

# A Dream of Evangeline

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In a time when gods and men have fallen, a lone being has survived. A shadow of a ghost of a black wolf must somehow restore the world to its former state, or fail and watch as existence fades to nothing.

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## The Black Beast

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A black shape slowly stirred itself, a silhouette against gray hills stretching out into the vast distance of a featureless land. A stinging sand blew on a strong wind, howling as it swirled between the crests and valleys of ash-like dirt.Â The shape struggled to its feet, slow and painful, resigned in its efforts. It was a beast who's name was forgotten in these faded times, covered in black fur, tall and lean. One golden eye peered out beneath its ragged brow, the other was lost beneath a long white scar stretching from muzzle to pointed ear.

At last the beast stood, and surveyed what lay before him. Hunger gnawed at his gut, as he swept his great head from side to side, and lifted his muzzle to scent the wind. What he saw filled his belly with a pain greater than hunger, for he could remember the times when this vast land was filled with green trees, and the cool crisp wind whistled by, bringing the scent of the trees and earth and water to his nostrils. He remembered most of all, the wild thrill of the hunt, the heady scent of his prey, and the happy sounds of his pack after the kill. His pack, raising their heads to howl joyously at the moon.Â

He didn't know what had caused this great barren grayness to replace those fertile valleys, but he knew it had something to do with the twolegs. They were all gone now, with the rest, and at times he was sure that he was the only creature left on this earth.Â

He shook himself, jolting out of his reverie. He had to go on, to continue, to find something to sustain him through one more day. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten, and he desperately needed to find food. The memories flitted through his memory, of great crashes in the sky, and a stinking sulfurous scent. Of himself locked in mortal combat with... something. Those were different days though, and he wasn't entirely certain if the memories were his own, or a some shared memory of another great black beast who once had lived. He shook himself again. It did not matter. All that was past was irrelevant, the only thing that mattered now, surviving, and continuing on.Â

The great beast at last began to move forward, almost as a flood overcoming a dam, he leaned forward and flowed into a loping run. He was very tired, and very hungry, and still unsure quite where he would go, or where he had been.Â

The gray land flowed by in a blur, making it hard for him to tell if he had put much distance between himself and his waking point. The sun was a harsh white disk hanging in the blue skies above him. The dust stung in his eyes.

He ran on, slowing only when he felt his lungs begin to burn for air, and his throat close with the thirst. At last the sun set, and faded down below the horizon, its red rays adding a reminder of the beautiful sights that had faded from this world. A reminder of the red blood of his enemy, or the other beast's enemy, right before the world had begun to empty of color. His enemy, gripped in his teeth, with his enemy's long tooth in his side. Was it real? Or was this bleakness all that had ever been.

The moon rose now, his old friend. He wished that he had the strength to howl in greeting, but without his brothers it would mean nothing. He slowed to a trot, tongue lolling from his mouth, thinking only of the cool clean waters that once were so abundant. His body ached, his lungs burned and gray dirt mixed with tears and slid slowly from his glowing golden eye.

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He was tired. Not just tired of loping across the monotonous terrain, but tired of the familiar hunger, the dull scent and the endless days spent without knowing if he was any closer to where he was going. Without knowing where he was going. His rolling gate slowed to a trot, and then a stumbling walk. He told himself that he had to keep going, but he wasn't sure whether he cared to continue or not. He tried to think of the last meal he had enjoyed. He knew only that it had been many moons ago, it seemed it must have been an impossibly long time. A dull memory of a thin, stumbling, limping prey, a smell of weariness and resignation blowing with the wind and the dirt into his stinging nose. Nothing at all like when things had been right, running with his pack, the thumping of his prey's heart strong in his ears, determination and vigor filling his senses, equally strong from his prey and his brothers.

