SNOW WOMAN: The Wolf (May 1869)

Some years spring comes very late to the Bighorn Mountains, and this was one of those years. The snow was still clogging the passes and lingered in broad patches on the slopes. The game was scarce, and the Crow village was running out of food. May had come, but it felt like March in the mountains.

Night Buffalo, formerly First Sergeant James Washington, and his wife, Snow Woman, the adopted daughter of the village chief, had spent their first winter together in their lodge. They had been married for almost a full year and had become the parents of a baby girl on a cold winter night. They loved their daughter, and she went everywhere with them in a cradleboard made by Night Buffalo.

He finally had a family and devoted all his efforts toward their well-being and happiness. Back before the war, when he was a slave, he never dreamed of having a wife and child. Now that he did, they were his whole world.

Night Buffalo worked for several days in February making a cradleboard for his daughter. He selected a ponderosa pine for the back of it and made the footrest and rounded cover from the same tree. He looped buckskin laces through the frame to secure a trade blanket to cover the child. On cold days, Snow Woman could hang a beaver fur from the wooden cover.

Snow Woman wore the cradleboard whenever she left their lodge, even on hunting trips. She was able to keep pace with Night Buffalo, although she was not able to run very fast. They had not been having much luck on their hunting trips since the game had not yet recovered from the long winter. Even the wolves were having a hard time surviving, and one pack had been coming very close to the village. This pack may have been scaring game away from the area.

Seeing that they were almost out of smoked meat from their last hunt, Night Buffalo took his Henry Rifle down from the tepee wall. As he checked its action, he said, “Snow Woman, I need to go out and get some fresh meat. I figure on using this rifle since I’ll be in the forest and any shots will be fairly close ones.”

“I go along. My arrows will be quiet and not scare other animals from where we hunt,” she said in reply.

Night Buffalo had no objections. He knew she would not hold him back and that the two of them together had a better chance for a good hunt.

Snow Woman arranged their daughter in her cradleboard so that she would be warm during the hunt. Then she put the cradleboard onto her back and picked up her bow and a quiver of hunting arrows. Meanwhile, Night Buffalo had slung the Henry over his shoulder and wore his belt with its Colt Army Revolver and Bowie Knife. On his other shoulder, he carried a coil of horsehair rope about twenty feet in length.

If they killed a large animal, he planned to hang the main carcass from a tree above the reach of any wolves or other predators. Then he could return with a pony to bring it back to share with the village.

“Why are you bringing our daughter with us?” he asked Snow Woman as he stood by the tepee entrance.

“She must always go on hunts with us. That way, she will be a great hunter, like her mother and father. She will not be a weak woman depending on a man to survive.”

When her mind was made up, he knew he could not win an argument when her, Night Buffalo turned and stepped outside. It was a sunny day, but the night had been cold, and the ground was frozen. It meant easy walking but poor tracking unless they hunted the north facing slopes where snow still lingered.

He and Snow Woman had hunted together many times, and they knew several places where elk and deer tended to frequent. As the snow retreated, they would go to those places to graze upon the new, spring grass.
As they walked together, he watched her progress with the extra weight on her back. She was moving as fast as he was without appearing to expend much effort. He also noticed her movements had become more sensual as they neared the forest. Just as he began to think that maybe they should have waited another hour to start the hunt, Snow Woman stopped and turned.

“You need to watch for animals. Perhaps tonight we can do other things,” she said, flashing a mischievous smile.

“I was makin’ sure you weren’t havin’ any difficulties. A hunter does not normally wear a cradleboard.”

“I not feel the weight of it. It is light, and the spirit of our daughter gives me more strength.”

“Maybe tonight we can see about adding the spirit of a little brother to our family.”

Snow woman resumed walking toward the forest, exaggerating the movements of her hips for a few steps. Her extra layers of clothing hid most of the effect, but the sudden glint in Night Buffalo’s eyes showed that he got her message.

