

WINTER SOLSTICE NIGHT OF THE WOLVES

By

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WINTER SOLSTICE NIGHT OF THE WOLVES

THE SNOW HAD been falling relentlessly for three days, covering the trees and forest floor. All signs of life were obliterated. An eerie quietness settled over the land as the clouds moved away, exposing thousands of stars and a full moon. Hunkered down, the woodland creatures had no desire to leave their warm nests and burrows. They were content to spend the cold snuggling with others of their kind or sleeping through the long winter night.

Yemaya and Dakota stared into the darkness, their eyes searching for signs of movement.

"Do you think they're okay?" Dakota asked, shifting slightly in the warm embrace of the arms wrapped around her waist. Yemaya was standing behind Dakota, her chin resting on her lover's head. A blanket was draped around both of them, shielding them from the cold air. When Dakota shivered, Yemaya pulled her closer.

"I am sure they are fine. Every year around this time they go away for a few days."

"Where?"

"Out there!" Yemaya said, unconsciously nodding toward the mountains.

Dakota sighed.

"I miss Simtire."

"I know. Once you have bonded with wolves, they become a part of you, and you, them."

"You must miss Regina and Voinic an awful lot."

"I do, but they will be home tomorrow."

"I hope so."

"Come inside. You are cold." Yemaya guided Dakota into their bedroom and closed the balcony doors. "I will run a hot bath so we can warm up."

"I've a better idea." Dakota pulled Yemaya toward the bed.
"Let's warm up under the blankets."

Yemaya's lips curled up at the edges. Her blue eyes twinkled with suppressed humor.

"Are you sure? You are still recovering from the flu."

"What better way? The doctor told me to stay in bed. I'm simply following her orders."

"So you are."

* * *

Several wolves were gathered in a circle on the highest peak of the mountain range surrounding Lysanne Valea. The dim lights of Castle Lysanne could be seen several kilometers away. Tree limbs swayed back and forth, making the lights appear like the flickering stars of the distant worlds.

Every year, for as long as the Lysanne packs could remember, they gathered on the same day at this particular site. The young and healthy would join the old and failing. Alliances were renewed and information exchanged about the clans that lived deeper in the mountain ranges. The recent dead were mourned and their names passed on to others, never to be forgotten. Wolves cherished their kin as much as they cherished life itself. All who came before them continued to live in the wild beating heart of each wolf. Vyushir, the Wolf Spirit, deemed it so.

* * *

Voinic lay next to his mate, Regina, worried about her failing health. She was older than him and feeling her age. Thirteen cycles had passed since her birth, three more than his. This trip had been particularly hard for her. What normally took a few hours had taken almost an entire day. Her progress up the steep terrain had been painfully slow.

Whining softly, Simtire crept on her belly toward her dam and sire, voicing her concern. She was the youngest of Regina's last litter, but already displayed the Queen's intelligence. Simtire was brave and strong, with a youthful exuberance that often got her and her siblings into trouble, trouble she almost always managed to escape. Although proud of their offspring, Voinic and Regina often had to chastise her for her irresponsible behavior. Chastisement, by wolf standards, was often harsh, and never forgotten.

Mother? Simtire thought, nudging Regina with her nose. Wolves didn't communicate entirely by words. Often imagery and body language were used. The imagery was like watching a slide show, sometimes at high speed, sometimes slow motion. A picture of Regina lying on the snow with her eyes closed followed by the image of Clovn, her deceased daughter, showed Simtire's concern for her mother. Almost immediately, Regina flashed back a scene of her running with the pack and then lying down to rest. Simtire wasn't fooled, but knew better than to challenge her mother. After giving Regina's cheek several licks, she backed away on her belly.

"Aaawww Wooooo!" she howled, turning her nose upward. Others followed suit until a chorus filled the air and echoed across the mountains and valleys. Distant clans picked up the howls and passed them to others farther away. Within minutes, the entire Carpathian Range reverberated with the wolves' songs. Then, just as quickly as it began, their world fell silent.

Your children are worried about you. I am worried about you, Voinic flashed to his mate. Regina sent the same image to Voinic as she had sent to Simtire. Voinic knew better. *We have been together too long, my Queen. You are not well.* Images of the two of them running through the forests, playing with their children and their children's children, was followed by the single image of her walking slowly up the mountain.

