SNOW WOMAN: The Marriage (March 1868)

Eighteen winters ago, the young Crow female named Snow Girl was renamed Snow Woman when she survived three nights alone in the forest during a mighty blizzard that ended many lives in her village. She had learned survival skills from her father, Wolf Killer, who had wanted a son and raised her like one.

Once again, she was alone in the forest with just her pony as a companion. She was following a blood trail from a deer she had wounded with a stone-tipped arrow. The blood was becoming more common as the shaft worked at the wound as the deer ran. Soon she would catch the animal and finish it with her knife. The patches of snow made the trail easy to follow.

Periodically, she would stop and carefully listen to her surroundings. It was early on this winter day, but that did not mean that the forest was empty. She had learned to be aware of her surroundings. Most predators slept through the winter, but wolves were active throughout the year, and a mountain lion could be seen from time to time.

As she stood, slowly scanning her surroundings, she felt a sense of well-being. She was at home here in the forest among the pines and alders. They made her feel secure and welcome. The snow was retreating during this late wintertime, although it still glistened on the ground all around her. It had maintained some depth where it had drifted throughout the winter. It had granulated to the point where it supported her weight, especially while the cold of the night still lingered into the morning.

Snow Woman’s 120 pounds of muscle and bone-shaped her lithe frame into a deceptively feminine outline that belied her physical prowess. When walking through the village, the swaying of her hips attracted great interest among the warriors of her tribe. Here in the forest, such movement disappeared as she assumed the actions characteristic to a warrior on the hunt.

Not finding anything to be concerned about, she resumed tracking the deer. Moving through the forest, she left only a slight trace of her passage where the snow was softest. At the same time, she blended so well with the trees that only by knowing where she was would one be able to see her, especially when she stood still.

As she approached a clearing in the forest, she saw the body of the deer lying near the center of the field. Cautiously approaching the edge of the forest, she scanned the distant trees before going out into the open. That was when she saw a figure leave the trees and slowly approach the deer. It was a large man wearing buckskin and carrying a rifle. Since his skin was dark like the night, she wondered who or what this man was.

Upon reaching the deer, he crouched down and suddenly stood, looking around. After a moment, he pulled the arrow out of its body. Then looking back into the forest, he sounded a low whistle, and a beautiful black horse trotted out to him. He put his rifle into a sheath on the horse and took a large knife out of his belt. He then started to clean the deer.

The snorting of his horse caused him to look up as three Cheyenne came charging out of the forest shooting arrows at him. He shifted his knife to his left hand and reached for a pistol at his belt just as an arrow caught him on the left side of his chest. He managed to raise his revolver and fire one shot just before his startled horse reared up and knocked him down with one of its hooves.

Snow Woman had been watching him work on the deer and was just about to challenge him when the three Cheyenne appeared. She moved out of the forest just as he fired his pistol. His shot had knocked one of the warriors backward, but the other two kept coming. Entering the open area, she shot an arrow at the trailing warrior and hit him in his side, causing him to go down. The third Cheyenne reached the prostrate man and dropped his bow. He took a tomahawk from his belt and bent over, raising it to split his skull. He realized he was alone and hesitated for a second. That gave the prostrate man time to push his knife into his stomach just as her arrow also hit him in the back.
Snow Woman kept running until she reached his side with another arrow ready to fly. She stopped and looked down at the dark man lying in the snow. The effort of stabbing the Cheyenne had exhausted him, and he just lay there, bleeding from the arrow wound and nearly unconscious from his horse’s hoof.

James Washington had spent the winter hunting and trapping in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming Territory. He had not been very good at it and was near starvation when he saw the deer. He had to risk making off with it before he ran into whoever had shot it. He was living in a hut he had stumbled upon higher up in the mountains where the local Indians did not hunt during the winter. Someone had filled an attached lean-to with enough dried grass to get his horse through the winter. Unfortunately, his skills were not suitable for surviving a winter in the western mountains. He had spent some time on the prairie hunting buffalo and was an excellent shot, but this was unlike anything he had previously experienced.

