

## Spirit of the Mountain

A light, steady snowfall swirled down through the cold and blanketed the crags of the Blue Fog Mountain. An unbroken meadow of white contrasted from the night as the moon in a clear sky, and far in the distance, a curving line of pines merged into the dark horizon.

Then a glimmer of blazing color flashed between the trees like the flicker of candlelight, the only sign of a living entity out in the cold. A bouquet of white whiskers materialized from the shadows, followed by two glowing emeralds that perused the landscape.

The apparition disappeared.

Suddenly, a beacon of warm gold and deep orange easily loped through the snow, occasionally pausing to look back, then stood erect on a ridge: a tiger. He observed the path from whence he had come as though anticipating peril, yet all the same he held the air of smug confidence. His ears flickered. He crouched down, haunches poised, and let the snow fall upon his stripes; but he sprang too late.

Thunder shook the mountainside. A searing pain exploded in his flank. He stumbled to one side, then pivoted so rapidly that the next shot only grazed the fur he left behind. He underestimated the poachers' perseverance. It would be harder to elude them with a fresh trail of vermilion tears the snow had not yet time to hide.

Small figures wrapped in coats made from his less colorful kin hastened after his shape. He continually bounded forward, ever moving faster although his hind leg hurt and he yearned to favor it. There were no more trees with which to lose his pursuers, only a stretch of stone, snow dunes, and mountainside. He ran the most jagged path he knew, but succeeded in little except to

force his pursuers into a wide, straggled line. No more lightning crackled from their shiny nozzles, but the excitement was high; the chase was ending.

The tiger arced one last time over the snow, then stopped short: a sheer drop twenty times his length. Down the mountain would lead him straight to his pursuers' lair. He should not have left the trees for there his pursuers were weaker than he. He glanced back at the onslaught of fatal nozzles, then again at the drop. The pursuers and the trees behind, or forward, away from the present danger to face yet another.

An eternal split second of wrenching ambivalence and burning throbs passed. He whirled about and closed the distance with a single leap. He glided clear overhead, as impressive as an eagle swooping in for the kill, but landed heavily when his backleg gave out. A mad scramble of surprise and renewed vigor ensued at his tail. A single breath exhaled in frozen droplets and he rolled onto all four paws again.

Lightning erupted all around him as he propelled himself toward his only hope of sanctuary. Snow, thrown into the air by artificial explosions, dazzled in his green eyes. More than once his footing slipped he moved so quickly. The violent vibrations grew fainter. He was pulling ahead, out of their shooting range. His coat would belong to no one but himself.

The world lurched at a crazy angle, the tiger jerked off his feet. Another burst of agony in his forepaw compounded with the dull ache in his flank. The poachers had laid iron jaws to catch him. Another shot, much closer, and a triumphant cry rang out. He struggled and thrashed viciously, but the iron teeth had sunk in to the bone. With a wounded cry he curled to his two good legs and the injured hind one, and he sprinted as best as he could to the foot of the pines.

Another close blast slammed into the ground beneath his feet, and he was thrown against a tree. A hinge fell out, and the pressure in his paw lifted. He gave a vigorous shake and was

freed from the disembodied teeth. Before he could lose his pursuers in the trees, a blur assaulted him. He instinctively lashed out and sent the coat-wrapped figure into the air. But more were coming with every sign of using their sizzling bullets to take him down. His terror and despair reflected in their black eyes as their avarice reflected in his green ones...

A distant sound of rushing and collision reached the poachers' and his ears. Seconds later, a blinding white wall smashed through the pines. The tiger managed to escape it by a hair's breadth, but the poachers were swept away, over the plain, and over the sheer cliff. After a long while, the avalanche ended, the silence returned, and it was the tiger, the pines, and the gently snowing sky again. Warily he plunged deeper into the shadows until, thoroughly exhausted, he finally laid down and attended to his paw and flank.

Once he had cleansed and combed his fur, he shook himself of the cold, nestled at the base of the tree, and looked into the sky. At long last he blew out his whiskers with a great foggy breath and laid his golden head on both paws to sleep. He alone reigned the Blue Fog Mountain once more.