SNOW WOMAN: Nightshade’s Last Journey (June 1871)
By Bob Fincham

Snow Woman had awakened before the sun peeked above the eastern horizon. She was restless and could not sleep any longer. Her two children, Laughing Waters and Standing Tall, were both sound asleep, curled up next to Nightwalker. A fierce guardian, the two-year-old wolf, was like a little puppy with the girls.

Nightwalker was an essential part of their family, but she was more and more restless. Soon she would have to leave and join with her own kind. The call of a local wolf pack was proving to be more and more irresistible each time they came into the area. Snow Woman was certain Nightwalker would leave the next time she came into heat. The first time she came into heat, she killed five of the village dogs that tried to mate with her.

As she sat up in her sleeping furs, Snow Woman inadvertently pulled them partially off her husband, Night Buffalo. She stared at him in the faint light of dawn that was spilling in through the tepee opening. His curly hair fascinated her. It was so like that of the buffalo it made for strong medicine. She was glad he kept it off his face since it scratched and hurt her skin when he held her close. The way he removed it by using a sharpened knife was amusing. The other warriors in the tribe plucked each hair using bone tweezers.

Watching him as he slept, she felt a hypnotic pull in the way his chest rose and fell with his deep, steady breathing. She wanted to caress his shiny, ebony skin where it stretched so tightly over his finely chiseled muscles. She often wondered why the Great Spirit gave him this unique color, so like that of a bull buffalo.

As she watched him sleep, he rolled over onto his side. She gently ran her hand across his exposed back, touching scars that crisscrossed it like the web of a spider. “He will not say how he got these scars other than he was once a slave to white men. I hope he killed whoever did this to him.”

She pulled the furs over his exposed back and quietly got to her feet. Stretching, she went outside to do her morning toilet and enjoy the fresh, dawn air.

The sun was entirely visible as she gathered wood to start the breakfast fire. Everyone would be hungry this morning after last night’s activity. Standing Tall was just a few months old and would be the easiest of them all to feed. Her breasts were heavy with milk, and she worried that when she finished nursing, they would sag like an old woman’s.

Before she re-entered their tepee, Chief White Owl approached her and said, “You look well this morning, my daughter.”

“Thank you, father. My family is also well,” she replied.

“Please tell Night Buffalo to come to my tepee after he has eaten. We have important business to discuss.”

“Yes, father. I will tell him.”

She wondered what was so important. Several things crossed her mind as she started to build the breakfast fire. It may have something to do with the harsh winter and its lack of game. Or maybe the smells and overuse of the toilet and garbage areas surrounding the village are finally starting to bother him.
After placing the wood on the coals from last night’s fire and blowing on them to create a flame, she felt someone staring at her. Turning to face Night Buffalo, she saw him staring at her.

“Whatever you are thinking, we do not have time for it. I will make breakfast, and then White Owl wants to speak with you.”

Sitting up and stretching, Night Buffalo said, “There have been rumors going around the village that we have been in this location for too long. It is time to move. That is what he probably wants to discuss.”

As they talked, Nightwalker stood and stretched. She sniffed at each of the girls before going outside.

“One day, she will go outside, and that is the last we will see of her,” Night Buffalo said.

As she stirred the left-over stew from dinner, Snow Woman said, “She needs a family of her kind, and she senses that need. When she finds that family, she will live there, but she will still visit with us from time to time.”

“She treats our daughters like they were her own, but she will soon lead a wolf pack. It will be a pack we need not fear,” Snow Woman continued as she filled bowls for Night Buffalo and Laughing Waters.

Night Buffalo quickly ate and prepared to leave. He left his weapons in their places and gave Snow Woman a strong embrace before leaving.

“I feel your hunger, but it must wait until tonight. Now I must take care of Standing Tall, and you must go to White Owl,” she said as she pulled away from him and walked over to their younger daughter, who was waiting patiently for her breakfast.

Wishing he had more time, Night Buffalo left his lodge and walked to the tepee of White Buffalo. He noticed that Nightshade had come near, and Nightwalker was sitting at his side.

They lived on the edge of the village, and Nightshade was always nearby. He was a spirited stallion, and only Night Buffalo and Snow Woman could come close to him. For some reason, he and Nightwalker had become friendly toward each other. He often saw them having mock fights in the field between the village and the forest.

When he reached White Owl’s lodge on the other side of the village, the chief was standing outside as if waiting for him to arrive.

“Welcome Night Buffalo. We have something important to the whole village to discuss,” White Owl said as he stepped inside his lodge.

Night Buffalo followed him and they sat by the ashes of the breakfast fire. Night Buffalo waited for him to speak.

Taking a pipe from behind his seat, he lit the tobacco in it. He used a coal from the embers of the fire. After taking a long draw on it and blowing the smoke into the air, he passed it to Night Buffalo, who repeated the process.