From time to time, a group of Crow hunters crossed his trail and had even tracked him for a spell. When they realized he was the one called OotchiaBishee or Night Buffalo by one of their chiefs, they let him alone. He was good medicine for the tribe with his black skin and buffalo-like hair. Game was plentiful this winter, and the village of Snow Woman believed it was from his presence in the mountains.

The Cheyenne had also been hunting in these mountains. Their people were starving since the game was scarce in their lands. They wanted the deer and elk from the Bighorns, and they also wanted to take away the Crow’s big medicine. If Night Buffalo was pulling the game from their lands to the lands of the Crow, then he must die.

Washington did not know any of this as he lay in the snow bleeding from his wound. Snow Woman had heard rumors of this man and thought they were just stories for the children and the superstitious in her village. Now she had second thoughts. When she saw a group of Cheyenne warriors attacking him, she had saved his life as a reflex. Besides, they did not belong here and were the enemies of the Crow. Now she had to decide what to do.

Since no Cheyenne came running to the sound of the pistol shot, they should be safe for a while. She retraced her steps to where she had tied her pony and brought it to where Night Buffalo lay. He was in shock and starting to shiver. She quickly cut two long poles and made a travois that she attached to her pony. She managed to move Night Buffalo onto it and covered him with a buffalo robe.

She had two more things to take care of before taking him to her village. First, she cleaned the deer and managed to swing the carcass over the back of her pony. Then she removed the weapons and scalps from the three dead Cheyenne and left their bodies for their friends or scavengers to find. As she prepared to move out, she went to the black stallion where it waited by the travois and rested her hand on his nose as she spoke quietly into its ear. Then she mounted the stallion and rode out of the clearing, leading her pony by a short rope of braided hair.

It would take all afternoon to return to her village, especially since she had to take steps to conceal her trail from any Cheyenne that might be following to avenge the three dead warriors. Once she got to the village, she could give Night Buffalo to the medicine man, and a group of warriors would go looking for any Cheyenne in their territory.

The people of her village knew Snow Woman to be a rebellious person who acted more like a man than a woman. It was mostly the fault of her father, who had taught her many of the ways of a warrior. Her mother tried to teach her how a Crow woman was expected to behave.

When her parents died from a disease that covered their faces with red spots, she was sixteen summers of age. Many members of the village died from the same sickness, and the ones who remained were either recovering from its ravages or too busy surviving to worry about one young girl. She stayed in the family lodge alone for several moons. Then one of the older men noticed her and admired her beauty and decided she would be his woman. When he entered her tepee and demanded she become his woman,
he barely escaped with his life. After that, none of the men of the village dared to approach her, and not even the chief could find her a mate.

A lone woman who acted more like one of the warriors and would embarrass anyone who tried to possess her, Snow Woman was used to her freedom. When she had left on her hunting trip, none were surprised and expected her to return with a substantial kill. As soon as she rode into the village on a fine black stallion leading her pony with its cargo, everyone became excited. After one of them noticed the three Cheyenne scalps attached to the horse’s saddle, the excitement increased to the point that the chief and several warriors came running with their weapons to repel a raid.

Snow Woman dismounted and stood before Chief White Owl, who had quickly looked at the travois and said, “This man the one we call Night Buffalo. Snow Woman responsible for him. Must take him to her lodge for the medicine man to heal.”

Before she could object, he went on to say, “Three Cheyenne scalps make Snow Woman more warrior than squaw. How you get them?”

After Snow Woman related what had happened, Chief White Owl thought for a moment and said, “Darkness is almost here. At the rising of the sun, I will lead a party of warriors to make sure the Cheyenne go back to their lands. Snow Woman will stay here with the women, children, and old people.”

When Snow Woman started to speak, he held up his hand and said, “Your father was wrong to raise you as if you could be a warrior. Now you take three scalps and greatly insult the Cheyenne. If they know a woman did this thing, we will have a blood war between us.”

He then turned and walked away. As he left, he signaled three men to take Night Buffalo to Snow Woman’s tepee and stand special guard through the night.

