

Snowy Hideouts

By Wendy Wilson-Wright

Tinsel flicked his ears back and forth a few times, his eyes remaining closed, his nose buried in the cushion of pine needles. The weather had changed during his nap; he knew this without even looking at the sky, but he wanted a look anyway. He lifted his chin and stretched his neck; the lower branchlets brushed the sides of his face as he leaned forward. This move took more courage than you might expect. Part of him wished to remain hidden in the thicket and never come out. Too much change—he didn't like it. Just when things start to make sense—just when things settle, like a detached leaf finally snuggling into the earth, like a splash in the pond that finally smooths, just when you get used to how things work, that's when everything changes. His first big change wasn't that long ago: it was when he noticed a difference in his coat. It didn't look right; the white dots were fading, and his fur felt weirdly thick.

When did that happen? Is something wrong with me?

The sudden awareness had tightened his young, fawn face and had made his whiskers twitch. All he had to do back then was look at his mom; her expression would warn of danger. But when he looked at her that day, she didn't seem worried about the change of his coat, so he probably didn't need to worry either. Besides, her coat didn't have any white dots.

And now, things were changing again; he could feel it in his whiskers. Lifting his snout to probe the surroundings, he found the air different; it was thicker and kind of heavy, like his newly thickened coat. Plus, there was a new smell; it reminded him of the scent after a rain, sort of like that—but different. Whatever the smell was, it wasn't the one he wanted. Using his wet nose and each whisker on his young face, he examined nearby scents, searching for his mother. Nothing. The thickness of the air blocked his sense of smell. And there was another change; the milky sky had gained a steely outline—cold and quiet steel. The forest was like that at the time, so quiet, the type of quiet right before a mountain lion appears, the type of quiet right before you try to do something for the first time. Suddenly, *plunk*. Someone was beside him.

“Hello,” a funny-looking frog said, peering up at him, tipping the edge of its top hat toward Tinsel in a friendly sort of way. So strange. The brown blob sounded like a frog, but it looked more like a little hunk of wood, except for the hat on its head of course.

Tinsel didn't answer; he just stared.

Rejection. The wood frog knew that feeling and didn't like it. A sudden worried, embarrassed expression filled his face. “So sorry to disturb,” he mutter-croaked. “I see I've rattled your quiet time; I'll be on my way then.” The flattened frog turned to make a quick escape.

Just when he was about to exit this brush-off, right when his skinny frog legs prepared to spring toward a friendlier environment...

“Have you seen my mother?” Tinsel blurted.

The frog whirled around and bounced back toward Tinsel, a froggy look of relief escaping him, his eagerness compelling Tinsel to take one step backward. “Your mother...hmmm...” the frog lifted his hat and scratched his head as he thought. “Well, perhaps I have, good Sir...what is her name?”

“Mom.”

“I see; indeed, indeed...marvelous...good solid name...” the frog's cheeks puffed as he thought. And thought. Suddenly, his bobbly eyeballs bobbed even more. “Might she have a tail?”

“Yes!” Tinsel's eyes widened.

The frog whipped one stubby finger upward. “And might she have whiskers too?”

“She does!”

“Wonderful, wonderful!” the frog rubbed his tiny, stick-brown hands together and gurgled, enjoying Tinsel’s growing excitement.

“And I bet she can leap high—like a leaf in the wind—can’t she?!” The frog was smiling now, a giant, gummy, toothless smile.

“You have seen her!” Tinsel felt giddy. “Where is she?” Tinsel was smiling now too.

The frog was on a roll and didn’t want to stop the fun. “And I bet her eyeballs are in her face, not on the top of her head like mine!”

“Yes, yes, where is she?” Tinsel’s smile stiffened.

“And when she hisses, everybody runs!” the frog’s bulbous eyes were nearly bouncing.

“Hisses?”

“She uses her claws to carve the trees,” the frog began jumping as he spoke, “and her front fangs can carve designs in bone!”

Tinsel exhaled; his chin dropped, his nose almost resting on his neck. “No, that’s not her. Mom doesn’t have front fangs.”

“Oh,” the frog sunk lower into the pine needles, “I guess I haven’t seen her then.” His little brown head was flat against the ground. “Kind of glad that wasn’t your mom. Those fangs were pretty scary,” he muttered, allowing only a few word-chunks to exit his pouting mouth.

