

Origins

by Nicolai

She ran fleetly through the forest, knowing the pursuit would be there. Her mate was dead, killed by the same furs that pursued her. Their pursuit would not be easily deterred, for their insensate rage was deep and strong.

As she ran, she considered the small, growing life within her. The cub deserved to live, she decided. If she survived, she would birth him, then give him to be fostered. After that, there would be a decision to be made.

When she came to the river, she dove in without pause, knowing that her fur would protect her from the freezing water. She was thankful that the spring breakup was early and that the water ran free, hiding her trail and aiding her flight. There was still ice, as well, to conceal her from any lurking eyes. White ice, the same color as her fur. If she was careful, especially after the sun returned to the sky, from a distance she would appear to be just another piece of the spring drift. For now, she swam strongly with the current.

The sky trails were running freely across the sky, though it was late in their season, predominantly green tonight. Green, the color of new growth in the forest, and of the new life within her. Green, the color of the ghosts of the dead, including her mate. She could feel him looking down on her and approving her actions.

She swam on through the night, easing her stroke after a time and conserving her strength. When the dawn arrived, she began drifting with the current and blessing the late snow that began to fall. She knew she would not sleep today or tonight, her rage would sustain her for that long. Tomorrow she would probably have to find a den of some sort and rest, hopefully late in the day.

Knowing she needed nourishment, she dipped her head beneath the water and began scanning for fish. For a time she saw little, then she spotted a movement she knew. Diving carefully, she came up on the bottom feeder and managed to sink her claws in, preventing its escape.

Returning to the surface, she surveyed her meal. Despite her distaste, she consumed the large fish raw, all the while wishing she could have a fire and cook it properly. The fish, called turbot by the new furs who lived in the large villages that she had been told of, was delicious when properly cooked, and still palatable even when raw.

Dropping the fish's head back in the water, she vigorously scrubbed her paws together, cleaning them in the river. Ducking her head, she slaked her thirst in the clear water. In another moon, the water would turn brown with silt and it would be undrinkable until well after the autumn freeze. Another thing to be thankful for in her flight.

From the hunters' tales, she knew that late in the day the river she was in would join with another, larger river. Then the following morning that river would join with yet another, even larger. When that river narrowed and became too dangerous to swim, she would have to exit on the south bank and head south. She would find a large village perhaps two or three days travel by foot from the large river. She shivered with fear, hoping that they would not return her to her clan.

She drifted through the day and late that afternoon the river flowed into another. She struggled with the turbulence where the two flows merged, and came through unscathed, as much by luck as by

skill. This new river flowed faster, and she was pleased at its speed, even though she knew it increased her danger. It would carry her far, indeed, from the pursuers who would kill her if they caught her.

For the first part of the night, she swam again. Then near midnight, she chanced upon a larger floe of ice, one that would support her weight, and she clambered aboard carefully and settled down to rest.

Restless, and knowing that she would be able to find sleep only in exhaustion, she lay quietly on the ice floe and watched the river, alert for trouble.

As she drifted, her mind drifted also, back to the previous summer.

The clan had had a good winter, with many seals and even two whales being caught. When spring had come, they had moved off the sea ice and back to the shore, following their usual pattern. This time, the movement of the ice had taken them into unfamiliar territory, farther west than they had ever been before.

The land had been rich with waterfowl, and the caribou had come in numbers not seen in living memory. They had settled in the tundra lands of the northern shore and harvested the bounty around them, living easily off the land and recovering from the hardships of the winter.

Then the other tribe had come. Furs of another species, one she had never seen before. One that the elders had called the 'wild ones' and the 'furious ones'. She, along with all the other femmes and all the cubs, had been warned to flee the strangers at all costs. That they were wild and vicious, and were as likely to eat a stranger as anything.

The males had gone out and made a display of their strength while the wild ones watched impassively. Then, as quietly as they had appeared, they disappeared again into the vastness of the tundra. The elders prayed to the gods that the wild ones were properly impressed with the strength of the clan and would not return.

She, for one, had been fascinated by the strangers. Their strange, dark fur, long and shaggy, so unlike the shining white of her species. The odd stripe that circled their backs, the huge, bushy tail so different from the small stub of her own tail. Even the odd mask around their eyes was new.

Her fascination had become an obsession, and she had begun sneaking out of camp and trying to find the strangers, to watch them from concealment. It had taken her more than a moon to locate them, but she had finally succeeded. She had watched from a distance, carefully concealed, knowing that her white fur made her stand out on the tundra. She had even rolled in the muddy muskeg to darken her fur and aid her efforts at concealment.