Snow Woman held her head high as she led the black horse to her tepee. She wanted to put it with the common herd but thought it best to keep it nearby. He was nervous and seemed more at ease when he could sense the presence of Night Buffalo, his owner. She removed his saddle and set it by the tepee next to the rest of the gear belonging to Night Buffalo. She made sure that a blanket covered all his weapons. He had enough of these for three men.

Entering her lodge, she saw the medicine man shaking his rattle over Night Buffalo and chanting a prayer of some sort. She jumped when he grabbed the arrow and tried to pull it out of his chest. That was when Night Buffalo let a yell and awakened, knocking the man across the floor with his right hand. Then he moaned and fell back onto the pile of robes that served as a bed.

The medicine man stood. Turning to Snow Woman said, “Arrow must come out, or he will die. The wound must then be treated with a flame to stop bleeding. I go get others to help so he no move.”

She looked at Night Buffalo and shook her head. She said, “My father showed me the right way to remove a Cheyenne arrow. It cannot be pulled out. It must either be cut out or pushed through. If you pull it out, the head will come off and stay in the body.”

The medicine man responded by saying, “What does woman know? I must take care of Night Buffalo by order of Chief White Owl. If he not live, then the whole tribe suffer bad medicine I will take out arrow.”

Taking out her sharp skinning knife and the three scalps from beneath her jacket, Snow Woman growled, “Perhaps you need to come back in the morning when Night Buffalo is rested.”

The medicine man thought she might be bluffing but had second thoughts when he saw the scalps. He decided to let Night Buffalo rest and said, “I will return with two others when the sun come up. Then I will remove the arrow.” Staring at the scalps as he spoke, he inched his way toward the entrance to the tepee. He left and quickly went across the village to his own place.

Watching him leave, Snow Woman did not notice Night Buffalo open his eyes. When she turned toward him, he said, “It is damned cold in here, woman.”

“Black man awake now. I start a fire then take out arrow.”
“Where am I and how come you speak English?”
“You no speak Crow, and my father teach me English. You have many questions. I will give answers in the morning.”

Seeing he was not going to get any additional answers, Washington lay back and watched her light a fire. Then, as the air in the tepee started to warm, the throbbing pain from the arrow became more intense. He had to stifle a moan and decided some talking might help divert his thoughts a bit. So he said, “I would like to know your name before you start working on that arrow. Can you at least tell it to me?”

Snow Woman laid her knife down, so the blade was in the fire and turned back to him. She stood over him and for the first time, really looked at him. His shirt had been removed by the medicine man, exposing his upper body. He looked powerful with many scars from past injuries. His black skin was dripping with sweat from the effects of his wound. His eyes were bright with intelligence but could not hide the pain he was undergoing from the arrow in his chest.

After a few seconds, she replied, “I am Snow Woman. The Cheyenne arrow is deep in your chest but far enough to the side that it can be removed, with much pain. I cannot pull it out, or the head will stay behind. I must push it through you and remove the tip.”

She picked up a tomahawk and told him, “Now, you must make yourself sit up for a moment.”

As he started to rise, she piled some more robes behind him so that his back was off the ground. Then she gave him a piece of leather to bite down on and suddenly hit the arrow’s end with the flat of the tomahawk, driving it partway through his body. Washington almost bit through the leather from the pain but stayed still and only grunted.

Before he could make any reaction, Snow Woman reached behind him and deftly snapped the end off the arrow while pulling the shaft back out of the wound. Blood started freely flowing, cleansing the wound. After a moment, she took the knife from the fire and sealed both openings caused by the arrow.

As the smell of burnt flesh filled the tepee, Washington passed out. Snow Woman took the robes away from his back and let him lie down on the bed. She made a poultice of herbs and mosses, which she pressed into the wounds and bound with leather strips. Now she just had to wait and see whether he became feverish from any poisons remaining in his body from the arrow.

During the night, she rested and awoke early to make some warm food, clean the three scalps, and prepare for the return of the medicine man.

At first light, she stepped outside to gather some firewood. As she came back into the tepee, Night Buffalo was sitting up in his bed. He was trying to move his left arm and was able to raise it several inches above his waist. He watched her come back in with her arms full of firewood and waited until she sat it down to speak.

