

More Tales From The Brink

SAMPLE



**The Mountain Ghost:
A Snow Leopard Story**

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The Mountain Ghost: A Snow Leopard Story

By Neil Harwood

The Shepherd

Vasily scrambled down the rocky path. Half-walking, half-sliding, the shepherd reminded himself to take it easy. It would be foolish to break a leg here, half an hour from home.

The sun had disappeared behind the mountains, and Vasily didn't have much time to get back before darkness fell. The wind was cold, and snow was in the air. It would not be a good night to get stuck out here at the mercy of the Russian winter.

He shivered under his thick fur coat. If the cold didn't get him first, the wolves soon would.

Vasily was getting old, and a hard life in the mountains had made him look even older than his years. His wrinkled face and balding head were tanned dark brown from the years spent outside.

Walking in front of Vasily were two sheep. Somehow they had managed to escape from his fields, and he was guiding them back. Once on the path they were no trouble. It was almost as if they were feeling guilty for having run away.

They were not the only sheep to have escaped, but Vasily hadn't found the others. They were probably food for the wolves by now. Vasily knew there was a pack of wolves nearby. For several nights he had heard them howling in the darkness.

It was a sound Vasily had grown up with. Strangely for a shepherd, he liked hearing the wolves. He respected them. Like him, they somehow had to survive on the cold, rocky slopes.

However, Vasily was not a sentimental man. If the wolves ventured into his fields, they would find him waiting with his rifle. Sometimes they needed reminding whose territory it was.

Vasily blamed the wolves for the sheep's escape. Even if the wolves hadn't come down into the fields, it was their howling that had scared the sheep into breaking out.

Lost in thought, Vasily didn't realise that something was watching him as he made his way down the treacherous path. A predator, evolved to live and hunt in these extreme conditions. But this was no wolf. This was a solitary hunter, with pale green eyes and a thick, grey, spotted coat.

The snow leopard kept her distance. Hunger had forced her down to the lower slopes of the mountain. It had been a harsh winter, and she had needed to increase her range in order to find food.

A week ago, she had caught a deer. This had provided much-needed sustenance, but now she was hungry again. She looked at the sheep in the fields below, and saw an easy meal.

Vasily led the two sheep back into the fields just as it was beginning to get dark. A light snow had started to fall, and the wind was picking up. Vasily was tough – he had spent his whole life in this harsh environment – but this winter had been one of the worst he had ever known.

Despite the weather, Vasily decided that after dinner he would try to find out where the sheep were escaping. He would also look out for wolves.

Night Patrol

Vasily entered his house. It was little more than a wooden hut, enlarged over the years by various members of his family, now all long gone. Although the structure looked flimsy, it had stood the test of time. Inside, it was surprisingly comfortable. There were animal skins hanging on the walls, and a well-stocked pantry. When the stove was lit, the house

End of sample.
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