Silence. The animals didn’t make a sound: they just stood there. Only the wind-stirred leaves were brave enough to speak. Then, slowly, very cautiously, one froggy eyeball swerved upward, toward Tinsel. “But,” the frog’s word was a sudden burp, harshly breaking the silence. “I’ll let you know if I do find her.” He asked rather than stated, offering help like a student offering a half-finished test to a teacher.

Tinsel’s face was soft when he looked at the frog. “You will?”

The frog bobbed his head up and down; a croak caught in his throat.

“Thank you.” Tinsel said softly.

The tension melted and the frog brightened. “Trippet at your service,” he lifted his top hat and swung it before himself, taking a bow.

“Thank you, Trippet.” Tinsel whispered, a slight smile sneaking past him.

But the frog missed the smile; his two orb-like eyeballs froze; he stared into nothingness. “Trippet?” He muttered to himself in a twig-snapping fashion. “That doesn’t sound right. Tropper? Tapper? Tobbler?” He scratched his tiny brown chin. “I seem to always forget,” the frog gave a closed-mouth croak.

“How ‘bout,” Tinsel’s words were soft petals, slowly opening, “I call you Mr. Tipper? I like the way you tip your hat.”

“Wonderful! wonderful! That suits me well.” The frog’s chin lifted. “The name’s Mr. Tipper,” he nodded decidedly, “and you are, my dear Sir?”

“My mom called me Tinsel.” His mother’s voice was still in his ears; he could hear her say his name; he could see his name drawn into the earth with her hoof. She had been so patient with him as she taught him to write, showing him how to turn his hoof and apply the right pressure to form different words, so patient when he clunked his hoof down and smeared the words. Remembering his blurred, hoof-printed efforts and the high-pitched whimpers he had made when she told him to try again—it now made him cringe. He wouldn’t whine today if she forced him to write.

Mr. Tipper smiled at Tinsel’s introduction and gave the fawn a fancy tip of his hat. Just when he did, the air turned icy and a gust blew in their faces, forcing their eyes closed.

Mr. Tipper's voice grew high and thin as he tried to out-croak the wind. "Best take shelter," he held onto his hat as he strained to be heard, "but I hope you will come and visit me dear friend." His eyes gleamed a puppyish longing.

"Where?" Tinsel shouted into the wind and glanced upward at the darkened, stirring movement above the branches.

Mr. Tipper now grabbed his hat with his other froggy hand and stretched his saggy neck toward Tinsel, making it taut. "What's that?" he yelled, the gust erasing much of his voice.

A jumble of pine needles and leaves rolled at their feet.

"I said," Tinsel blinked away the tears from his wind-irritated eyes, "Where, do, you, live?" he competed with the wind.

"AH...GOOD...YOU...," suddenly, the raspy gust stopped, "ASKED!" Mr. Tipper needlessly shouted the last word, pushing Tinsel's head backward, making his ears flick. Embarrassed, Mr. Tipper chuckled. "Please excuse," One froggy hand dropped to his side; he lowered his voice. "Yes...of course...a bit of data is needed if you are to visit," the frog looked away and chuckled again. Tinsel waited. "Uh, let's see now...where do I live...yes indeed..." Mr. Tipper tugged on his hat's rim as he thought. "There's a way to remember..." Mr. Tipper's heart picked up a notch; if he had had teeth, he would have gritted them. "Ah, yes!" his hat jumped with the frog's heady realization. "The Squigget family, I live close to them!"

"The who?"

"The Squiggets—the tiny, little bunny family, great musicians. Just follow the music."

"Ok," Tinsel's voice trailed into a thin wisp; the directions sounded a bit wobbly.

Mr. Tipper suddenly had that transported expression again; his eyeballs looked kind of stuck. "Although...no...it will be fine; they should be playing when you visit." You could tell he was tussling with a thought. "Unless...unless... no...the bunnies stocked the fox's home with berries," the frog was clearly battling with himself. "So..." His face stiffened.

Tinsel peered at the sky, worried about the next gust of wind.

"No..." Mr. Tipper shook the thought from his mind. "The fox won't be needing bunny sandwiches this winter..." Notice, dear reader, that the frog did not express whether the sandwiches were **for** the bunnies or **of** the bunnies—**for** vs. **of**, two prepositions giving quite different outcomes, especially if one is a bunny.