“I need to have my weapons handy. Where are they?”
“You no trust Snow Woman?” she replied.
“It ain’t no matter of trust. I feel naked without them.”
“Weapons are safe. I get them after you eat.”

As she rebuilt the fire and started some food warming beside it, the medicine man entered with two other warriors. Seeing Night Buffalo sitting up, he said, “Chief make Snow Woman responsible for you. I no longer help.” Then he turned toward her and stared for a few seconds before walking back out. The other two never said a word.

As he finished his meal, Washington heard ponies riding by the tepee. Wondering what was happening, he asked Snow Woman, “Big hunting party going out today?”
She shook her head as she reached for his bowl and said, “Men of village ride back along trail searching for the Cheyenne that came into our lands. Chief think they be angry about three braves we killed yesterday. Perhaps they come here and make trouble.”

Washington thought things over for a minute and then asked, “How long will they be gone?”
“If no fight then be back before the sun go away.”

Bothered by the pain and stiffness in his wound, he leaned back and said, “I think I need to rest a bit. Thank you for the food and your help.”

He was asleep before she even stepped outside to clean the bowls and to see who remained behind. After rinsing them with melted snow, she walked toward the center of the village. The only people present were the older men and boys, who were watching for trouble and the women who were working at various chores around their lodges. Chief White Owl must have believed the Cheyenne threat seriously enough to take all the warriors along on his search for them.

Washington awoke to the aroma of venison stew. He felt rested and believed he could eat a whole deer by himself. Snow Woman was sitting on the other side of the tepee with a stack of arrows. She was sharpening the tip of one with a stone. From time to time, she would spit on it as she worked the tip. When it satisfied her, she carefully slid it into a brightly colored quiver. He noticed that the tips were iron, and the arrows were also brightly colored.

After he had watched her for a few minutes, she said, “Night Buffalo feel better. Soon he will be able to take care of self.”

“Does Snow Woman have a man who lets her prepare his war arrows?”

“Arrows are mine.”

“Since when does a woman of the Crow possess war arrows of her own?”

“Snow Woman’s secret. I am the best hunter in the village and have taken scalps from enemies.”

“Your secret is safe with me. I suspect you are better than many men with those arrows.”

She set the quiver to the side of the tepee and covered the war arrows with a buffalo robe. As she walked to the low fire, she took two bowls from a stack and filled them with stew. Handing one to Night Buffalo, she said, “One day I will be the first woman to ride with a Crow war party.”

As Washington ate the stew, he noticed that the wound was not nearly as painful. He could raise his left arm higher than before. Without that distraction, he looked more closely at Snow Woman. What he saw made him wonder about several things. To his eyes, she was a beautiful young woman without an ounce of fat on her body. She was not married to anyone from the village. She lived alone and was an excellent hunter. She was fearless and able to take care of herself in all ways. She had saved his life and even took scalps when doing it. Then she doctored him and is now nursing him back to health. His weapons and personal things were by his side, and she had said nothing about them. There was a scalp setting on top of his Sharps rifle.

Noticing that he had been examining her and his surroundings, she said, “That scalp is from the Cheyenne you killed. I kept the other two. They are here.” As she spoke, she reached behind some robes and held up four scalps. “These other two are Lakota.”

Seeing the additional scalps, Washington said, “Snow Woman is more of a warrior than most men. She is also a good woman taking care of an injured man.”

Blushing slightly, she put the scalps away. She showed off her scalps to display her fighting abilities. She was sensing a feeling for this man that was different from her usual brashness. She felt an attraction for this stranger she was nursing back to health. She did not understand it and was not sure whether she needed to resist it or let it develop.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a commotion outside her lodge. The older men and boys were running past toward the edge of the village. Stepping outside, she saw a band of mounted men at the edge of the forest who were slowly advancing toward them. They were about a hundred yards away, but their appearance indicated they were the Cheyenne the warriors were hunting. They saw the warriors were gone and decided to attack and take some revenge.

Running back into her tepee, she grabbed her war arrows and hidden war bow. She planned to take a position away from the older men and boys. They might try to take her weapons away from her and
make her go with the women and children as they fled from the opposite side of the village. She had
forgotten all about Night Buffalo as she knelt behind a deerskin on a stretching rack. She would have a
clear shot at the Cheyenne as they attacked the village.

