

NESOOWA AND THE CHENOO



In the Old Time, when the world was young, Nesoowa and Toma left their people and went to hunt in a wild and lonely part of the North Woods. The North Woods was a dangerous place because of the Chenooks, terrifying evil creatures that roamed the forests in those days. Chenooks began as humans, but the evil in their hearts drove them mad, until they became cannibals who liked nothing better than to eat human hearts.

There were many Chenooks in the North Woods, so most people were afraid to go there. But Toma and Nesoowa were young and brave. They knew the hunting was good in the north and didn't believe anything could harm them.

One day, however, when Nesoowa was alone in the camp, she heard a rustling in the bushes as if some wild beast were thrusting its way through. Suddenly there appeared in the clearing a horrible creature. It was shaped like a man but was not a man; it was covered in leaves and pine needles, with cold, staring eyes. It was a Chenoo.

Nesoowa trembled with fear. The Chenoo had seen her, and now there was no way to escape. She had no weapons in the camp, and even if she had, she would never have been able to kill a Chenoo. Thinking quickly, she decided to try to trick him instead.

Stepping boldly into the clearing, Nesoowa held out her arms to the cannibal. "My father!" she cried joyfully. "Whatever happened to you? Why have you been gone so long?"

The Chenoo looked dumbstruck. He had expected tears and screaming and prayers. No one had ever spoken to him in such a loving tone of voice. He looked down at the woman in confusion.

"Dear Father," Nesoowa continued softly, "how tired and ill you look. Wash yourself in the brook, and I will bring you some of your son-in-law's clothes to wear."

This Chenoo, whose name was Elaak, actually was very tired and very ill. He had spent many days battling the strongest of all the Chenoots, the monster Winsit, until finally he had fled from the battle in defeat. Now his senses were dulled by exhaustion and the pain of his wounds. Too tired to protest, he went to wash himself in the stream. He put on the clothes Nesoowa gave him and settled himself by her fire.

Nesoowa offered him food, but he shook his head with a snarl. Not knowing what else to do, the young woman sat calmly by the fire and took out her beadwork, trying to behave as though everything were normal. Yet all the time she was thinking of Toma, who would be back any minute. If she could only find some way to warn him, then both of them could escape.

After a while, Nesoowa smiled gently at the Chenoo. "Dear Father," she said, "I'm going to get some wood for the fire." But when she rose to go outside, Elaak followed her. Taking the ax from her hand, he began chopping down all the trees that surrounded their camp. He swung the ax ferociously, and one tall pine tree after another fell in his path.

Nesoowa began to be afraid he would chop down all the trees in the forest. "Father!" she cried. "Stop now! That is enough!"

The Chenoo put down the ax and returned to his place by the fire. Now he had shown her that even though he was sick, he was still stronger than any man.

Soon Nesoowa heard Toma whistling through the trees. He was home from hunting. "Father," she said loudly, "it's your son-in-law. How happy he will be to see you."

When Toma appeared in the clearing, she ran to him, smiling. "Look, Husband," she said. "Father has returned. Come and welcome him."

Toma saw the Chenoo sitting by the fire and his heart filled with dread. He realized the great danger to both of them and quickly understood what his wife was trying to tell him. Continuing her deception, he greeted the Chenoo warmly. "We have been so worried about you, Father. Come and smoke a pipe with me. I have much to tell you."

Toma sat by the Chenoo for many hours, telling him the news of the hunt and all that had happened to them since they'd come to the North Woods. Elaak refused to eat or smoke a pipe, but finally, as he listened to Toma's calm, soft voice, he fell asleep. The couple huddled together and watched the Chenoo, afraid to move. In a whisper, Nesoowa told her husband how the cannibal had appeared that afternoon and what she had done. All night long they sat by the fire, too terrified to sleep or try to escape.

In the morning Elaak opened his eyes and fixed them with a cold stare. "Bring me tallow!" he roared. Nesoowa hurriedly heated a pot of tallow over the fire. When the tallow had come to a boil, the Chenoo snatched it from the fire and drank it down in one gulp.

Elaak sat back down by the fire and stared bitterly out into the forest. After a while he

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spoke. "I will stay here," he said. "Winsit will never think to look for me in the camp of a human being. In the spring I will be strong again. I will kill him and eat his heart. Then I will be the strongest of all the Chenooos."

All winter long Elaak stayed in their camp. He was sullen and morose. Every day Nesoowa cooked for them. She tried to act naturally, but she was tense and uneasy. Toma was afraid to leave her by herself with the cannibal, so he stopped going hunting. By midwinter, their supply of meat was finished.

Early one morning Elaak shook Toma awake with a growl. "Come," he muttered. "We'll go hunting together."