The sky grew muddy; the branches creaked as they stirred the icy temperatures from above, mixing them with the air below the trees. Mr. Tipper shivered and popped out of his trance. "They'll be fine. Nope," he gave his hat a sharp tug as if it was all decided, "the bunnies will be fine, which means they'll be playing. Now," Mr. Tipper shook his tiny hand for emphasis, "don't forget, kind Sir," he croaked teacher-style, "they play every afternoon that the fox hammers in his shop. And the fox hammers each time the raccoon, Ms. Weavelet, sews camouflaging pajamas for the forest's babies. And Ms. Weavelet's sewing seems to make the fox hammer harder and faster for some reason. So then the Squiggets play even louder.

"So," Tinsel was trying not to grit his back teeth, "Where do you live?"

"Ah right—I'm past the Squiggets, near the fox's workshop. Just look under the leaves; that's where I live."

Tinsel's eyes scanned the earth below his hooves; leaves were everywhere. The fawn opened his mouth to speak, but just as he did, a tiny bit of lacy white floated before his face. It turned to water when it hit the ground.

And just like that, “Good day, Sir!” Mr. Tippet croaked, tipped his hat, and leaped away.

Tinsel stood still for a time, watching the little brown frog hop offward and away; he watched until his fawn eyes could see no difference between a hopping frog and a blowing leaf. Tinsel listened to the cold rattle of the forest’s branches. Before long, a second white flake drifted downward; this time it landed on Tinsel’s nose. The fawn peered through the branches and into the sky, and as he did, tiny webs of ice gathered on his lashes and whiskers. He shook them off, only to gain more as others fell. This time, they were larger and heavier, and they didn’t melt when they hit his face. Tinsel lowered his head and worked his way under the low, drooping branches of pine. He snuggled up to the tree’s trunk and squirmed himself lower into the blanket of needles until he felt snug.

A friend. He had found a friend. The thought allowed him to sleep.

It didn’t take too many thoughts after he awoke before he remembered Mr. Tipper and decided to try and find his friend, the funny brown frog with the stylish top hat. Clambering from his pine-tree shelter, Tinsel stepped into the open air. WHACK. The cold struck him like never before. He blinked a few times when he saw it—white. No more pools of rusty needles, no more brown leaves rolling in the wind; it was all white. Everything was wrapped in its powdery grasp. What would his mom say about this? Tinsel’s thoughts were nearly numb. He had to find Mr. Tipper; hopefully the frog would explain what this white was about, hopefully Mr. Tipper hadn’t already forgotten. Tinsel followed the path he had seen Mr. Tipper take, at least he tried to. It wasn’t an easy task since everything had been changed, since everything looked like it was covered in clouds, clouds that crunch beneath hoof. About the time Tinsel began to question his path, that’s when he heard a tiny, little floaty sound. As the fawn moved forward, the floaty, bouncy sound drew nearer. The Squiggets, it had to be them. And then he saw it, their little hideout, their glow-filled home. Cheerful music streamed from its walls. Tinsel stepped lightly, trying not to crunch too loudly as he passed their shelter. And then—Bang. Bang. Bang. The sound nearly drowned the music. Not too far from where Tinsel stood was another twiggy shelter. *Fox*, Tinsel swallowed. Now Tinsel really tried to hold back any crunch; he stepped as lightly as possible.

But if that’s where the fox lives, then Mr. Tipper mustn’t be far, Tinsel thought. The fawn stopped moving and scanned the area. Tree, tree, branches, white, white, white, rocks, white, tree—wait! Tinsel’s eyes swished back to the rocks. He’d nearly missed it. Beside one rock was a tiny little sign, and on the sign was an arrow pointing toward a dip within the rocks. Could this be Mr. Tipper’s place? Maybe the sign was for him, Tinsel. He suddenly felt lighter, and warmer too. As the bunnies played their instruments, their music seemed to lift his hooves, compelling them to prance toward the snowy stonefort. Peering downward, Tinsel saw that in a crevice between the rocks was a blanket of leaves, lightly dotted with icy white flakes. Using his hoof, Tinsel knocked on the side of the rock. No answer. He tried again. Nothing. Not knowing what else to do, the fawn used his snout to scoot the leaves away. And there, lying below the cover of leaves, his legs drawn under him, his face erased of expression, was Mr. Tipper.

“Hello, Mr. Tipper!” Tinsel whispered.

But the frog didn’t react—not a word, not a tipping of the hat, nothing. Perhaps the frog was again deeply frozen in thought.

“Mr. Tipper,” Tinsel quietly sang, but nothing changed.

Using his snout, Tinsel gently pushed the frog, trying to wake him. Nothing.

“Mr. Tipper!” Tinsel’s voice grew louder.