Setting the pipe aside, White Owl said, “Night Buffalo has powerful medicine. The tribe has need of that medicine. It is time we move to a new place. Game no longer passes through our forest, and the land has become sour. Our new home must be near water and safe from enemies. It must have game in the surrounding forests. Lame Duck says he knows of such a place east of here in the Big Horn Mountains. It is in a hidden valley he came across when hunting in the mountains. I want you to go with him and decide if it should be our new home.”
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“Lame Duck is ready now,” White Owl said.

“I will prepare Nightshade for our journey and say goodbye to Snow Woman. I will join Lame Duck before the sun goes much higher in the sky.”

“Go with the Great Spirit, my son.”

Night Buffalo hurried back to Snow Woman and gathered what he thought he would need for the next few weeks. Snow Woman wanted to go along but knew she should stay with the children. Usually, she could have someone watch the children for a few days, but this would be a long trip. When he came back, they would have time for a hunting trip into the higher mountains.

“I was looking forward to a pleasant night with you. Now I will have to wait until I return,” Night Buffalo said as he wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Lame Duck can wait a little longer,” she said as she put her arms around his neck and pulled him close.

A half-hour later, Night Buffalo was saddling Nightshade. He was wearing his gun belt with a .44 caliber Colt Army Pistol in its military-style holster on the left side and a Bowie Knife in its scabbard on his right hip. Another Bowie was in one between his shoulder blades. His Henry repeating rifle was in its casing attached to his saddle.

Having said his goodbyes to his family, he met Lame Duck near White Owl’s tepee. He was one of the oldest men in the village. He walked slightly bent over with a noticeable limp. Night Buffalo hoped he was strong enough for the journey to his valley in the Big Horns. It was midmorning as they rode out of the village.

Presently the village was located among some smaller mountains between the Absarokas and the Big Horn Mountains. The Big Horns were at the edge of the Great Plains with its large buffalo herds and large parties of Sioux and Cheyenne. The whole area belonged to the Crow Nation by treaty with the United States. The Lakota Sioux ignored the agreement and drove the Crows to the west of the Big Horns. By moving into the Big Horns, they would have fertile hunting grounds while risking trouble with the Sioux.

Night Buffalo understood these facts and hoped that Lame Duck was honest about this special place in the mountains.

After four days of travel, they arrived at the foothills of the Big Horns. Game had become plentiful. They had passed several places that appeared to be acceptable for relocating the village, but none were easily defensible.

That night, as they sat by their small fire Night, Buffalo asked Lame Duck, “How much farther to your valley in the mountains?”

“In one day, we shall enter the valley,” he replied.

“Since this valley is so nice, why is it not occupied by the Sioux?”

“The valley entrance is difficult to find, and the Sioux prefer the open plains.”

“How did you find this valley?”

“I was following an elk I had wounded. It led me into the valley.”

“Why were you here, so far from the village?”

“It was many summers ago. I was a young man taking ponies from the Sioux. I had an extra pony and thought to use it to carry some meat back to the village.”
Lame Duck stopped talking for a moment as he relived a high point of his youth. Then he went on, “After cleaning the elk, I explored the valley and saw many good things. Now I will show them to you.”

The next morning, Lame Duck pointed to a peak shaped like the head of an eagle. “The valley is to the south of that peak. The trail to it starts here.”

He drew an x in the dirt to indicate where they stood and another x to show the peak. He then sketched and described the circuitous route they would follow to reach the valley opening. It was about twenty miles to the entrance, with a slight rise in elevation.

Lame Duck brushed out the sketch, and they left camp after a quick, cold breakfast. The trail to the entrance was an easy trek with several stream crossings and many tricky intersections with a variety of game trails.

They reached the valley before nightfall, and Night Buffalo was impressed with its appearance. The entrance was forested and located between two steep ridges. It was narrow enough to be easily defended from any attackers. After entering the valley, he saw how it quickly widened like a giant funnel. Much of it was an open plain with scattered patches of forest. The sides of the broader part of the valley consisted of gentle slopes that steepened at the higher elevations. In some areas, the valley floor abutted cliffs. Several streams flowed through the valley that appeared to be fed by snowmelt and numerous springs along the valley walls.

After camping in the valley for the night, they decided to explore its eastern entrance. If the Sioux were to stumble onto the valley, it would probably be from that direction.

The east end was heavily wooded without any well-defined paths other than a few small game trails. It took the better part of the day to exit the valley via its eastern end.

After a cold camp, they continued traveling to the east for the next two days. At noon on the second day, they came to the top of a high cliff at the side of a tall peak that overlooked the Great Plains. Several moving dark patches were indicative of vast buffalo herds.

Night Buffalo decided to go out onto the plan and swing south of the Big Horns before turning west and heading home.