Even with all her precautions, she had been seen. One of the strangers had circled behind her on her third excursion to watch them and had come up behind her without her knowledge. And so she had met her mate.

He told her later that he had been watching her since before she had found them. His people were native to the tundra and traveled widely across it, and he had spotted her during her searching.

He was as fascinated by her people as she was by his. They had exchanged tales of their lives, exploring the differences in the ways they lived. He told her that his people were known as wolverines. She told him that she was a polar bear, and he had laughed, saying that was rather obvious. They had shared dreams, ideas, their lives and secret ambitions. They had laughed at how similar the attitudes of the elders of the tribes were, and how closely the warnings about the others and their dangers had

matched. Even to the tales of how the others were known to eat cubs raw.

During the summer, their love had developed, grown and flourished. In the fall, as her clan had gathered on the shore to await the sea ice, they had declared the love and their mating in secret, with only the gods as their witnesses. His tribe had followed the caribou as they moved south into the mountains and the forests, and she had fled her clan as he fled his tribe, and the two of them had gone together into the wilderness.

The struggle to survive through the long night of winter had been difficult, especially for her. Her prowess as a huntress on the ice was worthless in this new environment, and the burden of providing food had fallen perforce on her new mate. He had risen to the challenge and they had survived, even during the bleakest of times, and most of the time they had prospered.

With the spring, they had traveled back onto the tundra, avoiding both the clan and the tribe as best they could. They had discussed the troubles that their mating would cause with both, and had come jointly to the decision that rejoining either was impossible. The old, old taboos about cross-species matings were the same in both groups. As was the penalty: death.

They hunted as a team, her skills improving steadily and their coordination improving with experience. Then the worst had happened.

While gathering goose eggs, they had been spotted by both groups within minutes of each other, and so their flight began.

At first, their lead had been good and the dissension between their pursuers had aided them. Then, somehow, the clan and the tribe had joined together and become a single group, pursuing both of them.

The femmes and cubs, along with many of the males, had turned back. The best hunters of both groups, however, had remained on their trail. And they had begun to gain on the lovers.

From the first, her mate had chosen difficult terrain to slow their pursuers. As they headed higher into the mountains, he had told her his plan, to go south and join the large mixed tribes that lived in the large villages, 'cities', he had called them. There, among those strange furs, a mixed mating like theirs was not a cause for a death hunt. It was unusual, yes, and talk would spread, but they would be allowed to live without fear of being killed for their mating.

Then, that terrible day when the hunters had found them. Her mate had lead her to the ravine, and told her to head down it, then run as she had never run before. He had whispered the way to the 'city'. He had told her that he would follow if he could, but that she must escape so that their cub could live.

As she had headed cautiously down the ravine, she had heard him turn back, and sobbed as she fled, for she knew that he meant to buy her the time to escape with his life. That he would kill as many of their pursuers as he could, she understood, as that would increase her chances of escape. But he would die there, that morning, for her. Thus he showed the depth of his love.

Suddenly, she was shaken out of her reverie when her floe impacted another, nearly throwing her into the water. Looking around, she quickly realized that she had found an ice jam, and her progress was stopped. She must cross this obstacle, and quickly, and resume her travel downriver.

Crossing the ice, quickly but carefully, she reached the other side and paused to observe. Concealed among the ice floes better than she realized, she examined the downstream end of the jam and

identified the key piece that would break the jam. Luckily, it was larger than the piece she had been riding and she knew that by jumping on it from a certain angle, she could probably break it loose, and possibly clear the jam at the same time. Riding out the wave that would follow the breakup would be difficult, but possible.

As she was examining the ice, charting a path to get her to the key piece and allow her to attempt to break it loose, a movement caught her eye. Looking carefully, she suddenly realized that a wolfpack was camped in the woods at the side of the river. On the side she had to approach to get the angle she needed for her plan to work!

Now she needed to be extra careful. Wolfpacks were well-known for killing furs who intruded on their hunting territory and this appeared to be a hunting party, for she could see no femmes or cubs. Well, if she managed this, they would be a serious problem for her pursuers, if they were still on her track.