Regina opened her eyes and looked at her mate. At ten cycles, he was still strong and beautiful. Only his graying coat and muzzle revealed signs of his aging. Voinic was the perfect consort for her, and a wonderful father to their offspring. He shared the responsibility of raising several litters, willingly, feeding and protecting his family against anything that threatened them. Rarely did he challenge her authority. When he did, though, he was usually right, and Regina was wise enough to accept his decisions.

Regina returned Voinic's images exactly as he had sent them, adding one more at the end, the face of her and Clovn standing together.

Voinic felt a pain in his chest. Clovn was with Vyushir. The pack clown, she was missed by everyone.

When? he asked.

Regina closed her eyes. Her mind went blank. Wolves could not relay time. The past was a series of pictures of events and pack

members, the future a blank slate. Still, her exhaustion was a good indication that her passing was near.

* * *

The wolves watched the exchange of visions between their Queen and her consort. There were no secrets between kin. Secrets created distrust and a wolf's life depended on complete faith in the pack and its leaders.

An eerie calm settled around them. No one was willing to disturb it. Several distant clans called out, trying to entice the pack into joining them. When the calls went unanswered, they, too, grew quiet, sensing something was wrong.

Simtire stood and stretched, leaning her body forward and then backward. Looking at those around her, she turned and walked back over to Regina and lay next to her, placing her mother between her and Voinic. Others in the pack gathered around the three, some lying down, while others stood guard. Nothing would get between them and their Queen.

* * *

A cold wind blasted the trees, shaking the snow from their branches. Several dead limbs snapped and fell to the ground, the impacts muffled by the deep white blanket covering the forest floor. The wolves stared into the moonlit darkness, searching for anything unusual. Nothing was unusual, and yet they sensed something was moving toward them from over the ridge. Ears pricked forward, several moved cautiously away from the pack, intent on creating a first line of defense. Others circled Regina nervously. If their scouts failed, the rest would defend their Queen.

The moon was directly overhead. Light reflected off the snow-covered landscape, creating an almost-blinding glare. Distracted by this vulnerability, the wolves didn't see the white figure bounding toward them from the opposite direction. It leapt over the first three. When the wolves charged the intruder, it spun around and slapped them to the ground with massive paws.

Stay down! it snarled. Reeling from the blows, the stunned wolves had no choice but to obey. The remaining wolves crouched, unsure of themselves. *Down!* Every member of the pack lay down and rested their heads on their paws... except two. Voinic and Simtire stood and positioned themselves in front of Regina, willing to die for their mother, mate and Queen.

The intruder's hackles rose. Emitting a low growl, its lips curled upward, exposing large, white canine teeth.

You defy me?

Simtire felt a moment of fear. Her heart beat wildly as she stared at the enormous white wolf confronting her.

She is my Queen! My mother! Images of their hunts together and her tugging on her mother's ear when she was a pup filled her mind.

She is my life-mate and my Queen, Vyushir! Voinic added, recognizing the Spirit.

She is mine to do with as I wish! I have come for her, Vyushir growled.

Simtire and Voinic stepped forward, blocking the Wolf Spirit's path.

Take me!

And me!

You are not why I am here. Step aside!

* * *

Regina's feet twitched as she dreamt of running across the mountainous terrain. The aches and pains of age were gone. Next to her were her mother and father. Other kin either followed or were spread out along each side, enjoying the thrill of the chase. A herd of large, white bison ran in front of them. Only one interested her and her companions. The pack separated one young calf from its mother and surrounded it. When the calf gave up, bawling, the wolves moved in for the kill. One by one, they approached the terrified baby, giving it the coup de grace: a lick on the snout. Then, happy that the chase was over, they turned and charged toward the highest peak, leaving the mother bison the job of reassuring her baby. Regina never killed in her dreams.

It was a glorious chase, wasn't it Moth — A deep growl interrupted her thought. Looking around, the faces of her deceased kin faded. Regina opened her eyes slowly, feeling lethargic and confused. Before her stood Simtire and Voinic, their backsides barely a foot from her face; beyond them stood a great white wolf.

Vyushir! Regina called out, attempting to stand up.

Rest! Vyushir commanded. *And remove these insubordinates from in front of you. They refuse to obey me.*

Simtire! Voinic! What is this about?