The two of them made a capable hunting team, and they often hunted together without anyone else from the village. They did not speak when entering the forest and communicated with hand signals. This trip would be no different, even with the child.

As they crossed the north slope of a valley, snow was still present, but just in large patches. Since the air temperature was slightly above freezing, they stashed their outer layer of clothing in the crotch of a tree for later retrieval.

They both enjoyed the greater freedom of movement as they moved into a thicker patch of the forest. Wildlife had left the area. Night Buffalo was about to signal a halt when they heard loud snarling and the sounds of wolves fighting something.

Keeping their weapons ready, they approached the source of the sounds. Just when they came to a spot where they could observe what was happening, the sounds quieted. Cautiously crawling around a large tree, Night Buffalo saw a wolf pack loping away from a pile of fur laying in front of an old, fallen tree. They quickly disappeared about a hundred yards down the hillside among some trees.

Signaling Snow Woman to follow, he approached what appeared to be the scene of a vicious fight. There was blood sprayed all about on the ground and up onto the fallen tree with a dead wolf lying in the open. There was another, injured wolf laying half in and out of the space under the tree.

Night Buffalo took out his Bowie Knife and said, “I better finish off this injured animal. We can use the furs from the two of them.”

Placing her hand on his arm, Snow Woman said, “Wait a moment, my husband. Look at her eyes.”

Startled, Night Buffalo took a closer look at the injured wolf. There was no fire in her eyes, just a pleading sadness.

“See her teats,” Snow Woman said. “She has been nursing her young. They are probably in a den beneath that tree. She was badly injured defending them from a hungry wolf pack.”

“We have to put her out of her misery and then see if their pelts are useful. They might be all torn up from the fighting,” Night Buffalo said as he moved toward the injured wolf.

Snow Woman moved to stand between Night Buffalo and the now whimpering wolf. As she looked into its eyes and reached in its direction, the wolf closed its eyes and died.

“That was foolish, Snow Woman. It might have had enough strength to attack you to defend its pups.”

“The look in her eyes showed she wanted our assistance and did not think of us as enemies. The Great Spirit brought us here at this time for a reason. That reason is beneath this tree.”
Deciding not to argue with her, Night Buffalo lifted the dead wolf away from the entrance to the den. Then, as Snow Woman removed the cradleboard from her back and sat it against a tree next to Night Buffalo, she said, “Do not take the fur from this wolf. It is not for us.”

Turning away, she crouched down in front of the den entrance and proceeded to crawl into it. Night Buffalo sat by their daughter and listened carefully for any sounds of trouble from the den. Just as he started becoming concerned, Snow Woman emerged from the lair with a small, blind wolf pup.

“All but this one are dead. We were meant to be here to help it,” she said as she showed the helpless little animal to Night Buffalo. “It is pure black, much like you and Nightshade. I will name it Nightwalker.”

Night Buffalo just shook his head and said, “How are you going to keep it alive? It will die without milk, and no dogs in the village have pups just now.”

“It will be a sister to our daughter because I will feed it from my left breast while she feeds from my right one. I have enough milk for both. There is big medicine at work here. The Great Spirit is guiding us.”

Knowing better than to argue with her, Night Buffalo tried a different approach. He said, “That little pup already has small, sharp teeth. It will be painful.”

“No matter. I will feed it now. When we return to the village, I will place milk in a bowl and use my finger to feed it. Several dogs in the village will soon bear litters, and one of them will feed it at that time.”

When she bared her left breast and held the wolf pup next to it, Night Buffalo turned to the two dead wolves and took out his Bowie. Before he took a step, Snow Woman pointed to the wolf that had killed the pup’s mother, saying, “Skin only that one. It will provide a warm resting place for our daughter and Nightwalker, her milk sister.”

After skinning the one wolf and rolling up the fur, Night Buffalo placed the body of Nightwalker’s mother into the den with her dead pups. Then he sealed it with large rocks.

