

The Wolves

I head deep into the surrounding forest and tall naked trees rise up to meet me like soldiers their officer. I am truly in my element. I instinctively crouch lower to the ground, every step becomes more careful and deliberate, the snow no longer crunches under my feet. I stoop down soundlessly and rub snow on my clothes to kill my lingering scent. My hands turn an angry red and prick with frostbite. Everything has become more efficient. Every breath I take is shorter and slowly blows big puffs of steam into the air. Finally, I reach a frozen meadow next to a dead stream, more black trees shrouding my well guarded secret. I stoop down and check for my hidden makeshift lift, made of rope and thick branches in order to handle heavy deer or another animal. I cover it back up with snow and straighten to my stealthy crouch. I scan the snowy ground for cloven hoof tracks but nothing is there. I clear my mind and follow my instincts deeper into the woods, crouching behind trees and constantly scanning the landscape around me for hours. Time passes, but I never tire. Suddenly, I hear a twig snap under my foot. I look down and notice tracks in the snow, a couple feet away under the deceptive shadow of a bush. Hope blooms behind my eyes. I pull out a wooden arrow and load it into my bow, careful not to make any noise. I get closer and inspect the signs. Tracks are several inches deep, heavy. They lead through densely standing trees and I see antler marks engraved in the black bark of a tree. My heart is singing with hope and my mind is struggling to focus. I follow the tracks to a log on the elevated ground and peer over it to see a deer, nibbling unsuspectingly at some survived greenery in the escarpment below. Carefully, I test the direction of the wind and it's in my favour, blowing towards me. I'm in luck today. My nerves are pulled taught like the string of my bow but my concentration becomes razor sharp like the tip of my arrow. It doesn't notice me as I aim my bow at its heart. I let go. The deer has no time to react and it topples over to sink in the snow. It's dead. I run back to the meadow, expertly dodging trees to find my stashed lift. I drag it back hurriedly to my kill. My muscles bulge as I drag the deer onto the lift,

around 150 pounds. I tie a sturdy thick rope to the posts of my lift and put my back into pulling it home. My heart hammers with happiness even as my feet sink deep in the snow with each heavy step. Then, I look up to the sky and notice the bloody orange tint of the treetops.

No. My happiness fades and despair sinks its claws into my heart. The sun is going down. I lost track of time. Fear eats away at me and my eyes begin darting around me. Five more miles to go. The night – no, the *animals* are coming. Real, vicious animals. I hurry and pull and drag but I know. With a sinking feeling, I *know* I won't make it back before nightfall. My heart patters in my chest and my eyes roll from pain and fear and exhaustion. I look between the trees and see the endless arctic landscape swallow the sun. I hear a howl. It echoes in the freezing wind and laps at my ears like the tides of a deadly wave. My stomach flips and rolls with nausea, adrenaline already pumping through my bloodstream. I try to walk faster, to land each foot harder in the snow but it's useless, too late. My hands are freezing. Each breath I inhale gets colder, the temperature already way below freezing. The wolves will be coming. The pack will soon gather and they will follow the scent of the blood and they will hunt me down. I realize I have to make camp. I have to gather wood, maybe even break the lift to keep it going through the night, my fire. I look up and the sky is already turning blue and black and dark, littered with stars and a ruthless bright moon. As soon as I reach an opening in the trees, I drop the lift and run to gather some wood. I only have time to gather 2, maybe 3 piles of thick branches before I hear another howl. Closer. I dart back to the deer. Drop to the ground. Light the fire with my raw freezing hands. The fire crackles and burns, reaches up in wisps and dances in front of my eyes. It lights a safe circle around me and the dead deer, just enough light to see six grisly dark shadows enter the opening. They slink between the black trees and their yellow eyes shine in the darkness, hungry and dreadful. They move in a pack, an apparent formation. Their eyes focus on the dead animal next to me and the seeping trickle of blood that spills from its wound. Volatile panic sets deep in the pit of my stomach but I force myself to keep calm.

My nerves are strings in this puppet show and I can't help but feel helpless. The wolves approach with gruesome stealth and I quickly grab a burning branch from the fire to protect myself. They expose their sharp fangs and emanate a deep macabre growl, a sound that will surely haunt me in my nightmares if I survive. I swiftly swing the fiery branch in front of me, my feet planted firmly on the ground. They idle at the edge of the circle lit up by the fire, hiding in darkness and watching me. I never falter, never lower the branch. A long time passes before the wolves lower themselves on the snow, their watchful eyes intent on the fire in my hand and the fresh meat next to me. The adrenaline still pumps through me and there is a rush in my ears, but I never look away. For hours I replenish my fire by slowly inching my hand toward more wood. Every now and then a wolf will inch closer, get up and pace around me, look for an opening. But I stand my ground, watching them too. I almost think my strategy foolproof when my fire begins to die and flicker again. I inch my hand toward wood but find nothing, fingers grasping at cold empty air. My hand trembles and shakes, my heart shooting down into the pit of my stomach. Perspiration stands out at the edge of my scalp and my breath comes out shorter, more desperate. The wolves notice and begin pacing around the flickering circle of light. Waiting. Their yellow eyes never leave me and their dark fur stands on edge like the chattering teeth in my mouth. With a striking idea, I remember the shotgun and slip a free hand under the layers of my coat. My fingers touch the steel barrel and pull on the handle. I check for bullets in my pocket, but I don't find any. Two bullets are in the barrel. Not enough to protect the deer and barely enough to protect myself. The fire on my branch burns closer to my fingers and the wolves sense an end. My eyes dart around me in sheer panic, looking for a way out. A way to save myself from sharp fangs that will pierce my skin and draw blood. Another idea hits me in a state of deliria: a tree several feet away, with low hanging branches. I can only hope that they will lunge at the deer and not me. The fire flickers and dies.

I step out of the way and three wolves go directly for the deer, tearing their fangs in the meat. I run to the tree with all possible speed and leftover strength. One wolf deliberates and turns to devouring the deer. Two others follow and I quickly turn around, knowing that I won't outrun them. Two wolves fiercely lunge at my throat, no longer having to hide in the darkness. I grip the shotgun in my hands and hit the one closer to me with the hilt of the handle, ruthless steel connecting with fragile bone. It yelps and I only have seconds to flip the gun and shoot the second wolf, a beast of grand proportions with fangs extended toward my neck. The dead wolf drops to the ground and the other is dazed enough for me to make my escape. I lunge at the tree several paces away and immediately swing myself up on the branches. My nails dig into the bark as I haul myself up, my shotgun buried in the snow on the ground. I hear gruesome and terrifying sounds of wolves devouring the deer behind me, distracted. I don't look back and keep climbing until I reach the last branch thick enough to support me. When I am finally safe, my nerves give way and my legs start to shake. My teeth chatter and I pant from erratic fear and sheer panic and exhaustion. It is for the first time that I finally notice the smell of smoke permeating my clothes and a bluish bruise on my forearm from the force of string on my hunting bow. I survived. I sigh and look at the sky for the first time in hours. It's brighter, light red and extending all the way to the edge of this infinite landscape. I settle against the trunk of the tree, its bark solid and safe against my back. I see the sun rise and for once in a long while I think it's beautiful.