"Wait, my father," Nesoowa said, "I will give you something to help you." She made him a pair of snowshoes from ash wood and rawhide.

When Elaak put on the snowshoes, he could move through the snow as fast as the wind. Even Toma, who was young and strong, could hardly keep up with him. Elaak led him deeper and deeper into the forest.

They came at last to a place where a stream of quickly moving water bubbled up through the ice and snow. Elaak took off his snowshoes and began to do a strange dance on the snow. Soon the water started to heave and boil. A monstrous lizard crawled out of the stream, and Elaak cut off its head with one blow.

Toma had never seen such a creature before, and he was disgusted at the thought of even touching it. But the Chenoo built a fire and roasted some of the meat. Toma was afraid to offend him by refusing to eat, and when he tasted the lizard meat, he was surprised to find it delicious.

After they had eaten, Elaak threw the head and tail of the creature back into the stream. "They will grow into another lizard," he said. "The rest of the meat is for my daughter."

He tied his snowshoes back on his feet and put the body of the lizard on his head. "Come," he said, gesturing to Toma. "Let us go home to my daughter."

Toma tried to follow him, but the Chenoo was going so quickly, it was impossible for him to keep up. At last Elaak turned to him. "Can't you go any faster?" he asked.

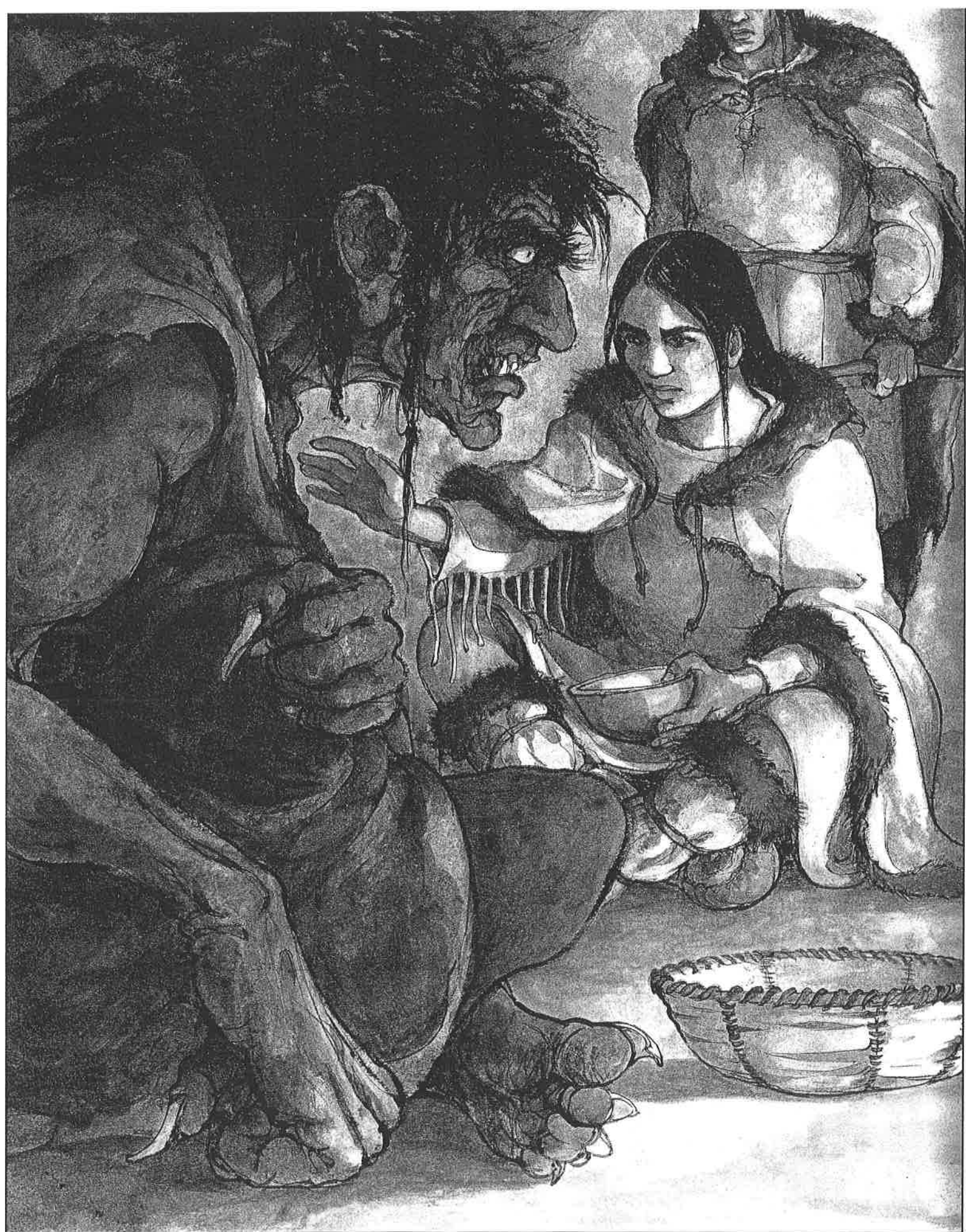
"No!" Toma gasped.