After placing the last rock, he picked up his Henry Rifle and reached for his pack just as a young doe walked into view near where the wolf pack had disappeared. In no time at all, it was shot, cleaned, and placed across Night Buffalo’s shoulders.

“The Great Spirit is pleased,” was all Snow Woman had to say as they started home.

Nightwalker, the wolf pup, was nestled in a leather bag that she wore over her shoulder while their daughter was in her cradleboard on Snow Woman’s back. Night Buffalo carried the young doe on his shoulders, and each of them still carried their weapons.

Their return to the village created quite a stir, especially when everyone heard the story of the wolf pup. Snow Woman had a reputation for being somewhat reckless while being protected by the Great Spirit. She had even become the wife of Night Buffalo, a man with big medicine. No one was surprised whenever she did something unusual.

Night Buffalo gave the doe to the village for a feast and celebration. The Great Spirit had given the people a gift and a sign that the hard winter was over.

By the end of June, Nightwalker had opened her eyes and immediately showed a high level of curiosity. She also showed an attachment to Laughing Waters, her milk sister. Laughing Waters had been called this child’s name because she was always smiling and trying to laugh when Snow Woman would sprinkle her with warm water after a bath.

Nightwalker was learning to walk without falling over her legs. She was always near Laughing Waters. More than once, she fell across Laughing Waters, who would grasp her thin fur in her tiny hands and hold her in place. They often fell asleep in this position.

At feeding time, Snow Woman would tend them both. As she nursed Laughing Waters, Nightwalker would feed on small pieces of raw meat, as was proper for a wolf pup. Later, when Snow
Woman was doing her daily chores, Laughing Waters was often out of her cradleboard and trying to crawl across her sleeping fur. Nightwalker was never far from her side and sometimes underfoot. Whenever Laughing Waters seemed upset about something, Nightwalker would become agitated and concerned. She would then lay beside her, and that usually calmed her, allowing Snow Woman to continue her work.

As the summer days passed, Nightwalker grew at a rapid pace and became more independent. She would often run off into the forest for short spells, sometimes returning with a small animal in her jaws.

One morning, Snow Woman was picking berries, and Laughing Waters was laying on a warm rock. It was also a favorite sunning spot for an adult diamondback rattlesnake. As the snake approached the stone from a clump of brush, it sensed the presence of a small mammal laying upon that rock. The diamondback slithered toward it. When the snake came within striking distance, it reared up and opened its mouth, baring its fangs. Since this diamondback was almost seven feet in length, it might even be considering the small mammal as prey.

When it shook its rattles before striking, Snow Woman dropped her basket and rushed to protect Laughing Waters. In a panic, she knew she was too far away to prevent a tragedy. A dark blur swept past her as Nightwalker hurried to the scene and grabbed the Diamondback at the base of its head just as it struck. She crushed its spine in her jaws and carried it away while Snow Woman scooped Laughing Waters up into her arms.

Letting the dead snake writhing on the ground, Nightwalker trotted over to Snow Woman and sniffed around Laughing Waters to make sure she was alright. Then she went back to the snake and settled down for a meal.

As the story of the young wolf and the rattlesnake circulated throughout the village, it grew with each telling. People looked at her with special reverence and offered her special treats whenever she walked among their tepees.

Nightwalker was often seen walking alone through the village, showing little interest in its people or animals. The village dogs avoided her. Once, challenged by three of them, she tore one to shreds and severely injured the other two.

Always aware of the location of Snow Woman and Laughing Waters, she was continuously in their vicinity when they were outside of their tepee. Inside at night, she still shared the sleeping fur of Laughing Waters while Night Buffalo and Snow Woman slept on their own. Nightwalker sensed the love shared by Snow Woman and Night Buffalo and responded to his commands as much as hers.

It was during the late fall when Laughing Waters was crawling around the tepee and trying to take her first steps that Snow Woman showed signs of a second pregnancy. Night Buffalo became almost overprotective and decided to kill more game to process for a good winter food supply.