The Cheyenne approached the village at a slow pace until they were about fifty yards away. Then
the leader signaled the men to break into a charge. No sooner was the motion made than the roar of a rifle
shot came from the village, lifting him off the back of his horse. The men with him stared with shock for
just a few seconds before rushing the village. That was enough time for a flight of arrows to land among
them. Two of the Cheyenne were wounded, but none were killed or even knocked off their horses. Then a
lone arrow embedded itself in the lead warrior’s chest, and another rifle shot rang out, knocking another
off his horse.

The remaining Cheyenne pulled up just as another lone arrow entered the rib cage of an
additional warrior. The six men who remained turned away from the village to regain the forest. The two
wounded ones lagged a bit behind and were hit again by two of the older men. As they fell from their
horses, several of the boys ran out to take their scalps. The other four Cheyenne disappeared into the
forest.

While everyone focused upon the Cheyenne attack, another group of warriors had entered the
village from a different direction. The screaming of the women as they protected their children attracted
the attention of Night Buffalo and Snow Woman. The Cheyenne were ignoring the women and children
as they attempted to attack the defenders from the rear.

There were ten of them riding through the village toward the defenders. Night Buffalo had
reloaded his Sharps and quickly shot one off his horse. Then he dropped the rifle and pulled a pistol out of
his waistband. He shot two more of the attackers as Snow Woman came up beside him and hit one in the
chest with an arrow. The others had been circling the tepees and came in from the sides. An arrow
knocked the pistol out of his hand as another warrior came at him with a war club. Ducking the swing of
the club, he grabbed a Bowie Knife from the scabbard tucked into the rear of his waistband with his
right hand. As the warrior swung his horse around, he threw the knife and hit him in the chest. Gripping the
hilt, the warrior had a surprised look on his face as he slid off the side of his pony. The warrior who had
fired the arrow at Night Buffalo was riding away with the few surviving Cheyenne. He did not get very
far. Snow Woman had put an arrow into his stomach and half-way to the forest his pony stopped as he fell
to the ground.

As the Cheyenne disappeared into the forest, Night Buffalo crumpled to the ground. Snow
Woman quickly ran to him and saw how the wound had reopened, and blood was flowing onto the
ground. The older men and boys had gathered around them, and she ordered them to carry him back into
her lodge. She gathered fresh materials and rewrapped the wound with a fresh poultice.

As she finished working on Night Buffalo, one of the men came into the tepee with a stack of
scalps and several blood-stained arrows. Another had Night Buffalo’s rifle and pistol. A third brought his
Bowie knife. The eldest was Moon Wolf, and he was their leader. He spoke to Snow Women as the others
waited. He said, “These weapons belong to Night Buffalo. The scalps belong to you and him. You both
saved many lives today. You take care of him, and others will prepare these scalps for you. I am sure
Chief White Owl will speak to you when he returns.”

Snow Woman thanked him and wondered what Chief White Owl might want to say to her.

Washington awoke as the sun was disappearing below the western horizon. The return of Chief
White Owl and his war party made quite a bit of noise as they rode into the village. As Moon Wolf talked
to the Chief, they both kept looking in the direction of Snow Woman’s tepee. As they finished, Chief
White Owl walked over and entered her lodge.

Night Buffalo was eating some stew from a wooden bowl as White Owl stepped inside. Snow
Woman was kneeling beside him. White Owl stood beside Night Buffalo and said, “Night Buffalo is a
great warrior and brings good luck to the Crow. When Night Buffalo better, he will become one of us, a Crow warrior.” Then he turned and left the tepee.

Night Buffalo had stopped eating while listening to White Owl. After he left, Night Buffalo finished eating and remained silent. Snow Woman was also quiet as she cleaned up after the meal and took another look at his wound. “Wound will heal. Then the Chief will make you a member of our tribe.”

Without answering, Washington lay back and was quickly asleep. Snow Woman stared at him for a while before going outside to take care of a few things. She noticed the ten scalps stretched on racks next to her tepee and White Owl standing beside them.

