

Though the sun had yet to come up from its nightly slumber, the forest was awash with light. Soft snow covered trees and bushes so thickly that they drooped from the weight. A slight shift in the wind tilted a branch just enough that it managed to drop enough to let the snow slip from it and free itself from the icy shackles as it flung itself back into place. Buckthorn, his dark coloration vibrant against the suffocating light greys and blues, grimaced as the falling snow landed on top of Briar. The fox was buried underneath it and he heard a gasp from his wife beside him, but he gave her hand a gentle squeeze, reassuring the worrying fox.

Sure enough, Briar's head popped out of the snowdrift as she beamed. A strong wiggle was all she needed to get out of it and stand once more. Her hand pat the top of her head. "My hat!" Jumping back into the snowdrift, she threw clumps of it up before lifting the brown leather hat and dusted the snow off.

"See, Papiny, our girl is tough." Buckthorn's voice was soothing as he looked at Papiny. His wife was bundled in tightly knit scarves, wraps, and tall leg warmers with boots. Her wings flicked snow off of them as her body shuddered for a heartbeat.

"I still worry for her. It's *cold* out here.." Her voice trailed off as she watched Briar scoop up a bunch of snow and pack it together in a rough ball shape. She looked focused as she tilted her head this way and that before crumpling the snow. "She's never been in snow before. But.." A smile started to grow on Papiny's face. "She looks like she's having fun."

Briar eyed the forest around them before going over to a tree and set her hands on it. Buckthorn started to call a warning but she shook the tree anyway and squealed in delight when it dumped snow on her, burying her once more. She had her hand on her hat when she wiggled out this time and shook herself to get the clinging snow off. "It's cold!" She seemed delighted by the cold rather than put off about it.

Placing his hands gently on hers, he grinned down at her. "How about I show you how to make a snowman?" He asked her in a gentle voice.

"Yes!" She squealed, jumping up in the air a couple of times as he laughed softly.

"All right, come away from the tree. We need space for this snowman to come to life." The snow crunched under his feet as he took a few steps away before scooping snow into his hands and packed it gently to make a ball. The tiny flakes clung to his fur and made it seem like his hands were covered in tiny stars as he held his hand out to her. "You start with a ball just like this." He set it down in the snow before rolling it around, watching as it grew steadily bigger.

To his relief, she was watching with rapt attention. Unless something interested her, she was usually gone in seconds. But her red eyes were focused on his hands. When the ball was bigger than his hands, he rolled it along the ground. "Just like this. You want to pack the snow in tight so it doesn't break off if you turn it in a different direction."

She nodded nearly hard enough to knock her hat off. "I want to try!" Her voice sounded like she was barely holding back her excitement as she put her hands on the ball and rolled it quickly, but Buckthorn stepped in her way.

"Slowly. If you do too fast it'll pack too loose."

She nodded, looking more serious as she rolled the ball slower, making sure to avoid trees. Buckthorn saw a mischievous smile go across her face as she headed towards her mother.

Papiny was watching her and smiled when she drew close. "Having fun, dear?" She asked, also seeming to catch that glint in her daughter's eye.

Briar nodded and turned, rolling the ball past her before turning again until she was circling her. "I'm taking all your snow! You have to just stand in wet grass now!"

A laugh left Papiny as she shook her head. "Not my snow!" She pretended to wail as she played along.

"Yes, all your snow! I'm going to be the snow queen!"

After a few more circles, she seemed to be struggling to push it and Buckthorn returned to her side, looking the ball over. "Good shape, Ms. Snow Queen." He said with a smile. "This size is good. Let's make another, about two thirds this size."

Papiny had gone back to the cabin for a bit to warm herself as they continued to work, but she returned just as Buckthorn was lifting the final snowball on. Briar grabbed two sticks, as Buckthorn had told her earlier to use them for arms, and put one on each side of the snowman's torso as her father put smooth stones down the snowman's chest for buttons. He looked it over before taking off his bandanna to tie around its neck.

"I can use my hat!" With a quick movement, Briar plopped her hat down on the snowman's head as Buckthorn used stones for eyes and a mouth.

He stopped and looked at his hands, realizing he was out of stones for a nose. He looked to Briar and opened his mouth to ask her to find a stick when Papiny stepped forward, gently nudging him out of the way.

"There we go!" She said with a wide grin as she stepped back, revealing the carrot she had stuck in his face and she looked up at Buckthorn. "I know you didn't grab one when you came outside but a snowman just isn't complete without one."

Briar grinned and jumped up, hugging her mother. "It's perfect!" Buckthorn pat her head with a warm smile on his face.

“It sure is. Now, let’s get you inside and warmed up. I can see you practically turning into a snowman yourself!”

She gasped at him indignantly, but rushed back to the cabin. “I’m going to be Ms. Hot Chocolate Queen now!” She called over her shoulder.

Buckthorn and Papiny shared a laugh before they followed after her, glad to be getting out of the cold.