Early one morning, as they lay together in their furs, Night Buffalo said, “Today I will go for fresh meat and take Nightwalker with me. I want to see if she is of any value to us on a hunt for food.” Snow Woman wanted to go along on the hunt but sensed that he needed to go without her. She replied, “I will gather extra firewood so we can smoke the meat for this winter. Soon I will not be able to hunt with you and Nightwalker eats more every day.”

“If he helps me on this hunt, he can be a big help during the winter when you are too large to go with me.”

Night Buffalo stood and took his Henry from its usual place on the tepee wall. Then he stood at the tepee entrance for a moment and signaled Nightwalker to come with him.

Nightwalker had been laying next to Laughing Waters. She stood and stretched before glancing around the tepee and trotting outside after Night Buffalo. She had been on hunts with the family several times during the summer and early fall. She enjoyed the forest and loved the many new scents that
assailed her nose. Once she even noticed a faint scent that was very similar to the smell of her sleeping fur. She did not like that odor, and when she sensed it, she bared her teeth and produced a subdued growl. She wasn’t sure why she reacted that way, and it did cause her some slight confusion.

Night Buffalo knew winter was approaching and hunting was becoming more serious and vital. Soon the game would be scarce. He hoped Nightwalker would use her heightened senses to help locate places where large animals sheltered from the elements and follow their scent trails when necessary. If so, they would be able to get enough meat for a comfortable winter.

The Crow used to hunt buffalo and would take large quantities of the meat for winter survival. Lately, the Sioux and Cheyenne had been very active and attacked any hunting parties in their territory. They did not care that the land belonged to the Crow Nation by treaty with the United States Government. A war would cost the Nation many lives, and since game was plentiful in the mountains, they chose not to force the issue at this time.

The aspen trees were starting to turn gold in the higher elevations. Winter was close, and snow could start falling at almost any time.

He was thinking about that prospect when Nightwalker stopped her aimless circling and stared in one direction. Night Buffalo moved closer to her and saw that she was staring along a trail of elk hoof prints. They followed the tracks for two hours when they spotted a bull elk grazing on some brush. It was within the range of his Henry. Taking careful aim, he shot it directly behind its shoulder, punching a hole through its heart.

The elk was a dead animal but responded to the bullet’s impact by taking off at a run. Each bound covered ten yards, and it was quickly out of sight. Nightwalker had taken off after the elk when Night Buffalo fired his rifle. He whistled, and Nightwalker stopped and waited for him to catch up. Together they followed the blood trail left by the elk. They had to track it for several hundred yards before spotting its body near the base of a cliff. Night Buffalo cautiously approached the elk. He did not want a wounded bull elk attacking him. He quickly determined that the elk was dead. He sat his Henry against its body and prepared to eviscerate the dead animal with his Bowie Knife. He noticed that Nightwalker had stopped and was sniffing the air.

When he knelt beside the dead elk, Night Buffalo felt a strange sensation. He sensed danger nearby. Maybe Nightwalker sensed it as well. He reached for his Henry Rifle and just as his hand touched the stock, he heard a blood-curdling scream from almost directly overhead. The distraction caused him to look up as a large cougar leaped from a point nearly twenty feet up on the cliff face.

Leaving the rifle, he rolled away from the elk, causing the cougar to miss raking its claws across his body. He stopped in a kneeling position with his Bowie pointed at the cougar. His rifle was on the other side of the cougar, and his pistol was back in the village.

The big cat had landed slightly off balance as it tried to compensate for the sudden movement of Night Buffalo. With a snarl, it turned and prepared to pounce but was diverted by Nightwalker as she attacked, sinking her fangs into its left hind quarter. The cat gave out a roar and quickly turned, throwing Nightwalker to the side. As it prepared to attack this new threat, Night Buffalo leaped onto the cougar, plunging his Bowie Knife directly into its heart.

Nightwalker stood beside the large cat, fiercely growling. Then she raised her head as if to sniff the air, and howled for the first time. She stopped with an expression of surprise on her face and then bayed once again.

