

BLOSSOM

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It was late when Grandfather came for her; so late that it could only rightly be called early. It would have been dark outside, except the moonlight reflected on the snow and gave the whole night a cold blue glow. He lifted her out of her bed and set her on her feet, pushing her arms into the sleeves of an old, musky fur coat before she was truly awake. She grumbled weakly as she was led down the stairs, but Grandfather wasn't feeling indulgent:

'The Winter Wolves are coming,' he said, urgently.

And that was that.

A brief stumble down the stairs, and then Grandfather had carried her outside. The air bit into her lungs as she breathed: it ate the sleep in her eyes and the air in every breath she took, and it made her want to pee. It had snowed whilst she was asleep, and that combined with the rude awakening made her feel that she had awoken into some

strange new world. The trees were no longer green, instead dark shadows tipped with cold white snow. The world was made anew in a strange monochrome, where the brightest white was tinged with blue and the darkest shadow couldn't manage more than a deep grey.

Grandfather pushed her out into the snow. He had thrown his own fur coat quickly over his habitual slippers and cardigan, in too much of a hurry to dress properly for the cold. If Mother had been there, she would have been Disappointed With Grandfather. But Mother wasn't here any more, and so she lived with Grandfather. And she couldn't well be Disappointed With Grandfather. Especially not now the Winter Wolves were coming.

The snow was still falling, thick white flakes coating her as she ran.

There was a howl from behind her.

'Blossom,' said Grandfather urgently. 'Run!'

Blossom ran. Snowflakes fell in her path and stung her eyes, but she ran on regardless. The woods took on an unfamiliar air in the snow, as if somebody had snuck into her room late at night and redecorated while she slept and now she couldn't tell the wardrobe from the bureau. She had often taken afternoon strolls through the woods with Grandfather, looking for the ideal place to build a den, or to find the first bluebells of the year. But now her lungs were aching and her legs were tired, and the heavy fur coat weighed her down and made her hot. She didn't take it off, though: it had been Grandmother's, and she didn't think Grandfather would be very happy if she lost it.

Behind her, the Winter Wolves howled. It was such a sad sound that it broke her heart. Grandfather used to say that the wolves mourned for the prey they were about to

kill; out of sadness for what they were taking and what it made them. Grandfather had dropped behind almost as soon as they'd entered the wood. He was out of breath just hopping down the stairs in his cottage. He had told her not to stop. To run. The idea came to Blossom that the wolves would be mourning her Grandfather now, and that she was now finally truly alone. Tears pricked in her eyes as she ran, stinging and freezing.

She nearly didn't see the first wolf, a grey pelted monster hiding in a patch of grey shadow where one tree leant drunkenly into another. Its eyes gave it away, glinting in the icy moonlight. When it saw it had been discovered, it threw back its head and howled steaming breath into the morning air. Blossom didn't wait to see if the howl brought others, just slipped off the path and between two holly bushes – and ran. The greedy holly nipped at her bare face, drawing blood. Her hand went to her cheek, but not before a single drop of bright red blood dripped to the ground, bleeding again into the crisp white snow.

The Winter Wolves were close behind her now. She could feel their hot breath on her bare ankles.

She tried not to think of Grandfather.

Up ahead, Blossom saw the strangest thing. There was a clearing, and sat in the middle of it was a large blue door, almost twice as tall and twice as wide as Blossom herself was. It didn't appear to be connected to anything, or lead anywhere. It just was. The snow fell against it, piling up at its foot, but the wood itself remained clear: as if it was heated somehow from within. Blossom didn't have time to consider the strangeness of this, nor to think too hard about her own actions. The Winter Wolves were gathering behind her, their breath clouding the air.

Blossom ran to the doorway and pushed through.

The Winter Wolves stopped chasing, and sang their despair to the moon.



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The other side of the door was stranger still. Blossom stepped through, bringing a brief flurry of snow with her that quickly settled around her feet. But the snow wasn't settling on the mossy woodland floor; instead, the ground beneath her feet was now fine bone-coloured sand that drank the moisture thirstily from the unexpected snowfall. Blossom had stepped through the door into a vast and empty desert, and what was more a vast an empty desert in the middle of the night. The sky was black and speckled with stars she couldn't even begin to recognise. The cold faces of two unfamiliar moons looked down at her, one glinting a dull copper colour. Luckily, the desert night was almost as cold as the winter morning she had just left behind her, so she didn't need to make a decision about whether to remove Grandmother's coat and risk losing it.

'Oh my goodness me,' said a voice from behind her. 'Oh my goodness no.'

Blossom turned and for a moment her Grandfather was standing in front of her. Then she blinked the snow out of her eyes, and saw that it was just another man in a vast fur coat, this one tied around his waist with a hairy piece of string. He was standing by a blazing camp fire which made Blossom notice how the sweat of the chase was starting to turn icy now that the running was over. The stranger in the coat was fussing around this way and that, muttering to himself as his thick black hair thrashed wildly with each shake of his head.