Turning, Simtire looked into her mother's eyes.

Vyushir has come for you. Father and I refuse to let you be taken.

Regina looked at Voinic.

Is this true? Voinic dipped his head once.

It is too soon.

Pushing upward, Regina stood on tired legs. She raised her head proudly, looking first at her mate and then her daughter.

Only Vyushir can decide when it is time. Step aside.

Reluctantly, both obeyed their Queen, but not before Simtire turned and growled at the Wolf Spirit. Although proud of her daughter's courage, Regina bared her fangs and nipped Simtire's flank. Chastened, Simtire stepped aside. *My apologies, Vyushir.*

No need, Regina. You cannot be held responsible for their actions. Are you ready to come with me?

If that is your wish. Regina flashed the image of her and Vyushir walking away together... and they did.

* * *

Noses raised to the sky, the pack's mournful cries filled the air. Their voices carried for miles, and all that heard sensed something was terribly wrong. Even the humans who stopped to listen felt an indescribable loss. Their eyes filled with tears without knowing why.

Yemaya and Dakota had just fallen asleep when they were startled awake by the wolves' howls. Pressing her hand to her chest, Yemaya felt her heart pounding and a shortness of breath.

"What is it?" Dakota asked, feeling a sense of dread. When she saw her lover's distress, she almost panicked. "Are you okay?"

"Something has happened to Regina," Yemaya replied, taking a few deep breaths to slow the heartbeats.

"Do you know what?"

"No, but it is not good."

* * *

You have done well with your kin, especially Simtire. She will make a good Queen, Vyushir said. Unlike the mortal wolves, the Wolf Spirit could read and project thoughts without imagery.

She is young, Regina replied. *It will be many years before she is ready to lead. Voinic will have a hard time keeping her out of*

trouble. Memories of her mate and her daughter flashed through her mind. She would miss them... and all of her kin.

You will see them again. Come!

Regina followed Vyushir through a wall of thick clouds and emerged in a lush green forest. The sound of singing birds and animals scurrying around was a pleasant change from the cold of winter. Hundreds of different smells filled the air. A brown rabbit darted between her and the Wolf Spirit, startling her. It was only when she heard a soft growl to her left that she realized other wolves were emerging from the dense undergrowth. Spinning, she saw a gray wolf sitting a short distance away, her tongue lolling out happily.

Clovn?

Jumping up, the wolf ran to her, almost knocking her over. Swift licks to the face confirmed that her daughter was real.

Mother!

Regina realized that she and Clovn were now communicating in a different manner. Images were no longer needed.

Mother, I have missed you.

I have missed you too, daughter. You were foolish to disobey me, Regina chastised, remembering how hard it was seeing Clovn's still body lying in the glen next to a young male from another pack.

Oh, Mother, that is the past. What is important is that we are now together. Come! Run with me and the others.

I am too old for that.

No one is old here. Listen to your body. Does it feel old to you? Clovn asked, bouncing around her like a puppy, nipping her hip playfully.

Clovn was right. Regina did feel young and energetic. All of her pains had disappeared. The exhaustion that inevitably came with age had faded.

Vyushir, who had been standing quietly to the side, nodded.

Age does not exist here, except in the mind. If you feel young, you will be young. Run as much as you want, and as long. We will talk later.

It was all Clovn needed to start the chase. Nipping Regina again, Clovn jumped backward and then loped away, daring her mother to catch her. Unable to resist the invitation, Regina charged after her daughter. The chase was on. The more she played, the

younger she became. Her graying muzzle and fur regained their youthful colors. Running and leaping, she was more than a match for any of her kin.

Vyushir watched the old Queen disappear into the Eternal Forest, and decided to join her and the other wolf children before returning to the mortal world. The Wolf Spirit had more business to attend to.

* * *

The Lysanne pack lay quietly, sharing personal images of their life with their Queen. She had been loved and respected by all. Her name would become legendary amongst all of the clans of the Carpathian Mountain range.

I should have challenged Vyushir. Simtire sent a picture to her kin of her fighting the Wolf Spirit.

Immediately, several images were flashed of Regina knocking Simtire to the ground, the Queen's teeth bared as a deep growl rumbled from her throat. Simtire returned the image, acknowledging the reprimand. Feeling her pain, Voinic nuzzled her neck and then leapt to his feet.