With these memories again filling his mind, suddenly something caught his attention, and he immediately stopped in his tracks, raised his muzzle to scent the air. A scent! He couldn't believe it, it had been so long since he smelled something other than the muffled dead smell of the gray dirt. Frantically scenting the wind, for the faint smell, he paced back and forth. There! He took off at a pace that pushed his weary muscles to the limit, running for the scent of life and sustenance, a means of continuing another day. The gray landscape blurred in the corner of his eyes as his great black body stretched out in long ragged strides, the wind whistling in his ears, bounding and leaping gaps in the forlorn landscape.

At last he sensed the distance closing between himself and his prey, the faint smell growing stronger and filling his nose. His whole body throbbed with a mixture of excitement and desperation as he drew closer, close enough now to begin to recognize that scent. It smelled like the long legged brown backs who he had chased so many times with his brothers. A scent fainter still ran through it though. Something jarring, and unfamiliar. He pushed it to the back of his mind, letting only the hunt occupy his concentration.

As he ran the landscape gradually changed around him. He ran for an eternity, up a looming hill and down the other side, leaping over a dry riverbed, finally catching a glimpse of his elusive prey. He slowed, seeing that his prey was standing still. Hunting without his pack was tricky, even after all this time, and he would have to be cautious. The brown back had not noticed him yet, and he dropped quietly to his belly, knowing it would have trouble spotting him against the gray earth. He would have to have faith in the great mother to keep the wind at his muzzle.

As he rested he examined his prey. It stood in a great gully, a crevice in the earth between two great jagged grey cliffs, its head drooping down to the ground. As he watched it slowly swung its head from side to side, perhaps searching for food, the wind blowing little tufts of its mottled gray and brown hair, like tumbleweed blowing down the gully. Its great antlers stood as tall as he himself did, blotting out the stars when the animal raised its head. He could tell that the great beast was old, maybe even ancient, and a vague sadness passed through him that such a beast, an elder if it had still had a pack, would be ended here. He wished he had a brother to share this feast with, knowing that the great brown back's sacrifice would largely go to waste. At the same time, he thanked the all mother for preserving him another day.

With a final deep breath he heaved himself to his feet. Before him, a narrow path glowed in the night, running in a near straight line down between the walls of the gully. It stretched out in front of him, almost as if he was meant to find the animal who lay at the other end.

Grimly he stretched out his weary muscles. The time had come, the time for the dance of death. With a shocking suddenness he thrust himself forward and downward with all his remaining might. His mouth gaped open and his one eye fixed on his target, his feet barely touched the ground as he charged forward, all his remaining determination primed for his one goal. The great head of the brown back rose and looked at him, dull eyes looked at him without fear. Almost slowly, almost resignedly, the massive animal turned from him, and began its flight.

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He surged forward in chase, but the great animal maintained its distance. The chase was on and the black beast followed the giant brown shape through the shimmering grey light cast by the full moon. Locked in a mortal struggle, the two creatures ran on in the night, both keen on survival.

He was close now, only the distance he could run in 5 breaths, but the great muscles below the ragged brown and grey fur surged in front of him, staying just out of his reach. He chased onward, his heart surging, the thrill of the chase coming back to him. The heady scent of the animal reached his nose, so good to smell again the scent of another living thing.

The brown back was tiring now, which was a good thing because he himself, great black beast that he was, could barely drive himself onward. Dark shapes began to slide past him, small shapes, little things close to the ground, but he paid them no heed. In his exhaustion and hunger, in his determination he was nearly delirious, and could think of only catching the weary animal running before him.

At last he closed the gap, leaping forward with a final surge of strength, he closed his teeth on the animal's mighty haunch. Gritty exhilaration coursed through him, making him want to howl, as he howled with his brothers, in triumph. Blood poured into his mouth, and he prepared to take the creature to the ground.

But something wasn't right. The blood burned in his mouth and he let go his grip in surprise. Stopping in his tracks he watched in shock as the tall slender legs of the brown back crumbled, the great rack of antlers swaying over and crashing to the ground with the surreal slowness of a tree falling in the wood. The sharp smell he had dismissed earlier came crashing back in full, and he gagged with the bitterness on his tongue. In desperation he bit and gnawed at the rocky grey dirt below his feet, trying in vain to get the vile taste out of his mouth.

