

# **Tale of the Snowbeast**

**by Janny Wurts, 1953–**

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That year, the season of white cold was worse than any elf in the holt could remember. The storage nooks were empty of the last nuts and dried fruit; and still the wind blew screaming through bare branches while snow winnowed deep into drifts in the brush and the hollows between trees. Huddled beneath the weight of a fur-lined tunic, Huntress Skyfire paused and leaned on her bow.

"Hurry up! It's well after daylight, past time we were back to the holt."

A soft whine answered her.

Chilled, famished, and tired of foraging on game trails that showed no tracks, Skyfire turned and looked back. Her companion wolf, Woodbiter, hunched with his tail to the wind, gnawing at the ice which crusted the fur between his pads.

"Oh, owl pellets, again?" But Skyfire's tone reflected chagrin rather than annoyance. She laid aside her bow, stripped off her gloves, and knelt to help the wolf. "You're an unbelievable nuisance, you know that?"

Woodbiter sneezed, snow flying from his muzzle.

"This is the second night we come back empty-handed." Skyfire blew on reddened hands, then worked her fingers back into chilled gloves. Woodbiter whined again as she rose, but did not bound ahead. Neither did he hunt up a stick to play games; instead he trotted down the trail, his bushy tail hung low behind. Hunger was wearing even his high spirits down. Skyfire retrieved her bow in frustration. The tribe needed game, desperately; the Wolfriders were all too thin, and though the cubs were spared the largest portions, lately the youngest had grown sickly. Tonight, Skyfire decided, she would range farther afield, for plainly the forest surrounding the holt was hunted out.

A gust raked the branches, tossing snow like powder over Skyfire's head. She tugged her leather cap over her ears, then froze, for something had moved in the brush. Woodbiter stopped with his tail lifted and his nose held low to the ground; by his stance Skyfire knew he scented game, probably a predator which had left its warm den to forage for mice in a stand of saplings. Skyfire slipped an arrow by slow inches from her quiver. She nocked it to her bowstring and waited, still as only an elf could be.

The shadow moved, a forest cat half-glimpsed through blown snow. Skyfire released a shot so sure that even another elf might envy her skill; and by Woodbiter's eager whine knew that he scented blood. Her arrow had flown true.

But unlike the usual kill, her companion wolf did not rush joyfully to share the fruits of their hunting. Woodbiter obediently held back, for in times of intense hardship, game must be returned to the holt for all of the tribe to share. Skyfire elbowed her way through the saplings, grumbling a little as snow showered off the branches and spilled down her neck. She picked up the carcass and felt the bones press sharply through the thick fur of its coat. Half-starved itself, the cat was a pathetic bundle of sinew; it would scarcely fill the belly of the youngest of the cubs. Skyfire sighed and worked her arrow free. She permitted Woodbiter to lick the blood from the shaft. Then, as wind chased the snow into patterns under her boots, she pushed her catch into her game bag and resumed her trek to the holt.

She arrived exhausted from pushing through the heavy drifts. Breathless, chilled, and wanting nothing more than to curl up in her hollow and sleep, she unslung her game bag. Shadows speared across the packed snow beneath the trees that sheltered the holt; but the tribe did not sleep, as Skyfire expected. Elves and wolves clustered around the blond-haired form of Two-Spear, who was chief. Closest to him were his tight cadre of friends, including Graywolf, Willowgreen, and sour-tempered Stonethrower.

Skyfire frowned. Why should Two-Spear call council at this hour, if not to take advantage of her absence? The chief might be her sibling, but to a sister who liked her hunts direct and her kills clean, Two-Spear's motives sometimes seemed dark and murky, as a pool that had stood too long in shadow. And his policies were dangerous. Elves had died for his hotheaded raids upon the humans in the past, and the chance he might even now be hatching another such reckless solution for the hunger which currently beset the tribe made Skyfire forget her weariness. Woodbiter sensed the mood of his companion. He pressed against her hip, whining softly as she pitched her game bag into the snow.

A younger elf on the fringes turned at the sound. Called Sapling for her slim build, her face lit up in welcome. "You're late," she said, cheerful despite the fact that hunger had transformed her slender grace to gauntness.

It was unfair, thought Skyfire, that lean times should fall hardest upon the young. She pushed the game bag with her toe, trying to lighten her own mood. "I'm late because of this." Then, as Sapling's thin face showed more hope than a single, underfed forest cat warranted, she forced herself to add, "Which was hardly worth the risk."

Sapling paused, her hand on the strap of the game bag, and a wordless interval passed. Dangerous though it was for an elf to fare alone during daylight, when men were abroad and chances of capture increased, the game in the bag was too sorely needed to be spurned. "The other hunters made no kills at all," Sapling pointed out.

The admiration in her tone embarrassed; brusquely, Skyfire said, "Is that why Two-Spear called council?"

Sapling hefted the game bag. "He plans to send a hunting party deeper into the forest than elves have ever gone, to look for stag."

Which was wise, Skyfire reflected; except that all too frequently Two-Spear's intentions resulted in discord and chaos. Frowning, she pulled off her cap, freeing the red-gold hair which had earned her name. "I think I had better go along," she said softly. And leaving the game with Woodbiter and Sapling, she stepped boldly toward the clustered members of the tribe.

Her approach was obscured by the taller forms of the few high ones whose blood had not mixed with the wolves, yet Two-Spear saw her. He stopped speaking, and other heads turned to follow his glance. "Skyfire!" said her brother. "We were just wondering where you were."

Skyfire endured the bite of sarcasm in his tone. She looked to Willowgreen, and received a faint shake of the head in reply; no. Two-Spear was not in one of his rages. But at his side, the half-wild eyes of Graywolf warned her to speak with care. "I wish to go with the hunting party, brother."

