A Gift of Wolves

The little cabin had been built with the weather in mind. The door opened inward and she began to shovel away the accumulated snow. It did not take long, the cabin's back was to the wind. The woman went out to take a look around.

Snow was piled high against the back wall, reaching to the roof. It swept down the side walls, encircling the home in its cold embrace. She stepped away from the door to inspect the roof. Luckily the wind had swept it clean. She needn't worry about it collapsing, or climbing up to clear it herself.

Her husband had left early that morning, hoping to find more game to add to their winter cache. She turned in a slow circle, searching the woods at the edge of the clearing for any sign of his return. It was then that she noticed the first flitting gray shape. Light coming from the door reflected back at her from several sets of eyes, confirming her fears.

With a mournful howl, the wolves announced their arrival. As she watched, the line of glowing eyes increased until eventually eight pairs stared back at her. She backed quickly through the door and slammed it shut. She slammed the stout oaken bar into place and let her breathing subside.

With her body again under control, she turned and went to the mantel. Reaching up, she took down the bow she had not thought to need again until spring. She admired its graceful lines, looking for any signs of wear and possible breakage. Finding none, she laid the bow on a nearby table. She took down her quiver from its nail in the corner and quickly inspected the gleaming shafts. The fletching was fine and the shafts were straight and true. Bless her husband's insistence on cedar. Finally, she went to a small chest on the shelf near their bed. Inside was their precious store of bow strings, wrapped in oil-cloth. Choosing one, she got her bow and strung it.

Pulling on a fur-lined jerkin, she went to the door. After listening for a moment, she removed the bar. Returning to the table, she slung the quiver over her shoulder and picked up her bow. She was halfway to the door again when she paused. Old habits die hard and she felt something
was missing. After a moment's thought, she slipped a wicked little fighting dagger into her boot. Feeling better prepared, she slowly opened the door, scanning for signs of the intruders.

Movement at the edge of the woods betrayed their presence. Opening the door fully, she stepped into the night. Light spilling from the doorway gave her her targets. Taking careful aim, she let fly at the closest shadowy form.

A choking scream told her the truth of her aim. With a grim smile, she went to work.

After a score of arrows had gone, a stark thought forced its way into her mind. She had not yet missed, and there were at least eight pairs of eyes still slinking between the trees. As that thought hit home, a great snarling weight bore her to the ground.

A wolf had circled the cabin and gotten behind her, as she moved out farther to keep the wolves in range. The pack had drawn away, leading her, to give its own hunter a chance. On silent paws it had approached, until the final leap had revealed its presence.

She rolled upright and grabbed her dagger. With a snarl of her own, she faced her attacker. The wolf leapt and she lunged to take advantage of its exposed belly. There was a yelp and the knife was torn from her hand. Cursing, she scrabbled to find her bow. Even as an awkward club, it would be better then her bare hands.

As her fingers closed around its comforting shape, a searing pain tore into her thigh. Screaming in pain and rage, she lashed out. The blow caught the wolf on its sensitive nose. Its answering cry spurred her on, and she unleashed a flurry of blows. Weak from loss of blood, the wolf went down.

When she was sure of it, she began to stumble towards the door. It suddenly seemed farther away then she could have imagined, and she began to fear.

With the tear in her thigh weeping her strength onto the ground, she stumbled towards the glowing sanctuary of the doorway. When she had gained the entrance, she turned to look behind her. The wolves were back at the edge of the woods and some actually moved into the clearing, as if to follow her. She pulled herself inside and again barred the door.

She leaned the bow against the wall, and removed her quiver and jerkin. Moving nearer to the fire, she finally permitted herself to look at her wound. The blood had slowed and was beginning to thicken. It formed a scarlet paste, holding the torn flesh and leather together.

She began to treat the wound, bathing it in warm water and cutting away the leather as it came free. Finally, she had a clean, open area to
work in. She started preparing a salve of herbs, following the instructions and murmuring the incantations passed down through generations of mothers and daughters. When she finished, she paused for a moment. Then she added a prayer to the new god the villagers had told her of during her last visit.

She had salved the wound and cleaned up the mess. Now, she tried to relax enough to fall asleep. After tossing, and turning for a while, she drifted off.

She was having a nightmare; a wolf had dug in through the thatch of the roof and was lunging for her throat. Suddenly, she snapped awake. Her face was covered with melting snow, and more drifted down from a hole in the roof. The hole was steadily growing larger under the onslaught of a great, gray shape. A short scream escaped her as she threw herself from the bed.

There was no time to get the lantern, she needed a weapon. After what seemed like an eternity, her roving hands found a large kitchen knife. She turned to face her attacker as the wolf started worming its way in.

Without warning, the wolf yelped and began trying frantically to back out of the hole. It screamed again and tore itself loose.

A confused chorus of yelps and cries arose around the cabin; and what remained of the silence was shattered by a familiar battle cry.

At the sound of her husband’s voice, a wave of joy ran through her. Confidence and clear thought returned in a rush. Ignoring the probably broken bow, she threw the bar off the door and opened it to the night, knife in hand.

Her husband had also abandoned his bow. He was in the midst of a milling pack of shapes, scything about with his broad sword. With each stroke the numbers dwindled, until the few remaining wolves broke and ran.

Seeing her, he gave a happy shout and began running towards her. He nearly lost his footing under the enthusiasm of her greeting. They embraced for a time as she related her story. When she finished, they turned and set to work. Wolf might not taste the best, but it beat going hungry, and the meat would help their supplies last through the winter.

As she worked, she said a prayer of thanks to the new god. The child she was expecting would be swaddled against the cold wetness of spring by the thick wolf pelts. The additional meat would guard them against hunger. Truly, she reflected, it was a merciful god indeed who sent such a bountiful gift of wolves.

Vern S. Johnson