

The dusk comes over the woods with its own chill, its own urgency. Without the sun's revealing rays, I resort to my binoculars to find a caramel brown of a deer's hide within the ash brown of the bare tree trunks and khaki brown of the dead leaves. The two magnified circles condense the overwhelming forest into manageable chunks. All I see is what I have been seeing for hours—silhouettes of bare branches. Still, I scan.

A snap comes from the west, I whip my binoculars towards the sound. White antlers peek out from behind a thick trunk. I steady my hands and watch a muscular buck stalk through the leaves. I instinctively look back for my dad, forgetting that I am alone this time. I keep his presence my head, his plans for me. Shoot the animal. Never taking my eyes from the antlers, I follow the steps he gave me—sling the bow to the front, extend it forward, take the arrow out of the holster, click it into bow string. I pull back on the string, my hand meets my ear, the tip of the arrow follows the buck's wide eyes, just like Dad taught me. One arrow. One chance to prove myself. My hand starts to shake. Dad's hand never shakes. I feel my arm grow weak. Through the brain. One shot. It won't feel anything.

I release the string. I watch the arrow slice through the crisp air. The echo of the string's reverberation mars the forest's silence. The arrow pierces the middle of the buck's stomach, he collapses to his side. I missed the head. I missed it completely. The buck explodes with a piercing, high-pitched scream. He lifts its neck to wail like a baby in a tantrum and cycles his legs, writhing in pain. Red catches my eye. The wound is gushing. Blood matts the fur and drips messily onto the leaves. I force some shallow breaths through my tense throat to shake off the shock. I need to fix this. I see his fur jumping up and down, a panicked heart thumping against the bounds of his chest. I run to the buck. His wild, wide eyes track me. He cycles his legs faster, trying to run through the air from his predator—me. I find the space in the air out of reach of the flailing legs and inch closer to him. I anchor my boot on his stomach and grab onto the arrow. I start pulling, feeling the arrow rip through fleshy layers of organ and muscle. The buck wails and shakes and twitches. I pull harder with my trembling arms, the arrow catches on his tough skin, his wails intensify. Cold tears start rolling down my cheeks. I pull harder. I am not strong enough. I pull like Dad is watching. The tip of the arrow rips through the sticky fur. I fall backwards by my own force, blubbing and collapsing with the buck.

Half the arrow is dripping with blood. Through the shuddering of my sobs, I pick myself up. I extend the bow, click the arrow in, and pull back. Blood is sputtering out of his mouth with the repeated cries. I see the warmth of his breath in the terrible wails and the wetness of his nose, the tip of my arrow could almost scrape it. He bows his head forward for a moment. I release. The arrow enters right between the eyes. His neck flops to the side, the wailing ceases. I hear human crying clearly now; it doesn't sound like any noise I've ever made in my life. I push the bow to my side and wipe the frozen trails of tears on my jacket. I have to get back to Dad. I grab the buck by its antlers. I keep pulling, and the body starts to drag from its limp neck, catching dead leaves as I walk. Blood from its mouth drips at my feet. They mix with my falling tears on stale leaves. I focus on the arrow poking towards me, right in between the eyes, catch my breath. I keep on stepping back. The buck starts to feel fake. Dad's going to be proud.