There was some howling in the distance as a response to her action. Night Buffalo figured he had better get busy with the elk and cougar before unwelcome visitors showed up. He skinned the cougar and removed a hindquarter from the elk, which he wrapped in the cougar skin. The rest of the elk he hung in a tree out of the reach of any predators. He would be back tomorrow with a pony to haul it back to the village.
Once they returned home, everyone became excited when they saw the cougar skin and later heard the story about how Nightwalker had saved his life. That evening Snow Woman fed Nightwalker a large piece of elk meat and thanked her for saving her husband’s life.

During the night, Nightwalker was restless. She was in her usual place next to Laughing Waters but showed a need to leave the tepee. Wolves were howling in the distance as if they were calling to her. She did not understand why she felt such a strong compulsion to answer them. She refused to leave the side of Laughing Waters and stayed in her place.

Night Buffalo heard the wolves and thought they were trying to get at the elk carcass where it hung out of their reach. He was sure he had attached it high enough to keep it safe but was still worried about it.

Snow Woman also lay awake, listening to the distant wolves. She sensed that they were communicating with Nightwalker and thought that soon Nightwalker would have to leave them and go her own way.

Everyone except Laughing Waters had a restless night. The sounds of the wolf pack had the whole village on edge. When the sun appeared the next morning, a group of warriors had gathered near Night Buffalo’s tepee prepared to drive them away.

Night Buffalo went along with the warriors. He figured that some of them could help bring the elk carcass back to the village. He left as Snow Woman was feeding Laughing Waters. Nightwalker left at the same time. She had to respond to the calls of the wolf pack. It was an almost irresistible call, and she was not sure why.

As the warriors went to where the elk hung in the tree, Nightwalker trotted in the opposite direction. Even though the wolf pack had been lively east of the village during the night, she sensed they were now to the west.

She came across their sign a few miles from the village. The alpha male had marked trees in the area with his urine. She was vaguely familiar with the scent. She became cautious and continued her trek.

Nightwalker was three-quarters grown, and thanks to her excellent care, she was already one of the most massive wolves in the Bighorn Mountains. She weighed almost 150 pounds and in perfect health. She was nearly a full year away from attaining sexual maturity and producing pups.

There were nine wolves in the pack. An Alpha pair led the pack. The male had lost his first mate the previous year, and her skin had served as a sleeping fur for Laughing Waters and Nightwalker. The smell of the Alpha male had lingered faintly on that fur and Nightwalker associated the scent with something wicked. There were two other pairs of wolves and three young ones about her age in the pack.

The pack surrounded Nightwalker as the Alpha female approached to stand directly in front of her. Nightwalker was uncertain about what to do. When the female bared her fangs and growled, Nightwalker sensed that she should place her belly on the ground, turn her eyes to look downward, and put her tail between her legs.

Instead, she stood erect and responded in a threatening manner, much as her mother had done nine months earlier. Her challenge was quickly accepted, and the Alpha female went for her throat. A shot rang out, knocking the Alpha female off her feet. She was dead before she hit the ground.

Snow Woman quickly reloaded her Sharps Rifle in case the pack came after her. She did not have to worry. The wolves scattered and ran off into the woods. Knowing that Nightwalker had probably run off to answer the call of the wolf pack, Snow Woman had followed her trail. Night Walker had not grown up among wolves and might get herself into deep trouble. Leaving Laughing Waters in the care of a friend, she had taken the Sharps Rifle and left the village.

When she shot the Alpha female and the pack scattered, Nightwalker must have gone with them. Snow Woman just shook her head as she removed the skin from the dead wolf and rolled it to take home. She felt sad that Nightwalker had run with the pack and hoped that she would return.
She was surprised when she entered her tepee, and Nightwalker sat beside Laughing Waters, having her ears pulled. She had decided for now that this was her home, but Snow Woman knew that one day the call of the pack would be too great to resist.