For the rest of the day, there was no sign of anyone else. The Sioux and Cheyenne must have been busy elsewhere. Since Red Cloud had driven the army out of Wyoming and Montana Territory, the tribes had been actively working to secure the area from other tribes as well.

Just before they camped for the night at the edge of the prairie, three Cheyenne spotted them. They immediately came after them. With a good lead, they should be able to lose them by swinging back toward the foothills. Kicking their horses into a fast pace, they hurried toward the hills. Lame Duck’s pony suddenly fell and threw him hard to the ground. Night Buffalo stopped to help him. As he turned back and rode near where he lay, Night Buffalo saw that he was not moving, and his head was at an odd angle to his body. His neck had broken, and he was dead.

Dismounting next to Lame Duck’s body, Night Buffalo pulled his Henry out of its casing. He prepared to defend himself and keep Lame Duck’s body from being scalped. The three Cheyenne were coming fast and hugging their ponies’ necks to present small targets. Two of them had rifles, probably single-shot weapons, while the third had a bow and arrows.

Night Buffalo chased Nightshade away. He knew he wouldn’t go far and wanted him away from the center of the action. Lame Duck’s pony stood nearby with a broken leg. He turned him slightly and shot him, putting his body in a position to provide some shelter if it was needed.
He knelt by the dead pony and prepared to open fire. As soon as the three warriors came into range, one of the ponies suddenly stumbled, throwing its rider. The Cheyenne landed on his feet, and Night Buffalo shot him through the stomach before he could take cover. The other two warriors swerved in opposite directions. The one with the bow turned back toward the east while the other went back out of rifle range and sat on his pony, just watching. He was holding his rifle across his pony’s back but did not appear inclined to use it.

Night Buffalo whistled, and Nightshade came to his side. He mounted and rode toward the watching Cheyenne, who moved father away, maintaining his distance. When he reached the dead warrior, he dismounted and took that man’s rifle. It was a Sharps and a small pouch around his neck held just three cartridges. If the watcher had the same gun, also with limited ammunition, he would wait to fire until he had a closer shot.

The pony that had stumbled was standing nearby. It did not appear to be injured. Dismounting and using Nightshade as a screen, he approached the pony until he could take its reins. Walking back to where Lame Duck lay, he placed his body upon the pony and resumed riding. The warrior who rode off to the east was probably going for more help while the one following would be sure they had an easy trail to follow. Night Buffalo needed to do something about the follower.

That night he camped at the southern end of the Big Horns. His camp was among some rocks and trees. He took Lame Duck’s body off the pony and buried him a hundred yards from the campsite. He thoroughly camouflaged the burial site so no one could find and defile it.

About midnight, he took Nightshade out onto the plain and whispered into his ear while holding a piece of a blanket from the dead Cheyenne’s horse near his nose.

He had played hide and seek with Snow Woman where she would hide, and Nightshade would find her by her scent. Now he would see if Nightshade could find the Cheyenne who was following him.

As Nightshade walked away, he followed a short distance behind. With luck, the Cheyenne would think he had wandered out onto the plain on his own. After about a half mile of apparently aimless walking, Night Buffalo started to have some doubts. He was about ready to give up when a shadow came out from some bushes and reached for Nightshade.

Night Buffalo sounded two short and one long whistle. Nightshade responded by rearing up and striking out with his front hooves. He connected with the shadow, knocking it down. Another signal stopped him as Night Buffalo hurried to the spot where the shadow had disappeared.

It was gone. As Night Buffalo looked around in the darkness, he was jumped from the side and felt the sting of a knife as it grazed his ribs. Then there was a grunt, and all was quiet because he did not miss with his Bowie knife.

After taking the dead warrior’s scalp, he mounted Nightshade and rode back to his camp. He saddled up and resumed travel in the light of the rising moon. Without the lone Cheyenne marking his trail, he would be able to lose any other followers in a short time. Then he could stop and rest.

At the end of the next day, they were into the foothills of the Absarokas, and Night Buffalo was exhausted. Nightshade was also showing some signs of fatigue. The pony was
carrying a light load consisting of two Sharps rifles and a few hand weapons and was not nearly as tired.

They were moving through a forested area on the slope of a steep hill. The back trail had been clear for some time, and he was not worried about being followed. When the grizzly bear attacked, it was without warning. It smashed into Nightshade and knocked him down, causing him to roll over onto Night Buffalo.

The grizzly then stood on its hind legs. It roared a challenge, preparing to tear into the human as he lay partially stunned with Nightshade standing slightly below him, just off the trail. The bear was an old silverback standing ten feet tall, spraying foam and spittle in all directions as he roared his challenge. The broken shaft of an arrow protruded from his side. It was a constant, painful irritation and a source of infection. The Blackfoot who had fired the arrow angered the bear and provided an easy meal. Now the bear was sick and starving as it hunted easy prey or scavenged on whatever it came across.