"You went with the hunting party last night," Two-Spear said acidly. He tossed back fair hair and shrugged. "Yet again, you returned alone. In strange territory, that habit could endanger us."

Skyfire bridled, but returned no malice; the carcass in her game bag was too scrawny as a boast to prove her success on the trail. Instead she sought a reply that might ease the rivalry that seemed almost daily to widen the breach between herself and this brother who was chief; above anything she did not want to provoke a challenge. The white cold made difficulties enough without elf contending against elf within the tribe. Still her thoughts did not move fast enough.

Sapling came hotly to her defense, calling from the edge of the council. "The Huntress brought us game! She was the only Wolfrider to return with any meat."

Skyfire gritted her teeth, embarrassed afresh as hungry, eager pairs of eyes all focused past her. Jostled as tribe-mates pushed by to crowd around Sapling and the pathetic bundle in the game bag, she hid her discomfort by pressing her hair back into her cap. Aware only of Two-Spear's sharp laugh, she missed seeing

Graywolf part the drawstrings. The bloody, bone-skinny cat was held aloft, a trophy of her prowess for all the tribe to see.

Yet hunger robbed the mockery of insult; and even the tribe elder who had taught her dared not mock her affinity for the hunt. When the vote was cast, Skyfire found her name included in the party of seven that would seek new territory to forage. That satisfied her, though the choice of Two-Spear's henchman, Stonethrower, as leader of the foray pleased her not at all.

The kill was skinned, then divided among the youngest cubs. Emulating Skyfire, Sapling tried to refuse her portion, until the focus of her admiration sternly instructed her to eat. At last, bone-weary, the finest huntress in the tribe since Prey-Pacer retired to her hollow and curled deep in her furs. The only things she noticed before she fell asleep were the dizzy lassitude of extreme hunger, and the snarls of the wolf-pack as they fought over the forest cat's entrails. The sound gave rise to discordant dreams, in which she faced her brother over the honed points of the twin spears he carried always at his side...

"Get up, sister."

Skyfire opened her eyes as the fair head of her brother tilted through the entrance to her hollow beneath the upper fork of the central tree. His eyes were blue, and too bright, like sky reflected in ice. "You promised to hunt down the grandfather of all stags, remember? Stonethrower is waiting for you."

Stung by the fact that this was the first time since she had been a cub that her brother had succeeded in catching her asleep, Skyfire peeled aside her sleeping furs. She reached for laces and stag fleece to bind her legs against the cold. "Tell Stonethrower to sharpen that old flint knife he carries. I'll be ready before he's finished." But her retort fell uselessly upon emptiness; Two-Spear had already departed.

The worse ignominy struck when she emerged, arrows and quiver hooked awkwardly over one arm while she struggled to lace her jerkin. Her other hand strove and failed to contain the brindled fur of her storm cape. She hooked a toe in the trailing hem and nearly fell out of the great tree before she realized that sunset still stained a sky framed by buttresses of black branches; the cleared ground beneath was empty of all but the presence of her brother. In all likelihood, Stonethrower was still in the arms of his lifemate.

Hunger made it difficult for Skyfire to control her annoyance. With forced deliberation, she sat on the nearest tree limb and began to retie the bindings that haste had caused her to lace too tightly. She pulled the chilly weight of the cloak over her shoulders and hung her quiver and bow. Then, hearing Stonethrower shout from below, she rose and grimly climbed down. By the time her feet sank into the snowdrifts beneath, her temper had entirely dissolved. Woodbiter had bounded up to nose at her hand, and her thoughts turned toward game, and thrill of the coming hunt.

The hunters gathered quickly after that. But unlike more prosperous times, as the afterglow faded and twilight deepened over the forest, they did not laugh or chatter. Their wolves did not whine with eagerness, but stood steady as riders mounted. Then, Graywolf with his unnaturally silent tread breaking the trail, seven elves departed with hopes of finding meat for a starving tribe.

Night deepened, and the cold bit fiercely through gloves and furs. Fingers ached and toes grew slowly numb. Yet the elves made no complaint. Generations of survival in the wilds had made them hardy and resilient as the wolf-pack that shared their existence. Beasts and riders traveled silently through the dark while the wind hissed and slashed snow against their legs. The weather was changing. Though stars gleamed like pinpricks through velvet, the air had a bite that warned of storm.

Skyfire did not travel at the fore, as was her wont; on foot, to spare Woodbiter the stress of carrying her when his ribs pressed through his coat, she hung back toward the rear of the line. These woods were barren of game, and she preferred to contain her eagerness until the holt lay well behind.

Yet even starvation could not entirely curb Woodbiter's high spirits. He cavorted like a cub through the snow drifts, snapping at twigs to show off his strong jaws. Skyfire smiled at his antics, but did not join his play. She dreamed instead of green leaves, and the fat, juicy haunch of a freshly killed stag.

Clouds rolled in before dawn, flat and leaden with the threat of snow. In the hush that preceded the storm, Skyfire sensed movement behind her on the trail. She paused, a shadow among the snow-draped boles of the trees. The other elves passed on out of sight ahead. Skyfire held her ground, and again the faintest scrape of leather on bark reached her ears; someone followed. Not a human; the tracker moved too skillfully to be anything but an elf. Tense, and troubled, and wondering whether Two-Spear's madness had progressed to the point of setting spies after his own hunting parties, Skyfire bided her time.

After a short wait, an elf emerged between the trees, thickly muffled in furs, and moving with the stealth of a stalker. Huntress Skyfire did not wait to identify, but sprang at once on the unsuspecting follower. Her victim squealed sharply in surprise. Then momentum bore both of them down into a snowdrift. The tussle which followed was savage and sharp, brought to an end when Skyfire pinned the other elf's neck firmly beneath the shaft of her bow. Her cap was knocked askew; enough snow had fallen down her collar to put fire in her temper as she shook the hair free of her eyes to view her catch.