The dirt was disgusting but after a time he could no longer taste the horrible corruption of the animal in his mouth. He looked over to where it had fallen, laying on its side, moonlight showing the black blood leaking from where he had wounded it. He walked closer, sniffing cautiously as he approached. Clearly the brown back had ended, but not from his bite. Closer now, he smelled strongly the corruption, as if his bite had burst a rotten fruit, and now the smell was unrestrained. It was as if the creature had been dead as it stood in the valley, dead as it ran before him, and now its flesh was so corrupt as to be poison to even his strong body.

The brown back was totally inedible. After the great chase, it had all been for not, and he would have to leave the animal where it lay, his hunger still gnawing at his gut. What dark forces could cause a creature to rot so, to be alive and yet dead at the same time?

Raising his head he howled in frustration where he had held back his howls of elation. His great black maw quivered and the muscles in his long rangy legs, and deep shaggy chest tensed with his anger and loneliness. Why must he continue when all else was gone?

More tired than ever, with the sounds of his sorrow echoing in the distance, he lowered his head, and began his stumbling walk anew.

As he walked, and the emotion began to settle, he began to notice a change in his surroundings. The Skybrother no longer shone down on him, but instead was settled behind a great bank of black clouds, and it became difficult to see. His one eye squinted, and he thought he could make out small shapes distantly surrounding him. He remembered in the old times, in the wood, weaving through the trunks of the tall green trees, their canopy all but obscuring the sky.

He had been the leader of his pack there, in the times before the tall two leg with the long tooth had come. In the time before he had needed to do battle. He remembered clearly the beauty of Silvermane, though he could

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not recall his own name. She had led the pack with him, his pack, and even though they were few, all the other packs had feared their strength. The forest had been his, uncontested, and he had ruled it justly, ensuring that prey had been hunted only for food, never for the joy of killing.Â

He remembered that in those days, they had howled to the Skybrother, and the Skybrother had howled back in the mind-voice, telling them of the AllMother, and how they must honour her. But now the SkyBrother was quite.

He looked up to the Skybrother as he walked, still hidden behind his rolling black concealment, the edges of his light peaking out. Times had been better then. Before he and the black beast became one. The black beast who's memories were his, who remembered fighting the two leg with the long claw. Who remembered only death, and fighting, and the end of the forest. The end of everything.

A dim glow became visible in the distance. Too tired to hurry, he merely continued. A lesser beast would have fallen long ago, a lesser beast would have fallen an age before, but the great black wolf continued on, his pride refusing to let him fall. His one bright yellow eye shone in the darkness, even with no light to illuminate it. The dim radiance marched ever closer.

As the moon slowly sank towards the edge of the world, he began to smell a faint but familiar smell. Water. He must be imagining it, it could not be true. So soon after the disappointment of the great brown back, he could not face another bitterness. But he could not stop either, he could only continue.

As the blue radiance began to take shape before him, he felt hope surge within his chest for the second time that night. His pace quickened. It was a pool of clear blue water, not as satisfying as prey, but still his parched throat throbbed, and his empty stomach sent a sharp pain through his middle. With the last of his strength he shambled forward, collapsing with his paws and muzzle thrust into the clean waters.Â

It was a small pond, only three times the length of his own body, but it was the first clean water he could remember seeing. He drank thirstily, almost biting the water in his haste, the cool pure liquid ending the torture that was the dryness in his mouth, and filling his empty stomach, at least with something.

At long last, after a night of desperation, after many nights of desperation, he dragged his weary body out of the pond. For what felt like the first time he could remember, his throat no longer felt as if it would close, and at least something was in his belly. As good as that was, the rest of him ached and burned, the wiry muscles of his legs quivering with exhaustion and exertion. He could barely stand, and with one last stumbling step he collapsed forward onto the ground by the pond. So tired was he, that he did not even notice the hard surface he lay his head on. Nor the great sprawling branches that spread out above him, dimly illuminated by the strangely glowing pond.

The black beast slept.

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