He pushed the little wood frog with more oomph. The frog scooted across the rock's surface like a dead twig and made a solid, thunking sound when it hit the side of the rock. Mr. Tipper was a lifeless hunk of frog. It's difficult to describe how Tinsel felt. One could say he let the coldness in; he let it numb his insides; he let it dry his eyes. Mr. Tipper had been his only friend.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The noise jarred Tinsel; it rattled his organs. Tinsel glared at the fox's home and snarled.

That fox, his lipped curled as he pictured the beast.

Tinsel wanted to bang something himself, but he didn't. Instead, he covered his lifeless friend with the leaves; he didn't want to see Mr. Tipper this way; he didn't want anyone to see his friendly friend all stiff and rigid like he now was. Tinsel wished he could help his pal; he longed to do something. But what? He kicked Mr. Tipper's sign, making it fall. There was nothing to do but go home. Tinsel's body felt like a heavy block of ice as he turned to leave Mr. Tipper. As he walked away, he purposely ground the icy blanket with his hooves, smooching the ice crystals and turning them to mush; the stinging snow's rough, crunching sound was welcomed. Everything keeps changing—now even his sadness was different; it was changing into a new feeling—anger. But as the fawn neared the Squigget's home, he got an idea...

Quickly, feverishly, madly, he dug and dug until his hoof reached the slippery earth below. And then, he hammered at the earth, using his hoof to stir up a muddy concoction. Snowflakes were falling again; this time the gusty wind twisted and whirled the icy fragments. He ignored them. Scooping up the pasty mixture hidden beneath the snow, he strained to recall his mother's instructions, and on fallen white bark, he wrote the Squiggets this note:

Dear Squiggets,

I am sad to let you know that our friend, I call him Mr. Tipper, is gone. Please help me say goodbye. You can play your floaty sounds for him. Thank you.

Tinsel.

P.S. I live under the pine trees.

Now, dear reader, you must surely know that although animals are taught to write, they certainly do not write in English—they're animals for goodness' sakes. I have, therefore, translated Tinsel's letter for you, and all dialogue within the story too, just for you. Let me further explain: I am sure you have noticed that animals do communicate—birds chirp to other birds, squirrels bark at other squirrels, etc. So it may not surprise you to know that each animal species has its own language. This said, you may not yet realize that in addition to each species' language, there is also a universal animal language, one language that all animals speak. And this is the language that Tinsel was taught to write. Of course, the language is written with hooves, paws, claws—it depends on the animal that writes it. No matter, the message is determined by the pressure and slant of the mark, not by the exact printing tool (tool as in hoof, paw, claw, etc.). The markings are read in special animal sounds. And it is these sounds that I will now give you, well, give you on paper, phonetically. Should you already know the data explained above, I ask your forgiveness. Here is Tinsel's letter, written in the universal animal language:

Oor Squiggets,

Ziff um oode un ef lun moo on zo oompa, ziff aw im suu Tipper, zee doon. Pwoof epa daw tep groobi.

Lun raw floa lunner boopey soons fu im. Ooka lun.

Tinsel

I can report a tidbit of happier news: the Squiggets did receive Tinsel’s letter, and they did write Tinsel back. They too were sad to hear of Mr. Tipper’s departure and were grateful to Tinsel for his friendly letter. Being the bright, bouncy bunnies that they are, they recommended that their special goodbye for Mr. Tipper be held the first of spring, “gree”—did you notice I just gave you a clue?—when the snowy chill would diminish and other critter friends could join them in saying goodbye. The bunnies promised that, while waiting for spring, they would dedicate their time to the creation of a special, hoppy “Mr. Tipper tune.” Such nice bunnies they are!

An even happier note: Since Tinsel’s letter, the Squiggets and Tinsel have shared an afternoon of carrot soup and floaty music. Luckily, the Squigget’s window was just wide enough for Tinsel’s nose, and they didn’t even seem to mind when he knocked over their table (and, therefore, the soup) when he couldn’t stop his snout from bouncing to the music they played for him that day.

Last note before the next note: The Squiggets wrote the raccoon, Ms. Weavelet, and asked her to join them at the goodbye. She agreed and promised to sew a special outfit for Mr. Tipper. Ms. Weavelet’s letter is posted beside her snowy shelter; it would be wise to visit her home.

Very last note (for now): If you use the story’s information and decode the letters written by Tinsel and the Squiggets, you are on your way to decoding the entire universal animal language. Happy journeys be yours as you visit each snowy hideout!