A merry face with tousled dark curls grinned up from a pillow of snow.

"Sapling!" Skyfire raised her bow, angry now for a different reason. Two-Spear's recklessness had provoked the humans to boldness; often now they set snares for unwary Wolfriders. And Sapling was still almost a cub, having yet to shed her child-name for the one she would earn as an adult. "What are you doing following the hunters?"

Sapling sat up, the hollows carved by famine accentuated in the growing light. "I wanted to be with you Skyfire turned her back, arms folded, and her cap still crooked upon her head. "You're lucky the humans didn't catch you instead." She spun then, and glared at her young admirer. "You know they caught Thornbranch. They burned him. You're not too young to remember."

Sapling scuffed at snow with her toes. She seemed more embarrassed than cowed by the reprimand. Tall, now, as her mentor, Skyfire was forced to realize that little remained of the cub who had once tugged at her tunic. Sapling had nearly grown up. If she had tracked this far without drawing notice, she would not

disturb the game, and she would be safer with the hunters than on a return trek to theholt.

"AH right." Skyfire set her cap straight with a hard look at her junior. "If you dare to track your elders, then you can act like one."

Sapling's face lighted up. "I can stay?"

"That's for Stonethrower to decide." Skyfire hooked her bow over her shoulder. "Now, come on."

Dawn brightened steadily as the two elves followed the trail of the others. Clouds lowered over the blown tops of the trees, and the air smelled of storm. Wisely, the Wolfriders had chosen to sleep out the day in a hollow by a frozen waterfall. By the time Skyfire and her companion found them, an enterprising elder had broken the ice to hunt for fish. The others had rolled in their furs, pressed close to the wolves for warmth, except for Stonethrower.

"You dallied, but not to hunt game this time," he commented as Skyfire appeared with Sapling in tow.

Yet his sarcasm was wasted on Huntress Skyfire. Woodbiter had not answered her call, and a swift review of the pack revealed the fact that he was not present. Owl pellets, she thought; with Sapling now under her care, the last thing she needed was that wolf getting into another scrape. Feeling the cold, the hunger, and all the weariness of the night's march, she met Stonethrower's dark glance. "Woodbiter's not with the pack."

The older elf shrugged. "He ran off ahead of the others. Like you so often will."

Skyfire bit back a retort. Instead, she closed her eyes and sent, seeking that pattern of awareness that was uniquely Woodbiter's. She found nothing. Alarmed, she put urgency into her call; and the wolf-consciousness that answered showed a thicket of briar and hazel, shot through with fear and the terrible, burning pain of a pinched leg.

"Woodbiter's in trouble!" Skyfire freed her bow. She tensed like a wild thing, ready to run and aid her wolf.

But Stonethrower stepped squarely in her path. "There's a storm coming. You gave Two-Spear your word that you wouldn't be going off alone."

At this, Skyfire felt a soft nudge from Sapling. Warmed suddenly by the presence of a friend, she smiled. "But I won't be alone Sapling will come with me."

Stonethrower narrowed his eyes, and sent, \*\*She doesn't belong here.\*\*

\*\*I know,\*\* Skyfire returned. \*\*What are you going to do about it?\*

Stonethrower considered the young elf at the Huntress's side; he also thought upon other instructions that Two-Spear had given concerning the sister who always found ways to evade the will of her chief. "I'll go with you," he said at last.

In other circumstances, Skyfire would surely have argued against taking her brother's henchman long. But Woodbiter was in pain; for that she would brook no delay. She sprang into the forest, Sapling a shadow at her heels, even as Stonethrower moved to gather his weapons. He had to run to catch up. Though day was fully come, the wood seemed dim, gray with the threat of a gathering storm.

Gusts rattled the branches like bones overhead, and the first flakes whirled and stung the faces of the elves who hastened to Woodbiter's aid. Soon the snow fell more thickly, the surrounding trees veiled in white; even Stonethrower appreciated

the forest instincts for which Huntress Skyfire was renowned. She led her companions without error through a tortuous maze of ravines. Once her keen ears caught the chuckle of current beneath an ice-covered stream; and only swift reflex saved Sapling from a dunking. Although Stonethrower questioned the wisdom of continuing with the weather against them, a glance at Skyfire's face forestalled any comment. The green of her eyes shone with a clear, fierce anger that elves who hunted with her had seen only once before, and that the time Woodbiter's mate had been killed by a human hunter.

For by now they had come far enough that the wolf's sending became clear enough to interpret. Skyfire gripped her bow until her knuckles whitened and said, "He is caught in a trap, the sort that humans set to break the legs of foxes." She paused, and as an afterthought added, "We have not far to go"

Skyfire drew ahead, then, despite the efforts of Sapling and Stonethrower to keep up. They followed breathlessly, twisting past trees gray and scabbed with ice, through hollows where the wind howled like a mad thing, and over snowdrifts spread like snares for unwary feet. Sooner than either elf thought possible, they came upon the Huntress, bent upon one knee in a depression between a steep bank and the roots of a twisted tree.

"Look," she said without turning.

Stonethrower and Sapling crowded closer, and saw the track of a huge beast, oval-shaped, with evidence of a pointy claw at one end. The snow fell less thickly in the shelter-of the draw; the track, though not fresh, was plainly discernible as something not made by chance.

"What is it?" asked Sapling, more than a little scared. The track was wider than four handspans, and half as long as her spear.