We run for our Queen! We run for my mate and for your mother!

Turning their noses toward the sky, their voices united in one long howl. It wasn't the familiar soulful, lonely call of the wild. Instead, they offered a joyous invitation to all who were willing to join them as they envisioned Regina leading them in the chase. On this night, no blood would stain the white blanket covering the land.

Springing forward as one, the pack raced down the mountainside toward a clearing. A gray mist swirled around its perimeter, giving it a mystical appearance. The wolves felt irresistibly drawn to the strange phenomena.

The sound of flapping wings filled the air. Voinic glanced upward. Three owls soared gracefully above, circled by smaller birds that playfully dove at their normally mortal enemies. A small meadow to Voinic's right began filling with white balls of fur as wild hares crept from their burrows and hopped cautiously out in the open. Squirrels chattered noisily in the trees, unwilling to chance cavorting with owls and wolves. Species by species, others joined in the celebration. Creatures big and small, predator and

prey, ran, romped, flew and soared together, their fears put aside for a few hours of absolute joy.

* * *

Vyushir watched the Lysanne Queen as she lay panting, her eyes closed.

Why do you not run?

I am tired, Regina said, not opening her eyes.

There is no tiredness here, Vyushir replied.

Not of the body. My spirit is tired. I miss my mate, my pack.

Your pack? This is your pack. All here are of your blood, before and after you, the Wolf Spirit said, motioning to the wolves frolicking nearby.

Regina took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

Yes, and I love all of them... but I miss Voinic and Simtire.

Sonya will soon give birth to her first litter. Who will guide her in raising the pups? Her mate was killed one moon cycle ago.

She will learn through trial and error, just as you did. Voinic will teach and protect her. She will be safe with the pack.

Regina knew Vyushir was right. Still... Opening her eyes, she stared sadly into the pale gray eyes of the Wolf Spirit.

I know. I only wish... Regina sighed and then shook her head and lowered it onto her paws.

— that you were with your mortal family? I gave you an easy death... a reward for your sacrifices and your loyalty to me. Would you have preferred to die a more painful one, perhaps being injured during a hunt or falling and breaking a bone?

No —

Vyushir looked at her thoughtfully. Regina was a highly intelligent leader. She had faithfully honored the thousand-year-old pact between the wolves and the Lysannes after bonding with Yemaya, descendant of Mari, the Earth Mother. She had performed her duties as Vyushir's Queen without question or complaint.

You are wise, Regina. I would expect no less from a Queen, but you are naïve in many ways. A painful death would have traumatized your pack. The distraction could jeopardize their safety. Would you have it otherwise?

No. I am grateful for your thoughtfulness, Regina said. *I'm sorry that I'm causing you problems, Vyushir. I don't deserve your kindness.*

You don't deserve your misery either, Regina. Now you have presented me with a dilemma. Unlike others who have journeyed here, I believe you will not settle in so easily. My attempt to reward you is becoming a poisoned gift, not only to you, but to those who care for you. I must think on this awhile.

Vyushir vanished.

* * *

Exhausted, the wolves returned to the mountaintop. For hours they played with the woodland animals, taking great care not to frighten or injure any of them. A game of tag developed between the young wolves, pine martens and lynx, while the rabbits chewed on the bark of a few saplings that had managed to withstand the weight of the snow. Not to be left out, the birds would swoop down amongst the players, creating distractions with their antics and chatter.

Settling next to Voinic, Simtire sent an image of her mother lying on her side, nuzzling her newborn pups.

Yes, Voinic agreed. She would have loved this. Rest! The young will soon have hungry bellies and we are one less for the hunt.

Neither Voinic nor Simtire heard Vyushir's approach as it moved silently toward them. The Wolf Spirit made its presence known only when it wanted to.

You have honored your Queen well, Vyushir said, startling all of the wolves.

Vyushir!

Vyushir!

All of the wolves lowered their heads onto their paws... all except Simtire and Voinic. Both stood defiantly, heads held high as they confronted the Wolf Spirit.

Have you come for another of us? If so, it must be me, Voinic offered, showing Vyushir an image of himself with Regina. I want to be with my mate.

Simtire sent a picture of herself. Sonya sent one of herself. Each wolf offered their personal image to the Wolf Spirit. Vyushir ignored all of them.