Moving with extreme caution, she slowly approached her launching point. When, IF, the floe broke loose, the breakup of the jam would cause flooding along the banks, and the wolfpack would be caught in the middle of it. With a modicum of luck, they would not spot her or pursue her. If they did, and if they managed to catch her, well, she had certainly given her best effort and she would go down fighting, like her mate.

As she neared her launch point, she suddenly felt and heard the ice move. The jam was beginning to break! With a sudden, frantic burst of speed, she leaped through the air and hit the key floe dead center, and the ice jam burst! Elated, she concentrated on hanging on, digging her claws in and staying on the floe, for falling into the water now was almost certain death from the grinding ice.

Hearing the howls of the wolfpack behind her, she listened carefully. No, those were not the sounds of pursuit, they were sounds of woe and dread, and curses on the gods for breaking the jam right then. She knew that she had not been seen, and she silently laughed to herself, enjoying the trouble she had created and knowing that it was another hurdle that would trouble the hunters on her trail.

The wave crest carried her nearly two miles downstream before it faded, and she collapsed on the floe, the burst of nervous energy that had fueled her through the wild ride exhausted. Then, suddenly and without warning, the ice floe spun and bobbed in the water, nearly throwing her off before settling down again. Looking around in the fading light, she realized that she had come to the third, and largest of the rivers she would be traveling.

From what she had been told, she knew that she would need to exit the river shortly before dawn and climb the bank on her left before it became a cliff. There would be an odd switchback curve in the river just before that point, and she knew she would have to keep a careful watch for that, and her fatigue was beginning to catch up with her. This would be the most critical night of her flight.

During the night, she found herself dozing off sporadically, and she began taking measures to keep herself awake until the dawn. Finally, she deliberately slipped off the ice and into the water. This, she knew, would keep her awake long enough.

Finally, she recognized the switchback curve in the river and began moving toward the left bank. Spotting a rocky bench, she struck out and reached it safely, leaving the water for the first time in two days.

Working her way up the bank, she kept her eyes open for a suitable hiding place, so that she could sleep. Shortly after sunrise, she found what she was looking for and gratefully crawled into the opening.

Even though it was only an animal den, it was a sheltered and concealed place and not one that was likely to be investigated by any furs trailing her. If an animal claimed the den, her scent should convince it to sleep elsewhere while she rested. Moving back from the entrance, she found a niche in the wall that would conceal her from observation unless the searcher actually entered the den, and she sank down there gratefully and quickly fell asleep.

When she awoke, the light outside the den was dim. After a few moments, she realized that it was dimming and that night was coming on. After a few minutes, she came to realize just how tired she had been, for she had slept through the day, the night, and another day before waking. With that realization came the knowledge that she was very thirsty and very, very hungry.

Gradually easing herself up, she carefully stretched her body, relaxing and awakening the muscles that she would need to hunt. Then she moved to the entrance and began testing the air for scents.

Many of the scents were new to her, in this new and strange land, but she was able to classify most of them, including other predators and several prey species.

As she eased out into the open, she took stock of herself, and smiled grimly at her appearance. Covered, as she was, with dirt, vegetation and other, less appealing things, her once proud white fur was dirty, dingy and dusty. It was also much less obvious in this new environment, where a clean coat would almost instantly betray her to any watcher. She would leave it in this condition until it was safe to be clean again.

Later, after feeding on the raw meat of her kill, and drinking her fill at a stream, she took her bearings from the stars and headed south, to her destiny.

Six moons later, she allowed herself to be led to a 'clinic', where, she had been told, she would be assisted in giving birth to her cub. The strange furs of this 'city' were kind but baffling. They did not care that she was not part of their clan, or even of their species. They gave her care without thought of any payment, once they found that she had no means to pay them. As others had fed her and sheltered her, and helped her learn her way in this strange place.

When her cub was born, strong and proud and bearing the features of both his parents, she stayed with him through the winter, giving him a strong start in his life with her mother's milk. At the same time, her sorrow at the loss of her mate continued its transformation into hatred and fury, becoming a cold, deadly and implacable rage aimed at the clan and the tribe whose paws were stained with his blood.

Then, as the seasons rolled around again and light and the sun were returning to the land, she took her cub to the place she had heard of, where unknown cubs were accepted and raised according to the ways of this strange place, and there she left him.

Then, finally, her decision made, she turned her muzzle back to the north, aiming herself like a spear at those who had killed her mate. She would return there, across the big river the city furs called the Yukon, and up the other rivers and across the mountains, and there she would go down fighting, killing those who killed her, as had he.

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