Skyfire frowned, and Stonethrower knuckled his beard, a habit he had when something distressed him. No Wolfrider had ever seen anything like such tracks, and quick sending among them established understanding they were troubled. A beast that size was bound to be dangerous.

Stonethrower quietly suggested they turn back.

Frightened herself, but driven by loyalty to Woodbiter, Skyfire regarded him with the contempt she usually reserved for humans. "Why should we? Are you afraid to go on?"

Swirling snow and the wail of wind through the draw filled a tense interval. Then, without speaking, Skyfire whirled and continued on. Sapling accompanied her. Left an untenable implication, Stonethrower followed after; but under his breath he muttered that Skyfire's belief that Two-Spear's reckless ways would eventually lead the tribe to ruin was an unbalanced accusation at best. In the opinion of the older elf, the sister was as stubborn as the brother, which was precisely why the two were continually at odds.

The draw deepened, narrowing into a defile where snow fell thinly, and then only when driven by odd eddies of wind. The prints of the strange beast showed plainly upon the faces of the drifts. Skyfire followed, nervous, but insistent the place of Woodbiter's captivity lay very near at hand. The elves labored through deeper and deeper drifts, sometimes sinking to their waists. The terrible tracks kept pace with them, even when the cleft of the gully widened and they found the wolf, crouched in the open and chewing at his bloody right hind pad.

No one rushed forward with joy. The tracks here were many, and thickest, and plainly associated with the snare. Perhaps they were made by monstrous, splayfooted humans, or bears with terrible cunning. But Skyfire refused to be cowed. She scouted the area with a thoroughness even Stonethrower respected. Then, borrowing Sapling's spear, she advanced into the clearing and bent at the side of the injured wolf.

**\*\*Steady,\*\*** she sent. Woodbiter whined, but he stopped struggling as his companion knelt at his side. Gently she scraped away the snow, felt through wet and matted hair to assess the injuries to her friend. The trap which held him was primitive. Green, springy sticks of sharpened wood had clamped his leg just above the first joint, strong enough to tear the skin and confine, but not to break bones. Angry enough to kill, Skyfire steadied Woodbiter's leg in one strong hand. Then, using Sapling's spear as a lever, she forced the sticks apart.

Woodbiter jerked free with a yelp. Trembling from his ordeal, he leaned against Skyfire, nosing her hair and ears in appreciation. Yet his friend did not respond with scolding for his carelessness, as she might have done another time. Instead, leaning on Sapling's spear, she stared at the perfect, reddened paw prints pressed into new snow by Woodbiter's limping steps. She ran her tongue over her teeth. With her wolf safe, now was the prudent time to start back to the stream where the other hunters had camped. But something too deep to deny rejected the safety of retreat.

Stonethrower arrived at her shoulder. Though impatient to be off, he did not intrude upon Skyfire's mood; instead he knelt beside her and with the flint knife he had once stolen from a camp of humans, began methodically to hack the water-hardened thongs which bound a collection of green branches into a deadly snare for the forest-born.

Skyfire spoke as the last bent bough whipped straight, then snapped between Stonethrower's thick fists. Her tone was cold as the wind that hammered snow through the branches beyond the shelter of the draw where they stood. "I'm going after them."

Stonethrower cast away a snarl of severed thongs. "That's folly. You saw the tracks. Whatever creature set this snare is large, and clever, too much for an elf."

Skyfire curled her lip. "Larger, yes, but not so fierce, I think. Only cowardly beings like humans ever set traps for animals."

"But Two-Spear said—" began Stonethrower, only to be cut off.

"Two-Spear isn't here. His wolf did not lie bloody in a trap for half a night." Skyfire jabbed the spear into the ground hard enough that ice scattered from the butt. "Are you stopping me?"

Stonethrower met her angry eyes, his hand tightened on the haft of his flint knife. "I should." But he made no move to do so as Skyfire spun away and continued down the gully.

Woodbiter whined and followed, and Sapling did likewise, too young to know any better.

Stonethrower went along as well, out of duty to his chief, but he regretted that decision almost immediately. The wind bit like the hatred of the humans, and the tracks, half-obsured by blown snow, were soon joined by a second set, and then a third; the new prints were twice the size of the first ones.



Skyfire stopped to test the tension of her bowstring, and Sapling wordlessly took back her spear. Stonethrower tried to resume his argument, then waited, as he realized that the Huntress herself was deaf to any spoken word. Deep in communion with her wolf, she waited while Woodbiter applied his keen nose to the frightening tracks in the snow.

The effort was a vain one; freezing wind had long since scoured any scent from the trail. On nearby twigs the wolf detected faint traces of resin, but the smell was unfamiliar to his experience, and to the elves as well. Unable to imagine this beast as anything but huge and dangerous, even the boldest of the four companions hesitated while the snow whirled and stung their exposed faces.

"We should go back," Stonethrower repeated. "The others should be warned that this part of the forest is unsafe for elves."

Skyfire stood poised, her hand less than steady on her bow. Then, suddenly resolved, she said, "No. Danger to us is danger to the holt. And the snow makes good cover. I say we follow these tracks and find out what sort of beast sets traps that snare wolves."

Her tone would brook no compromise. And unlike her brother, who was chief, Skyfire was not susceptible to counterargument, or cajoling, or flattery. Once she made up her mind, she stuck to her purpose like flint. Stonethrower had a scar to remind him, for when she had been a cub, he had once scooped her off some sharp rocks in a streambed when the current had swept her young legs out from beneath her. He remembered how she had sulked because he had refused to let her attempt another crossing at the same site. If anything, her determination had grown with her years, and Woodbiter's limp made her angry and dangerous to cross. Quite likely Huntress Skyfire herself was fiercer than the great beast she tracked, the older elf concluded as the others set off once more. But his attempt at humor failed as snow chased itself in eddies down his collar, and his fingers numbed on the flint haft of his knife.

