

## **The Snow Demon**

### **A tale of the Chakats of Long Lane Farm**

*2299, Annapolis Valley, GNA*

It was still a few hours before dawn. It had been a long night – it was actually the longest night of the year, the winter solstice. Some might mark the solstice as the start of winter, but the cold winds had stripped the leaves from the trees weeks before. The winds had blown snow into the Valley early and to a depth that was not often seen. It was one of those nights when you wanted to be inside, hidden from the unblinking stars that dotted the cold, clear sky.

The human walked up to the fire, which had been burning steadily until the logs were just a pile of glowing coals. With a twinge from the stiffness that had started to settle in his joints the last few years, he reached down and picked up a couple of applewood logs, and added them to the fire. The dry wood caught quickly, and the flames expanded the sphere of light that was pushing back the darkness.

Turning away from the fire, he could now see the many pairs of eyes that shone with the reflected light of the flames. They stared at him, glowing pairs of eyes surrounded by the fur of their faces, ears turned toward him, the occasional glint of the flames on the sharp teeth in the muzzles of the surrounding circle. In the light he could make out the shape of a wolf here, a fox there, the large feline bulk of the Chakats.

Turning toward the glowing eyes that surmounted the barely seen shape of the powerful wolftaur, he asked, “So, Star, it's your turn. What's the story you're going to tell us?”

The wolftaur's real name was Gloqowej (ge-lo-ho-wech), the Mi'kmaq word for 'star'. He'd been given that name because of the irregular white patch on his chest. Anyone except other members of his pack usually just called him 'Star'.

“Well, ... ,” he murmured almost to himself as he ran his handpaw along his chin and smoothed the fur under his jaw and down his throat. “There's a tale that my sire told me that had been told to him by his sire, and of course every word is true.”

Everyone stretched out in front of the fire groaned at that – they'd spent the last hour trading tall tales, each one trying to outdo the other with their fantastic stories. It was the usual ending for the Solstice party at Long Lane Farm. The Longtails and their cronies would settle in front of the fire as the other partyers found their various beds, and for some friends and companions would join mates to fill them. The lights were turned down until their little group in front of the fire was the last pool of light in that long dark night. Sharing the warmth of the fire, and for a few the warmth of a mulled cider or some other beverage, they'd engage in a contest to see who could tell the tallest tall tale.

“Come on Star. We all know *your* stories. If there are an infinite number of parallel universes, then they had to have happened in one of them. I just don't believe they happen in this one,” joked Puck. “And you, Jean-Matthieu, Big Joe Mufferaw? He wasn't even a real person!”

“Why sure he was – he's an ancestor on my maternal grand-mère's side,” the human replied with a big grin. “Besides, this close to la Fête de Noël? I'm not going to risk being on anyone's 'Naughty List' by telling anything but the truth!”

Star looked at his Chakat friend, and with a highly theatrical snort of disdain and an air of wounded dignity, he continued, “Well, Puck, you'll just have to make up your mind then, when you hear it.”

He paused for a moment, peered into the flames, and started his tale.

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My grandsire Saethwr Brindlefur was still a young wolftaur, a powerful hunter in his pack. This was about 50 years ago, about ten years after our pack moved into the Valley. It was a little later in the winter than it is now, and it had been a cold winter, with more snow than many years.

They had brought the sheep flocks into their winter pasture, and put members of the pack to guard them. This prevented them wandering off, and ensured that the wild wolves and other predators wouldn't prey on the flocks. Every night they would be herded into their sheepcot, and the pack would guard them against the storms and predators.

Despite their careful watch, a heavy snowfall blew in one afternoon which created the opportunity for three of the sheep to wander off before they could be rounded up. My Grandsire and two others got ready to track them, and bring them back.

They had on their heavy cloaks, with a warm hood and a long body that covered their upper torso, and along their lower torso to their hind legs. Under the protection of the cloak, they had panniers with a little food, essential supplies, a pistol, along one side a quiver and on the other a holster holding his bow. While the pistol might be good for protection, the hunting bow had the advantage of silence. The bow has always been the weapon of choice for the pack. The hunting bow could take prey without the shock and trauma associated with firearms, which we think spoils the taste of the meat. It also doesn't scatter prey like the noise of a gunpowder weapon would.

At first the trail was difficult only because of the encroaching dusk and the snow that still was falling, but as they raced along the trail became clearer. They were catching up on the wandering sheep.

Saethwr paused, and with a growl of exasperation, spoke to his companions. "Stupid sheep, what made them split up? You take the left trail, you the right, I'll follow the centre one." And with that they parted ways and carried on their individual trails.

The trail became clearer, although the steps became farther apart, more a panicked run than the usual gait of a wandering sheep. It had ploughed a trail through the deepening snow, although it must be tiring as it continued to run. If he didn't find it soon, the growing darkness would cover even the most obvious trail.

An iron smell drifted down the wind. Saethwr moved through the trees until he crested a small ridge, looked down and growled at the sight. The snow was stained red, scraps of wool covered flesh were thrown about the hollow and bloody gobbets were left about the partial skeleton of what had once been one of their flock.

Now, as hunters a wolftaur is used to the sight of blood, but this was the pack's animal, not some wild deer that fallen prey to a predator. The sight of such waste had caused the growl which made its way to his throat.

He saw the bloodstains that must come from the rest of the sheep being carried by its destroyer, and footsteps leading away into the trees. They were an odd shape, neither human, morph, wolf, or any animal that he recognized, which in itself was strange. He was not a grey muzzle, but there wasn't a track that he couldn't recognize. What had left these footprints in the snow?

It wasn't yet full darkness, so Saethwr had a few minutes left to find what had caused such carnage. Whatever it was, it needed to be taught that taking one of their flock could not be done without peril.