"Then get on my shoulders."

Elaak carried Toma and the meat all the rest of the way back to Nesoowa. They were home long before dark.

At last spring came to the forest. The snow began to melt, and many birds returned from the south. One day Kakakooch the crow came with a message for Elaak.

"Winsit knows where I am," Elaak told Toma and Nesoowa. "He is on his way here now, coming to fight me. We will do battle, and one of us will die. When he comes, my



children, you must hide in the cave behind our lodge and stop up your ears with moss. The battle cry of the Chenoo is too terrible for human ears."

Then Elaak told Nesoowa to bring him the bundle he had brought with him on the first day he came to their lodge. He untied the bundle and held up a pair of dragon horns, golden bright, one with two branches and the other straight and smooth. He gave the straight one to Toma.

"There's magic in this horn," he explained. "If you plunge it into the ear of a Chenoo, it will kill him instantly. If I die in battle, you must use it to kill Winsit. Otherwise he will eat you both."

Elaak grasped the other horn in his hand, and magically he began to grow, until he became as tall as the highest pine tree. A tremendous rage came over him, and he began to howl for Winsit, picking up huge boulders and smashing them to the ground in anger, pulling tall trees out of the ground by their roots.

Toma held his wife close. "Wife," he whispered, "now we have a weapon that can destroy a Chenoo. If Elaak is the loser, we will use it against Winsit. But if Winsit dies, we must kill Elaak."

Nesoowa caught her breath. She had shared her home with Elaak all winter, cooking for him and caring for him just as she would her own father. He called her Daughter. She couldn't let Toma kill him. But if Elaak won the fight with Winsit, he would eat Winsit's heart, and the evil in him would grow even stronger. They would be in grave danger.

"Help me," she prayed, and because she was so brave and because her heart was full of love, the great spirit Glooscap came to her in the form of a jay.

"Look at the ground by your feet," the bird told her. Nesoowa looked and saw some bright red flowers growing there, flowers she had never seen before.

"If Elaak wins the battle, crush the blossoms of these flowers with water and give them to him to drink." Then the bird flew away.

"Hurry!" Toma shouted. "Winsit is coming!"

Nesoowa grabbed a handful of the red flowers and ran toward the cave. She and her husband stopped up their ears with moss and held each other as the ground began to shake beneath them. Soon their ears started burning as the air was filled with the horrible war cries of the Chenoo.

For a long time they stayed in the cave and waited. They could still feel the ground shaking as Elaak and Winsit hurled boulders and trees at each other and wrestled each other to the ground.

Finally it grew quiet and calm. "I'm going out," Toma said. Nesoowa followed him.

There on the ground near the cave lay the two Chenoo, locked in an embrace of death. Winsit was on top of Elaak, his hands circling his enemy's throat. Elaak continued to pitch

his head and twist his body back and forth, but slowly and surely Winsit was managing to squeeze all the life out of him.

Elaak twisted again, trying to free himself. "Help me," he gasped.

"Help you?" Winsit laughed, rolling his red eyes back into his head. "Who would help you, crazy old man?"

With a cry, Toma threw himself onto the Chenoo's shoulders and plunged the golden horn into Winsit's ear. Within seconds, Winsit was dead.

Elaak twisted himself out from beneath the dead Chenoo's body. The rage of battle was still coursing through him, so that he couldn't even see Nesoowa and Toma standing far below him on the ground. He flung his arms high in victory. "Now I will eat his heart!" he cried in delight.

But Nesoowa was ready. In her hands she held a cup of water mixed with the blossoms of the magic plant. Bravely she climbed onto Winsit's body and looked up into Elaak's eyes. "Wait, Father!" she called. "Before you eat his heart, drink this to celebrate."

Elaak paused. As if a spell had come over him, he reached down and took the cup from her hands, drinking it down with one swallow.

In the same moment, he began to shrink. Soon he was the size of a man once more. His expression changed. His eyes became soft and clear; his shoulders sagged. All the rage and hatred of the Chenoo drained out of him. He became just an ordinary, tired old man.

Elaak held out his hand to Nesoowa. "Take me home, my daughter," he said with a sad, gentle smile.