The gully narrowed and widened, then opened into a frozen expanse of marsh. Wind rattled through ranks of frost-killed reeds, the tracks now showing through a swath of crushed stalks. Here and there a softened patch of bog had frozen the imprints intact. Woodbiter sniffed and snarled, and favored his hurt leg. Only Skyfire and Sapling seemed unaffected by the bleakness of the landscape, the former warmed by her desire for redress, and the latter, by the thrill of being away from the holt on her very first adventure. Stonethrower endured in dour silence, and almost rammed into the thong-laced tip of Skyfire's bow as she stopped without warning and pointed.

"Do you see that?"

Stonethrower looked where she indicated and felt his heart miss a beat. The snow had slowed, almost stopped, and rising above the ridge he saw blown smudges of smoke; where there are fires, the old adage ran, there are always humans. Worse, the fearsome tracks led off in the same direction.

Sapling jabbed her spear-butt ringingly into the ground. Skyfire tested the points on her darts, each one with singular care. This once Stonethrower did not argue when the sister of the chief suggested they scout out the size of the camp on the ridge. Though the site lay outside the Wolfriders' usual hunting ground, no

humans had inhabited this portion in past memory. The fact that giant, splayfooted ones did now might threaten the entire holt.

Grimly, three elves and one companion wolf started forward. The bare ice of the marsh offered little concealment, which obliged them to go carefully. Only the wolf spoke, soft, high whines of uneasiness at the scent of the humans on the wind. The elves moved in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts. Skyfire squinted often at the fire-smoke and wondered what game the humans might have caught in their traps besides the unfortunate Woodbiter. Sapling tagged at her heels, excited to be included, but wary and nervous. Over and over she tried to imagine what sort of creature had walked over the snow to lead them here. The tracks were fearsomely large, yet they crossed the deepest drifts seemingly without miring; that humans might use strange beasts to tend their traplines seemed dangerous and cruel to an elf brought up to love the thrill of the live hunt.

Stonethrower did not think of men or fearsome beasts. Instead he considered Two-Spear, whose dark, fierce temper did not run to temperance. He believed all humans existed to be battled, and likely this camp would merit no exception. A message must be sent back to the holt, and at the soonest opportunity, the older elf decided. Yet he mentioned nothing of this as he set foot in Skyfire's boot tracks and began his ascent of the ridge.

The elves climbed, buffeted by gusts that were barbed with ice driven off the flatlands below. Even the least experienced, Sapling, blended invisibly with rocks, hummocks, and tree boles. Soon the three lay flat on their bellies at the crest of the rise, the white puffs of their breaths mingling with the last, thinning veils of snow.

The air smelled of smoke. Woodbiter growled low, almost soundlessly, while the others gazed upon tents of laced hides, and fires beyond counting. Noisy packs of humans trod the snow to mire in between, more humans than the elves of Two-Spear's holt could have imagined existed in the whole of the world of two moons. The men carried weapons, spears, and flint axes and shields of hide-covered wood. Their cloaks were shiny with grease, and their cheeks dark hollows of starvation. No game roasted over the fires, but small children huddled close to them for warmth, too starved and dispirited to cry.

Huntress Skyfire pushed herself back from the crest and rolled on her back. Her green eyes stared sightlessly at sky. "They, too, lack game. No doubt that's why they're on the move."

Stonethrower offered no comment.

But Sapling said, "I saw no beasts among them, not one in the entire camp."

Skyfire rolled onto one elbow and eyed her keenly. "That's true." She smiled, more with relief than humor. "I don't think beasts made such tracks. Come look."

The two of them wormed back toward the crest, noses all but buried in the snow. Silently, Skyfire pointed, and Sapling saw large, wooden frames with sinew laces interwoven between. The middles had lacings; and a moment later, when a band of human scouts entered the camp from the east, they wore the same devices strapped to their feet. Sapling stifled a giggle. Obviously, the heavier humans needed such clumsy things to keep from miring in the snowdrifts, inconvenient though they would be for walking or running with any speed or stealth.

"No wonder they catch no game," she whispered to Skyfire, then turned, only to discover the Huntress had retreated back down the slope and was engaged in a subdued, but heated argument with Stonethrower.

"Two-Spear must not be told!" she whispered emphatically. "I agree the humans offer threat, but we cannot fight so many and hope to survive. Better the entire holt moves to another part of the forest than have everyone killed in a war."

"Now look who's talking of running!" Stonethrower glared at the redheaded sister who was so like, and yet so different from the brother who held his loyalty.

Uneasy to be holding a confrontation so near an encampment of humans, Skyfire tilted her head to one side in a way that never failed to endear. "At least wait until nightfall before starting back to inform the other hunters," she pleaded. "Woodbiter's lame, and all of us could use a few hours of rest."

Stonethrower grunted through clenched teeth, but offered no further argument as the three descended the slope. The snowfall thickened again as the Wolfriders crossed the marsh, icy flakes rattling among the dead stalks of the reeds and whispering across bare ice. Finding a sheltered place to spread sleeping furs took longer than any of them anticipated. Weary, and weakened still more from hunger, Skyfire and Sapling fell immediately asleep. Neither was aware that Stonethrower sat brooding and awake. By the time he rose and slipped soundlessly into the storm, not even Woodbiter noticed, dreaming as he was of game, with his nose tucked under his brush, and his injured paw curled carefully beneath.