He said, “Night Buffalo will need a woman and a lodge when he becomes one of us. You have been without a man long enough. Both of you are great warriors, even though you are but a woman. No other Crow warrior would take you as his woman. Night Buffalo must do so.”

Snow Woman’s first instinct was to refuse what the Chief said. But she felt an attraction for Night Buffalo that she had never experienced. Besides, to ignore White Owl’s decision would mean exile from the tribe. He had overlooked many of her actions in the past because he and her father were close friends. Now he gave her an order that she had to obey. Night Buffalo had no choice either. If he refused to take her, he would not become a member of the tribe, and she would be a woman no man wanted.

As the days passed, Night Buffalo became stronger and Snow Woman became less resistant to the idea of being his woman. She enjoyed spending time with him and hearing his stories about the great war and his experiences in the mountains. She told him about the ways of hunting and trapping in the forests.

Washington felt an attraction to this beautiful Crow woman who was nursing him back to health. She was gentle with him and yet showed no fear when facing a dangerous enemy. She was a person to be feared in a fight and owned scalps taken from her enemies in battle. When he recovered completely, he would always remember her kindness and never forget that she saved his life more than once.

One week before becoming adopted into the tribe, Chief White Owl spent time with him explaining the ceremony. Just before he left, he told Night Buffalo that this lodge would be his home and Snow Woman his wife. He also explained that he would be expected to give a gift of some sort to the man acting as Snow Woman’s father. That man was White Owl himself.

After he left, Washington just sat there. He tried to absorb everything that White Owl had said. When Snow Woman came back into the lodge, she sat beside him, and they talked.

“Snow Woman, you have been good to me, and I owe you my life. I would be proud to have you as my wife. I have been lonely for too long.”

“Night Buffalo you are a brave warrior, and a good man. You will make Snow Woman a good husband. I want to be your wife.”

“What kind of gift should I give White Owl?”

“The more important the gift, the better that the Great Spirit will bless the marriage.”

“We will need to visit the cabin where I was staying high up in the mountains. There I have just the thing. Besides, I am getting too soft and lazy, just sitting here in this tepee.”

Two days later Night Buffalo and Snow Woman led his black stallion and her pony into the mountains west of the village. They passed through the open meadow where they fought the Cheyenne. Continuing higher up, they eventually they reached his cabin.

Night Buffalo started a fire in the fireplace and went outside while Snow Woman prepared a meal. When he came back inside, he was carrying a stack of furs. On his second trip, he brought a Henry repeating rifle, two pistols, a tomahawk, two Bowie Knives, and several boxes of ammunition.

Snow Woman looked at his possessions as he carried them inside and finished preparing dinner. After they finished, Night Buffalo put everything onto the table.

“You can help me decide what is appropriate as a gift for White Eagle.”

“I cannot pick from your possessions. You must decide.”
“How about if I set things aside and you just nod or shake your head?”
When she did not say anything, he took that as a yes and made some decisions.
When they returned to the village two days later, the stallion was carrying additional weight. The people gathered to see what they had brought back from the cabin. As they watched, Snow Woman and Night Buffalo entered her lodge. Night Buffalo came right back out carrying a large leather pouch. He went to the tepee of White Owl, where he stood near the entrance as White Owl came outside. In the Crow language, Night Buffalo said, “I come to ask for Snow Woman to be my wife. I brought these gifts for you, the one who acts as her father.”
He sat a stack of furs with a Bowie Knife and a steel tomahawk in front of him. He also gave him the large pouch containing six Cheyenne scalps. Then before White Owl could say anything, Snow Woman came leading four ponies.
Night Buffalo said, “I also give these four ponies from four of the Cheyenne I killed as they attacked this village.”
White Owl was pleased. These gifts showed great respect for him and showed how much Night Buffalo valued Snow Woman. He accepted them and announced that the marriage ceremony would take place in two nights, right after Night Buffalo became a member of the tribe.
When spring finally arrived, and the snow left the lower parts of the mountains, Snow Woman and Night Buffalo spent more time in the mountains than in the village. They had many adventures together and stories about them spread among the Crow.