As the old grizzly started toward the stunned human, it was distracted by a loud commotion. The pony bucked and squealed as it tried to pull away from the area. Momentarily the bear shifted toward the cavorting pony but quickly stopped as it decided the human would be an easier meal.

Before it grabbed Night Buffalo, the bear came under a sudden and brutal attack. Nightshade had recovered from his fall and charged the grizzly. The grizzly was moving on all fours when Nightshade came at it. He slammed his front hooves into its side, striking close to the broken shaft of the arrow.

The strike near the wound was extremely painful and tore it open, causing copious amounts of blood and puss to flow from the injury. The bear made a rapid turn and swiped at Nightshade with its front claws, digging deep furrows into his shoulder. The impact swung Nightshade around but did not take him down. He kicked out with his hind legs and knocked the grizzly off his feet. The grizzly quickly came back up, only to be kicked again in the side of the head, causing one of his fangs to be broken off at the gum line.

Angered and entirely out of any self-control, the grizzly grabbed the hindquarter of Nightshade. He tore through a hamstring with his claws. Nightshade only grunted and tried to turn away from the bear, dragging his one hindquarter. He had no chance. The bear threw his weight onto the injured area and dragged Nightshade down. Then he started to rake his side with his claws as he moved more of his body on top of Nightshade.

Five shots stopped the struggle. Five .44 caliber lead slugs went deep into the body of the old grizzly. Even so, it reared up and turned toward the human who was holding a smoking pistol. As it started to move in his direction, the bear fell over, dead.

Night Buffalo quickly reloaded his pistol before examining Nightshade. As he looked at his horse, Night Buffalo said, “You and me been through a lot together. Many the time you saved my life. Now you are dying. There ain’t nothin’ I can do for you exceptin’ giving you peace. I will always remember you. We will always honor your memory in my lodge. Go in peace, old friend.”

He stroked the side of his neck as he shot him in the brain. “I will grieve for you another time. Farewell, my friend.”
Night Buffalo caught the Indian pony a short distance down the trail. He stashed his saddle and additional rifles high in some rocks before resuming the trip home. After sharing what he had learned with Gray Owl, he would return here to recover his stash and do a proper burial for Nightshade.

When he rode into the village two days later, he created a bit of a commotion. He was riding a Cheyenne pony instead of Nightshade, and Lame Duck was missing. He gave a full report to White Owl and went to his lodge where Snow Woman and the children were happy to see him. When they heard the story of Nightshade, a sadness settled over them all. Even Nightwalker was affected as she prowled around looking for her friend.

That night, as they all slept, Nightwalker left her place by the children and went outside. She went near the pony herd, looking for Nightshade. Finally, she went onto a slight rise and howled at the sky. It was a mournful sound, and after a brief time, it ended. Night Buffalo lay awake, listening to her and thinking about his loss. In the morning, he would return to where Nightshade lay and take care of his remains.

When Snow Woman awoke, she noticed that Nightwalker was gone. When she saw that Night Buffalo was also awake, she said, “Nightwalker grieves for her friend. I heard her saying goodbye in the night.”

“After breakfast, I must talk with Chief White Owl. Then I will return to Nightshade and bury him. I owe him that.”

“Very well. The children can stay with Small Bird until we return.”

Knowing he would not win a possible argument, Night Buffalo just stayed quiet. After breakfast, he went to meet with White Owl. Once again, they shared a pipe by the remains of his breakfast fire. White Owl said, “I talked with the elders last night, and we all agreed to move our village to Lame Duck’s valley in the Big Horn Mountains. We will leave in seven nights. You have described how to reach this valley, but I wish for you to guide us along the trail.”

“Very well. I shall return in four days and then prepare for the journey. I have things I must take care of as soon as possible.”

So it was that Night Buffalo and Snow Woman left the village later that morning with an extra pony. They made good time and arrived at the scene of the grizzly attack the following evening. When they arrived, they discovered Nightwalker sitting beside the remains of Nightshade. There were signs of activity all around the remains. However, scavengers had only fed upon the grizzly.

“Nightwalker honors her friend,” Snow Woman said.

“She must have backtracked along my trail to get here. I am sure she sensed that we would be coming to take care of Nightshade.”

After burying Nightshade and recovering his stash, Night Buffalo and Snow Woman returned to the village with Nightwalker walking beside them. When they arrived, one of the pony herd watchers approached them. He was leading a pregnant mare. She was a former cavalry mount that had been running with the herd. He said, “This mare and Nightshade spend much time together. She carry his seed. We all agree, this horse and its seed now be yours. That way Nightshade always be with you.”
Nightshade’s spirit was at rest, and the time for grieving had passed. Now everyone looked forward to the future. There was a new home to be settled, and perhaps a part of Nightshade will return in a few months when the mare gives birth.