Sundown came with snow still falling, and the light failed swiftly, turning the forest the gray on gray of winter twilight. Skyfire dreamed the dry crack of snapping bones as humans decimated the holt of the Wolfriders. She jerked awake. Snow flurried from her furs, and she took a moment to orient. Sapling still slept, but the snap of the bones was real enough; not handspans past her still form stretched Woodbiter, the rich scent of blood on his muzzle.

"Where did you get that?" demanded Skyfire, eyeing the meat between his paws with an envy impossible to hide.

Woodbiter blinked, a flash of triumph in his light eyes. He sent a confused flurry of images, and through them Skyfire gathered that he had learned the secret of the humans' traps; this kill, or at least this portion, had been stolen from one of them.

"You rogue!" Skyfire's merry laugh caused Sapling to stir from her furs. "If that's a haunch of stag, the least you can do is share."

Woodbiter rose with the grace of a sated predator, a grace that bordered upon disdain for the rag of meat he had spared for his companions. Still smiling, Skyfire shook Sapling's shoulder and said, "Look, we have something to eat before we must go into the cold and dodge humans."

Sapling sat up and stretched. "Where's Stonethrower?" she said, and came swiftly alert as Skyfire's green eyes narrowed to slits. The hollow where they camped was empty, but for the two of them and the one wolf. Stonethrower was gone.

"He'll be running to fetch Two-Spear, like an owl after mice." Skyfire slung on her bow and quiver, anger infused in her very motions. "That means you and I have to think very fast, and find a way to send these humans packing out of this section of forest!"

"What about Woodbiter's catch?" demanded Sapling.

The reply came brisk as Skyfire shook snow from her cap and jammed it over her hair. "We'll eat on the move. Come on!"

The elves slipped out into the bracing twilight chill, the wolf a shadow at their heels. They stole from tree trunk to thicket to thornbrake, wary of leaving tracks for humans to find. Once they had to duck into cover as a party of hunters passed by, returning to camp after checking their traps. The humans walked unaware they were watched from cover, or that the devices they wore strapped to their feet to make going in snow less clumsy were a marvel to beings more nimble than they.

Skyfire chewed thoughtfully on a strip of stag meat for a long while after the hunters had gone. Wary of her mood, and striving not to fidget for the first time in her young life, Sapling waited while the woodland slowly darkened. The clouds thinned and parted, leaving the night all velvet and silver with moonlight.

At last Skyfire stirred. "We have no choice. We'll have to investigate the humans' camp by ourselves."

At once Sapling feared the Huntress would forbid her to go forward into danger; but Skyfire only tested the tautness of her bowstring and looked levelly at her young companion. "Can you move as quietly as a wolf?"

Sapling nodded. At Woodbiter's eager whine, she and Skyfire crept from the thicket and tracked the humans' strange footsteps. Moving swiftly, and in silence, the elves overtook the trappers before long; careful to remain out of sight, they followed closely as they dared.

Apparently the hunting had been poor, for the humans grumbled constantly as they shuffled over the drifts on their strange footgear. Skyfire and Sapling caught snatches of cursing between descriptions of traps raided by fierce wolves. In time, the first group of hunters was joined by a second party, which reported another snare tripped and tampered with by some woodland demon with three fingers. Wolf-sign had been seen at that site also, and when the first band of humans heard this, they made signs to Gotara, and looked often over their shoulders. Without comfort, the elves noted that curses shifted to threats. They ducked unobtrusively behind a fallen log while their enemies drew ahead, a huddle of knotty silhouettes against the moonlit ice of the swamp.

"What do you think they'll do?" whispered Sapling.

Skyfire silenced her with a gesture, listening intently as the loud-voiced leader of the humans shouted querulously to the others. "And I say this camp is ill-favored! We must continue south at daybreak, and seek the lands that our prophet has promised."

Skyfire and Sapling shared a glance of alarm. The threat presented by the humans now went from dangerous to sure disaster; for if they moved their camp as planned, no saving grace could prevent an encounter with Two-Spear and his war-minded comrades. Even sending was inadequate to describe the grief which would inevitably result if human and Wolfrider met openly in conflict.

"We have to find a way to stop them," Sapling whispered.

Skyfire said nothing, but grimly started for the swamp. Thwart the humans' migration they must, but no strategy could be plotted until elves had thoroughly scouted the enemy encampment.

The task took longer than expected, for the tents of the humans numbered beyond counting. "Thick as toads in a bog," griped Sapling. Tired, chilled, and

scraped raw from crawling through briars and brush, she shook snow from her collar, packed there in a miserable wad since her dive into a drift to avoid a sentry. Her normally sunny nature had soured to despair. What could a skilled Huntress and a barely grown cub do against a band of humans big enough to overwhelm the forest? Skyfire could not offer a single idea; even Woodbiter walked with his tail down. In the valley below, between alleys of dirtied, trampled snow, the fires of the humans glittered like a multitude of fireflies during the green season.

Skyfire leaned on her bow, her frown plain in the moonlight. "I'm going down there," she said finally. "You must wait here until I get back."

Sapling offered no argument. What had begun as a merry prank, an adventure to make her young heart thrill with excitement, had now turned to nightmare. There seemed no end to danger and hardship imposed by the terrible cold, that untold numbers of humans should travel in search of new hunting grounds. Sapling huddled into her furs, uneasy and afraid, as the Huntress she admired above all else checked her weapons one last time, then vanished swiftly down the slope.