I am not here for that. Your times will come soon enough. I have a dilemma that must be resolved quickly. Regina is unhappy, as are most that first join me. Your Queen is strong-willed. I do not

think she will adjust easily to the Spirit World, which will make the others there unhappy. Unfortunately, I cannot simply return her to you and pretend nothing has happened. It would not be fair to those who have passed before her or those who will join me later. Have you a solution? Vyushir asked, looking first into Voinic's eyes and then Simtire's.

Voinic again sent the image of him standing next to Regina.

You are brave, Voinic, but Regina would be unhappy here if I took you. That would then become a burden to this pack. There can be no substitutions. The problem must be solved in another manner — and soon. At first light, I cannot undo what has been done.

Simtire looked toward the eastern slopes, her mind racing for a solution.

Why? she asked.

Why? I do not understand your question, Simtire.

You are Vyushir, the great Wolf Spirit. All wolves honor you and believe you to be all-powerful. Do we worship you falsely?

The question was no sooner asked than she felt a body slam into her, knocking her to the ground. Voinic straddled her, his lips curled, exposing long, white fangs. Lowering his muzzle to within inches of her face, he growled ominously. Gray-brown eyes flashed angrily.

You dishonor your pack and your Queen.

Simtire whimpered and rolled onto her back, exposing her neck to her father. Ashamed, she awaited his punishment.

Vyushir was pleased, although he admired the young wolf's courage. In time, she would replace Regina.

Enough! the Wolf Spirit ordered. *Simtire's question is fair... and she has provided me the solution I need.*

Without saying another word, Vyushir vanished, leaving the pack confused.

* * *

Voinic lay next to his mate, worried about her failing health. She was older than him and feeling her age. Thirteen cycles had passed since her birth, three more than his. This trip up the mountain had seemed particularly hard on her. What normally took a few hours had taken almost an entire day as she slowly made her way up the steep terrain.

Simtire and two of her siblings circled the perimeter, searching for anything that might threaten the pack and her sleeping Queen. She had been guarding her mother all night, aware of the toll the climb had taken. Soon it would be daylight, and they would begin their trip back to her mistress' lair. The return trip would be long. Simtire was concerned that Regina might not be able to make the return journey. A change in Regina's breathing caught her attention. The Queen was waking up.

* * *

Regina opened her eyes slowly, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. Yawning, she turned her head and looked around. Most of her pack were lying quietly nearby. Some dozed, their soft breathing barely audible. The ones who were awake lifted their heads and stared at their Queen worriedly. Simtire was standing a short distance away, watching her.

An image of the pack on the move was sent to each of its members. Regina flexed her muscles and rose to her feet. The earlier exhaustion was gone. So were the aches and pains that had accompanied it. Stretching, she tested her legs and then shook her head tentatively.

Voinic stood and licked her face.

Are you rested enough? he asked.

Regina sent him the image of her running with the pack. She was in the lead. The rest struggled to keep up with her. It was then followed by another of her and Clovn playing in a lush green forest. Because the image was slightly blurred, the wolves knew she was showing them a dream.

One by one, each pack member sent her images of their own dreams. Although slightly different, Vyushir was present in all of them. Regina raised her nose skyward. Her throaty song echoed across the mountains, followed by her mate, daughter and the pack. None doubted that the Wolf Spirit had visited them while they slept.

I am fine, she said. Vyushir has blessed me with new strength. Come! We run! I am anxious to return home to our mistress.

As am I, my Queen, Voinic said.

And I, my Queen, Simtire added.

And I, my Queen, each wolf called out.

Jubilant, the pack raced down the slope and into the woods as the sun peeked over the ridge. Sunbeams reached tentatively toward the meadow a short distance away. From a distance, the snow appeared as smooth and undisturbed as the rest of the land. It was only when the wolves passed through it that they noticed hundreds of animal tracks crisscrossing the surface and knew something unusual had occurred during the night.

Intent on reaching home before nightfall, the pack passed within meters of a large white wolf standing quietly on the edge of the forest. Regina, however, slowed and made contact with the pale blue eyes.

Vyushir!

Stay young, my Queen! Vyushir said and then vanished. The howl of a lone wolf was heard by all the clans of the Carpathian Mountains. All was well.

The End.