his other form. Velaria's head was turned to face the outside, and she had not the strength to turn away. The White Wolf was ready to hunt again. If anything, he was even bigger than in her earlier vision. He had spoken true when he said that he would grow stronger when he woke to the flesh again. The black wolves outside gathered together and began to growl low in their chests, fangs bared and ears flat. They had too much pride to turn away from their ancient enemy. Perhaps there was a chance that they would conquer him again. They carried the Elder's magic, after all. It would give their claws the power to pierce his flesh, even without the earth-fire glass, obsidian.

The White Wolf didn't hesitate. He charged out, muscles writhing under his skin. He dwarfed the opponents that outnumbered him, both in size and in strength and in simple presence. He tore into them, an Alpha weeding out the weak cubs. Maybe five of them could even land a scratch. The White Wolf left them crippled, but alive. He would pay them special attention after it killed their brethren. That time came soon enough. When the others were left in wet pieces of meat and fur on the ground, the White Wolf began to slowly eat the

remaining five that had irked him. They died, and it wasn't neat. It wasn't quick. They served only to feed their enemy. He left them with no honor. He would shit them out in these woods, food for the beetles and worms after him. So went the proud warriors, their pride now broken.

The Wolf stalked back into his den, and stared down at Velaria's body. It knelt down to sniff at her. Perhaps he would eat her, too. There was nothing as sweet as the flesh of a child. Yet, it would lack that distinctive flavor brought on by terror and panic. Without those extra spices, would it be worth crunching on her narrow bones? She had already outgrown her baby fat so there wouldn't be much of that for him. He would have accepted it, though, if only the fear remained.

"Foolish child," Winter Wind muttered, turning back to his lesser shape. "You went so bravely, so blindly, to your death."

He heard something, then. Some sound came from her. Was she letting out her last breath? Had he left her with any? He knelt down, and bent his ear to her mouth. In that instant, he realized his mistake. He realized it when he felt the sharp pain in his neck; a pain he knew all too well. His body was

paralyzed with it, and it was only that which kept him from howling out his fury.

The small hand of a half-dead, fey girl-child was wrapped tightly around a bone hilt. That hilt was pointed to her open mouth, and soon began to drip blood. The blade extending from that hilt penetrated Winter Wind's jugular, and drank greedily from him. It was not the usual way; typically it fed through the aorta, but this would do just the same. He began to fill with an empty cold as Velaria's eyes flashed open. He could glimpse in them a raging, maddened hunger. She thirsted for his life; the life he had taken from her. As it flowed through her frame, her pallor dissipated and her grip on the knife solidified. She sat upright, and pulled him down to her lap. She continued to suck the life from him. She would not be satisfied until every last bit was hers. That moment came soon enough, and she gasped as her lips left the bone handle. As the world turned dark, Winter Wind saw the blood staining her teeth. It was an image of strength, in his world; an image of victory.

Velaria stared right at his glazing empty black eyes, her own now exactly the same shade. She stroked his smooth, silky hair as she spoke.

“Not so foolish after all. Not so blind. Though I guess I am brave. I’m also really damned hungry.”

Winter Wind looked back, and whispered his last words. “Hunt well, child.”

He died then. He would never return from this death. Despite that, he died with a smile yet again.

Velaria stood from his corpse, knife in hand, and began to walk from the heart of the tree. As she went, she began to change. The creature that emerged was not a young girl, but a massive white she-wolf.

7 “Greran Mountain, eh? It’s a solid hike.” The woman said.

James looked back, and smiled. “Hey, I’m a tough guy. I can handle it.” He flexed his biceps a little as he spoke, unabashedly showing off.

“Good luck then.” She nodded to him, and let out a radiant smile. “I warn you, though. There are rumors of wolves in those hills.”

“Well, if any have the balls to come after me, I’ll roast them on a spit.” His bravado was plain as he turned to go, and he waved back at her as he left.

“Hikers?” Velaria thought. “Well, I am hungry. I wonder what he’ll taste like.”

She chuckled then at his last comment. “Well, I may not have balls but I’ll come after you nonetheless. When I do, I don’t expect to land on a spit. Time to bloody my teeth again.”

She turned to go, anticipating the hunt.