The night now almost covered the land, and the dusk had seemed to be passing into full darkness faster than normal even for that dark time of year. He could make out the trunks of the trees, but it was the blood smell that allowed him to keep following the trail.

The woods became increasingly dark, increasingly silent. It seemed that even the stars were blotted from the sky, until he could see nothing, hear nothing, not feel a breeze, even the smell of blood on the ground seemed to be fading. The dark seemed a tangible thing, having to be pushed aside so that he was staggering forward as if in a silent windstorm.

The pressure suddenly eased off, making him almost stumble to his knees. He straightened up and looked about.

He was in a clearing, that was glowing with a light that was anything but comforting, a glow that spoke more of death and decay than the warmth of a fire. Standing across the clearing was a shape that might have been a horrible parody of a man.

A voice echoed in Saethwr's ears – it didn't seem to come from the thing he was facing, but to come from everywhere and nowhere.

“What are you, foolish being that dares to follow me?”

Momentarily he wasn't able to answer, despite being a powerful wolftaur who had faced many threats and overcome them all. With a slight catch in his voice, he answered, “I am a wolftaur. I am a hunter with the Wolfville pack, this is our range, and that is the blood of one of our sheep at your feet. Now that you know what I am, what are you?”

With a small laugh that had no trace of warmth, joy, or humour, it answered, “So, you don't know me? If you knew, you wouldn't, you shouldn't have followed me. I am jenu.” That last word seemed to fade off like a cloud of smoke caught by a cold winter wind.

Despite his brave heart, this caused Saethwr to start. He had heard many tales of the jenu from their Mi'kmaq neighbours. Jenu were the embodiment of madness, of evil, of destruction – they might once have been human, or maybe something that had slipped from some hell to this world to prey on any that they encountered.

He reached under his cloak, reaching to where he carried his compound bow. Even with the dropoff in the pull weight, this was a powerful bow – over 200 pounds at peak and still 100 pounds at full draw. From the quiver on his other side he pulled an arrow, an aluminium alloy shaft with a razor sharp broadhead on the end. In a moment with the ease of long familiarity the arrow was nocked to the string, his one arm braced the bow while the powerful muscles in his upper torso's shoulders pulled the arrow back to full draw, momentarily settling it against his muzzle as he sighted, and loosed it at the jenu.

The jenu picked the arrow out of the air, bent it from the strength of its grip, and tossed it aside with what might have been disdain.

Saethwr didn't move, and his arm that held the bow drooped toward the ground. It took him a few moments to realize that it wasn't just surprise that held him immobile, he couldn't move, or even call out.

Frozen, he saw the jenu start to ... not so much walk towards him but to ooze across the bloodied snow. His mind raged, trying to make his limbs respond as the jenu stepped closer, but he seemed to have been turned into a block of ice.

The only part of his body that was responding was his chest, his lungs heaved as he struggled to move, the air forced in and out of his lungs was the one sound that penetrated the unnatural silence. His exertions served only to draw the stink of death and decay from the jenu into his nose, all the exquisitely sensitive capabilities of that organ telling him a tale of ten thousand horrors.

With the jenu barely a meter in front of him, the clearing brightened to the light of a moon that had not

been there moments before and he could feel movement starting to return to his limbs.

Saethwr was able to force his head to the one side, tracking to face toward a human voice that commanded, "Stop, foul one." He knew this person wasn't speaking in any language that he knew, but still he understood what had been said. He saw a very large man, dressed in the kind of leather clothing that the Mi'kmaq of this land once wore. With increasing ease, he was able to turn his head to his other side, as a pair of massive wolves stood shoulder to shoulder, hackles raised, snarling at the jenu.

The deathly voice of the jenu called out, "This is not one of yours – leave with your wolves and I will leave with my prize. He is neither one of the children of man, nor a child of the forests, but something of neither. He does not fall under our agreement."

"You are wrong, evil one. He is the child of both – my wolves know him as a cousin of theirs, and I know him as a creation of man, and while not a child of man and woman, he is sprung from the mind of man. In that way he is both a child of man and a child of the forest. Leave him, or you will have to fight me. You can't beat me, as our battles in the past have shown. Leave now, while you can."

With a snarl, the jenu moved away, each step making it less solid until it had faded into nothing.

The man stepped across the clearing, picked up the bent arrow, and handed it to my Grandsire.

"Keep this, son of man and son of wolf. This is a token of a treaty we have made today. Your people will never again be threatened by this jenu or its kind. But beware for their word is never to be fully trusted. Take care if you ever encounter them again."

He placed the arrow in my Grandsire's hands. Saethwr looked down at the twisted arrow in his hands. When he looked up, he was surprised to see that he was alone in the clearing. The stars again filled the sky, and the wind once again lightly whistled through the limbs of the trees.

To this day, that bent arrow is in a cairn at the gate to our lands, a reminder of that strange meeting. We have encountered that stench of death again from time to time, but never again has any of our pack come face to face with a jenu.

We aren't sure who the man and the wolves were, although our Mi'kmaq neighbours tell tales of Glooscap and his two companion wolves.

Was it him? Well, we'll never know.

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Gloqowej's voice came to a halt.

In the glow from the fire, the listener's heads nodded. A sudden gust of wind caused a whistle of air up the chimney, and a flair of light as the fire responded producing a sharp crack from a knot exploding in the flare of heat. The wind had given an odd quality to the sound ... some might think it sounded like a jenu screaming in frustration at losing their prey.

The group of friends listened to that sound, their heads jerking about at the loud report, their eyes filled with thoughts of dark and lonely places, and how much better it is to be surrounded by good friends and warm fires. Puck broke the silence with practically a whisper, "Thank you, Gloqowej." Shi gave herself a shake, and with the return of the smile that never seemed far from his muzzle, "Now, who's next?"

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