Accustomed to the clean scents of the forest, Skyfire found the human camp rank with the smells of burnt embers, rancid fat, and sweat mixed with poorly cured furs. She wrinkled her nose in distaste as she passed the first of the tents, but forced herself to continue. Moonlight transformed the terrain to a tapestry in black and silver, the tents like ink and shadow against snow. Embers glowed orange from the dark, where the occasional fire still smoldered. Skyfire crept forward, past the tenantless frames of snow-feet which lay stacked in pairs by the tent flaps. She ducked through racks of sticks bound with thongs that supported the long, flint-tipped spears of the humans. The design of the weapons proved that this tribe did more than hunt; they were warriors prepared for battle as well. Briefly, Skyfire entertained the idea of stealing the spears; even cutting the lashings and stealing away all the points. But the racks were too numerous to tackle by herself, and too likely, the humans stored other weapons inside their tents. Lightly as a Wolfrider could move, she could not raid on that scale without one enemy waking in alarm.

Dispirited, Skyfire ducked into the shadow of a tent. Never in her life had the tribe confronted such a threat; and her excursion into the camp yielded no inspiration. With little alternative left but to go back and attempt against hope to reason with Two-Spear, the Huntress faced the forest once more. Bitterly disappointed, she started off and failed to notice that her storm cloak had snagged upon a pile of kindling. A stick pulled loose, and the whole stack collapsed with a clatter.

In the tent, an infant human began to cry.

Skyfire froze. Barely daring to breathe, she hunkered down in the shadows. How Two-Spear would laugh if carelessness got her roasted by humans! Wishing the human cub would choke on its tongue, she waited, and heard a stirring of furs behind hide walls barely a scant finger's width from her elbow; at least one parent had wakened to the cries of the child. If the Huntress so much as twitched an eyelash, she could expect a pack of furious enemies on her trail. She forced herself to stillness while a man's irritable voice threaded through the young one's wailing. His curse was followed by a placating murmur from his wife.

Skyfire fingered her bow as something clumsy jostled the tent. Then she heard footsteps, and light bloomed inside. Described grotesquely in shadows upon hide walls, she saw the human mother bend to cradle her wailing cub. The woman crooned and rocked it, to no avail, while Skyfire weighed the risk of bolting for the forest under cover of the noise.

Angry shouts from the neighboring tents spoiled that idea. Galled by the need to stay motionless while the entire human camp came awake, Skyfire shivered with impatience. If she was caught, she hoped Sapling had the sense to stay hidden on the ridge.

The infant continued to wail. Even the mother grew irked by its screams, and her voice rose in reprimand. "Foolish child, be still! Or your noise will waken snowbeasts from the forest, and they will come and make a meal of your bones with long, sharp teeth."

The cub gasped, and sniffled, and quieted. In a frightened lisp it said, "Mama, no!"

"Don't count on that, boy." The light in the tent flickered, died into darkness, as the woman slipped back into her furs. "If I wake tomorrow and find nothing left of you but blood on your blankets, FH know you didn't heed my warning."

Her threat mollified the cub to silence, and the woman's breathing evened out as she returned to sleep.

Outside, in the shadow, Huntress Skyfire lingered, still as a ravvit in grass. She waited, listening to the sniffles of a terrified human cub; her mind churned with thoughts of the fear inspired by the tracks of the humans' strange snow-feet, and the terror she sensed in the mother's voice.

Skyfire began to formulate an idea. By the time the little human had snuffled himself back to sleep, that idea became a plan to save the holt.

Cautious this time to stay clear of the kindling, the Huntress darted for the forest.

She arrived breathless on the ridge, and found Sapling and Woodbiter curled warmly in a hollow, asleep. "So much for undying admiration," she murmured, and laughed as Sapling awakened, sneezing as she inhaled a nose full of Woodbiter's tail fur.

"Up," said Skyfire briskly. "We have work enough for ten, and not much of the night left to finish it."

Sapling sat up with a grin. "You have a plan!"

The Huntress tilted her head, more rueful than serious. "I have a ruse," she confided. "Now waken your imagination, for before the humans awaken, we have to invent a nightmare."

So began the hardest task Sapling had known in all her young life. All night long they carved wood and trimmed the skins of their storm-furs and sewed them into the shape of a great beast, which they padded with cut branches. Woodbiter raided another trap, gaining a set of stag horns which they set in the jaws for teeth. Skyfire fashioned eight monster-sized imitations of a beast's clawed pads and, in the hour before dawn, announced that her "snowbeast" was ready for action.

"Strap these paws to your feet," she instructed Sapling. Then, saving two of the clawed appendages for her hands, she called Woodbiter to her side and tied the

last four on him, while Sapling experimented by making fearsome trails of beast-prints in the surrounding drifts.

"That looks horrifying," Skyfire observed when she finished, and allowed one very disgruntled wolf to clamber upright. "But now I need you to help with the final touches."

The Huntress mounted the back of the wolf and placed the jaws of the snowbeast over her head. Muffled instructions emerged between the teeth, explaining that Sapling should place herself at Woodbiter's tail and lace the furs around them both, to flesh out the "body" of the beast. After an interval of laughter, and much tangling of elbows, the task was complete. A fearsome apparition snorted and pawed at the snow in the hollow.

"Now we make mischief on humans," the voice of Skyfire proposed from the gullet; and the snowbeast shambled off, with a wolfish whine from its second head, to do just that.

Once the two elves and the wolf coordinated with each other, they found they could run fairly fast; but the clumsy contraptions on their feet made silence impossible. Wherever the snowbeast passed, it made a fearful rattle, and the snapping of sticks and branches, added with the creak of its framework, carried clearly in the frosty air.

"If there was any game in this forest, it's on the run now," muttered Sapling. A giggle followed, half muffled by furs.

\*\*Quiet, now,\*\* sent Skyfire. \*\*We've arrived at the first of the humans' traps.\*\* Now began the dangerous portion of their night's work; for dawn was nigh, and the results of the snowbeast's frolic must not be discovered too soon.