'No, no, no,' he said firmly. 'This just won't do. I can't have people sneaking in through the back door whenever they feel like it. You'll just have to leave.'

'I can't,' Blossom said quite calmly. 'The Winter Wolves are chasing me.'

'I'm sure they are,' the little man said, not altogether unkindly. 'But I can't very well have you wandering around in here, can I?'

'I think they ate my Grandfather,' Blossom said quietly. Tears prickled her eyes again.

The scruffy man looked at her grimly.

He cocked his head, and smiled.

'Well,' he said gently, 'that's a little different then, isn't it.'

He twisted himself in a smooth corkscrew, his legs bending beneath him until he was sitting with his back to her, his legs crossed and the fire in front of him. He gave her a satisfied little smirk as he looked back over his shoulder at her, and patted the sand beside him. Blossom looked down at his hands. The nail was ragged on the thumb where it had been bitten.

'Why don't you tell me all about it, hmm?' he said.

There was only kindness in his voice. Blossom found herself looking back to the door.

'Oh I wouldn't worry,' the stranger said. 'I don't think they'll find their way in here.'

Blossom looked around: it was strange the way the man kept talking as if they were inside, when clearly they weren't. But so much of this was strange that one extra thing was neither here nor there. She yawned suddenly, surprising even herself. Her legs still ached, and she hadn't had as much sleep as she was used to. Fleeing from the wolves. It was barely her decision to sit by the fire, her body deciding for her to take its rest where it could. The stranger smiled again, and offered her something small and sweet from a paper packet. Blossom took it to be polite, but the taste of sugar was too much for her so early in the day.

The strange man didn't say anything, but Blossom realised he was waiting for her

to answer his question.

She warmed her hands by the fire, and took a deep breath.

‘My name is Blossom,’ she said, politely but confident, as she had been taught. ‘I live with my grandfather outside the village. This morning, the Winter Wolves came for us. I ran, until I ran here.’

Blossom looked into the fire and tried not to think about Grandfather.

‘And . . . ?’ the stranger coaxed gently.

Blossom looked at him, not understanding.

‘Where did they come from, these wolves?’ the black-haired man said. ‘Where do they go to? What do they want? Why chase you and your grandfather?’

Blossom looked at him, her head half cocked.

‘You’re not from the village, are you,’ she said simply.

The stranger mumbled to himself as he suddenly found the need to try to straighten his bow tie. The gesture was doomed to failure: the tie was held on with a silver pin. He looked more than a little shame-faced, smiling up at Blossom like a child. Like a younger child than her: suddenly she felt very old and very wise.

‘The Winter Wolves come in winter and they kill anyone they find,’ Blossom said, quietly so as not to make the words real enough to apply to her grandfather. ‘There isn’t anything else.’

The man shook his head.

‘There has to be more to it than that. I’ve –’ he stopped, as if changing his mind. ‘There are some bad things outside the village. Very bad things. But no matter what, no matter just how bad, they all have a reason for what they do. Not reason enough, usually.’

But a reason.'

'Not the Winter Wolves,' Blossom said, shaking her head. What was this? 'You don't know. You haven't seen them.'

The strange man fixed her with a strange look. Pulling his sleeves up, he reached out quickly and thrust his hands into the burning fire. The flames crackled invitingly, and crept up his arms. Blossom's heart seemed to shrink and swell all at the same time, as a spark that started in her belly made the rest of her body jerk forwards. Her hands were on the stranger's wrists and pulling before she even registered that the flames licking hungrily at her fingers weren't burning her. The fire lapped at her, but it was insubstantial, little more than air. And even so, she could feel heat that seemed to start a good way away from the flames themselves, warming against the cold night air.

The stranger gave her a confused look, as if he hadn't even considered she might be concerned.

He flicked a switch hidden inside the flames, and the fire died.

'Things aren't always how they look,' he said. 'Why don't we have some tea?'

A door appeared in the desert, large and indented with concentric circles.

The stranger unfolded himself, until he was on his feet.

In the middle of the woods, there was a clearing. In the clearing stood a blue door, the only thing for miles around that wasn't covered in a hefty coat of snow. Pacing around it, sniffing it cautiously, was an entire pack of wolves: grey of pelt and long of tooth, their eyes catching the pale sunlight and throwing it back. They seemed unsure of what to

make of the door, although neither could they seem to leave it be. They worried it like a wound, pacing it and snarling.

Then the door opened, and a young girl came out.

Her hair was so blonde it seemed as white as the snow, her eyes the same pale green as the wolves' and reflecting the light. She was wearing a light jacket of some indeterminate fabric, but it must be keeping her warm since she didn't seem tempted in the slightest to put on the fur coat she held folded in her hands. The wolves had been there when she'd first walked through that door, only a few minutes previously. Yet here she was, by some Narnian miracle, a good six months older.

And wiser: she lay the wolfskin coat on the snow.

'I'm sorry,' she said quietly.

The Winter Wolves howled.