Quiet reigned in the forest until shortly past daybreak, when the humans stirred blearily in their tents. The earliest risers crept out to light fires, and soon thereafter an outcry arose. Two supply tents on the camp perimeter were found ripped to shreds, and the culprit, whose tracks were pressed deeply in the snow, seemed to be a monstrous beast. No one had ever seen the like of such paw prints, but old tales told of a snowbeast which haunted the winter forests during seasons of extreme famine.

Fathers took no chances, but ordered their wives and children and grandfathers not to stray from the protection of the central fires. And the hunters sent to check the traps carried war spears, as well as knives and torches. They moved in bands of ten, for safety; but everywhere they encountered evidence of violence. The snowbeast had ravaged the traps, torn them to slivers, then trampled and clawed the surrounding snow to bare earth. Trees bore deep gashes, and near one trap the skull of a stag lay gnawed by powerful teeth, amid snow stained scarlet with gore. The band of hunters who found that trembled in their boots as they resumed their rounds of the trapline. The rattle of wind in the branches made them start, hands clenched and sweating upon the hafts of their weapons.

For all that, none were prepared for the apparition which lurked in the brush. Crouched like some nightmare forest cat, it fed in the shadows of a thicket, crunching the carcass of the stag with jaws that might have snapped a human in half at one bite.

"Gotara!" breathed the man in the lead. His snowshoe snagged on a twig, which cracked loudly, making him jump.

The snowbeast raised its head, spied the intruders, and raised an ear-splitting scream of rage. The humans saw then that the creature had two heads, the larger one eyeless and crammed with bloody fangs, and emitting a frightful, ululating wail. Below this, between clawed forelimbs, a second, wolflike head snarled and slavered and snapped. Six legs thrust powerfully beneath masses of brindled fur, gathered to bound to the attack.

The human in the lead screamed and cast his war spear. It struck the beast's flank and rebounded; and the beast leapt, plowing a shower of eddying snow.

The hunting party screamed and ran in stark terror. Tree branches whipped their faces. They dared not look back; the ravening snarls of the snowbeast sounded almost upon their heels. The breath burned in their chests, yet they did not slow until they reached the border of their camp. The snarls of the snowbeast sounded ominously through the wood as the men excitedly jabbered their tale. Howls echoed across the marshes, hastening the women who ran to wrap children in blankets and bundle up belongings and tents. Fear gripped the hearts of the humans like cold fingers as they banded together and departed, northward, where the lands were known, and safe.

By sunrise, no intruders remained to watch an elf back butt first from the bowels of the dreaded snowbeast. Tired, trembly, but able to contain herself no longer, she collapsed in a snowdrift, laughing.

Peering through the fangs of the snowbeast mask, Huntress Skyfire regarded her young companion with reproof. "Is that how you're going to greet Two-Spear, when he arrives here with his war party?"

Sapling sat up, snow dusting her eyebrows and her merry, upturned nose. "At least I look like an elf. If you keep standing there in that silly-looking mask, Graywolf will likely spear you for dinner."

At which point the jaws of the snowbeast clicked shut, and a tangle of wolf, and elf, and a mess of jury-rigged storm furs swooped and jumped Sapling in the snowdrift.

**\*\*Longreach! Storyteller!\*\***

The summons came from nearby and with the visceral intensity that always marked the chief's bad moods. The old Wolfrider roused from his wolfnap, grabbed his warmest blanket as a cloak, and poked his head into the icy, winter night.

"Bearclaw?" Longreach asked, as if there had been any real doubt in his mind.

"I need your advice."

Longreach nodded and lifted the oiled-skin door of his bower a bare heartbeat before Bearclaw shoved past him. The bower, one of the oldest set into the Father Tree, was cluttered and scarcely large enough for one elf let alone two. That didn't bother Bearclaw; he just pushed his way over to the sleeping furs and thumped down on them. Whatever had inspired this visit did not bode well for Longreach's peace of mind.

The storyteller pinched a wick into his tallow-pot and lit it from the kindle-box. The tiny flame reflected blood-red from the chief's squinted eyes. It boded poorly, indeed. Longreach spread his fur across last autumn's dreamberry crop and settled in for a long night.

"Tell me about it," he urged the seething Bearclaw.

"Fire-stinking Cutter, that's it."



Longreach leaned closer, sincerely puzzled by the chief's apparent rage; young Cloudchaser had never bothered anyone in his short life. "I'm sure the lad—"

"Wants to go hunting alone, he does. Middle of the worst winter we've had here in Timmorn knows how long, and the little shrike wants to go hunting."

"He means to help, I'm sure. The hunters have been ranging farther and bring back less—"

Bearclaw let out a liquid growl that contained every unhappy feeling a Wolfrider could have. "He means to get his soft-toothed self killed. As if I didn't have enough eating at my sleep with the tribe hungry and scrounging ... and the man-pack doing the same ... and now he wants to go hunting branch-horns in the frozen marsh."

The old elf scratched his beard and rubbed the sleepy-seeds from his eyes. "It's never easy to watch them grow up, is it?" he asked, cutting quickly to the heart of Bearclaw's concern.

Bearclaw tangled his fingers through his hair and looked away from the flame. "I'd forgotten the marsh. I shouldn't be watching my cub-son go there for his first hunt; I should be sending a hand of hunters and all the wolves—"

"Forgotten—well, my chief, we all forget. Why not blame me that I didn't use the dreamberries to help us remember? Or is the forgetting not what's really bothering you?"

"Puckernuts, Longreach, sour puckernuts—you know me too well for my own good. Cutter's solid—Timmorn knows he's more careful than I was on my first hunt. If he could only wait until spring. What's a few blinks of the moon when the rest of your life is waiting?"

"You have to let them go, my friend. They'll surprise you in ways you can't imagine—as I well remember—but you have to let them go—"

