

## *Fawn & Hope*

Kat observed the hunter-in-training, from a thick branch of a dead tree. John was still staring at the doe who had continued to graze, despite seeing him. As his stomach growled, watching the doe made John want to bend over and start munching on the browngrass, himself. Kat, noticing John's fixation on the deer, decided to speak up. "You know," she started, "You'll never be accepted as a hunter if you can't kill such an easy target." John didn't seem offended, for he knew it was true. He spent a while formulating a retort, as his eyes then fixed on the fawn grazing under its mother.

"In the world that we live in today," John began after letting out a sigh. "The will to survive is tied to the ones that you love, the ones that you wish to survive with. Having hope for the best for them will indirectly cause more hope for yourself. That same feeling shared with others creates massive energy of hope. That, that togetherness, that unity, that...hope. That is how you truly survive."

"Okay, deep." Kat looked perplexed. "But what does that have to do with killing a doe."

"The fawn!" John replied. "The fawn would have to continue life without the one thing it loves. It would be lost. Confused."

"John, are you crazy? We're short on food as it is. You can't pass up a meal that could feed the entire village because the doe's kid is there. So what? Kill 'em both if it matters that much to you!"

"I only have one spear, Kat."

"This is stupid. The presence of the fawn should not affect-"

"To sever the connection between one's family members, loved ones, is to sever their connection to hope for the future. If I killed that doe- the fawn's loved one- that fawn's will, its hope for survival would die with its mother!" John noticed he was almost shouting now. He took a deep breath and leaned back on the tree trunk.

"You know what I think," Kat offered after she took a moment to let John's words sink. "I think that you're thinking about it way too hard. They're deer, John! They're food!" John shook his head. He didn't expect Kat to understand. In all honesty, it wasn't even about the deer. John's little monologue was a compilation of feelings bottled up inside him since he was four, finally coming out. Seeing that doe lick the ear of its fawn, nurturing it, reminded him of what he'd been missing out on for fourteen years. His doe.

"Yeah," John agreed dryly. "I guess you're right." He stood and caught his spear as it fell from leaning on his shoulder. He lined up the shot again. If he wanted to be a hunter, he needed to be able to do this. His grip tightened. As he inhaled a large gasp of air, ready to take the shot, the doe looked up at John startled. It veered around and ran deeper into the woods, its fawn following clumsily behind. John lowered his arm partly disappointed, annoyed, yet partially relieved. As John looked back at the tree Kat began laughing.

“Oh, you think that’s funny?” John smirked at her. Soon enough they were laughing together, any tension that had built up between them in their thin dispute had vanished. It was a strange situation indeed, one worthy of laughing at. The doe seemed to know right when it was time to go. As if it knew John was serious that time. Little did John and Kat know, John had nothing to do with the doe’s sudden flight.

Their laughter was abruptly halted when the sound of a bone-shivering snarl scratched the back of their ears. A lump formed in John’s throat as a silver-pelted timber wolf slinked from behind nearby bushes. It crept closer and closer to John staying low to the ground, its yellow, darted eyes were focused- peeled on John’s. Its black tipped tail bounced side to side unsettlingly with every step it took. The doe was far gone, and the wolf did not want to lose yet another meal.

Frozen with fear, John kept his eyes on the wolf and his grip on his spear firm. All he could think up in his mind were ways to distract or deter the wolf so that he and Kat could escape. His options were scarce. When John attempted to slowly raise his spear in a defensive stance, the wolf’s growl grew fiercer. John immediately lowered it back down. The wolf, now only about five strides away from John, hadn’t yet seen Kat. She was now standing on the branch, her hand holding the tree’s base so she remained balanced. Kat was frantically, but quietly, searching in her sidepouch for something. John didn’t know what she was looking for, but he didn’t want her to try anything that put her into harm’s way. However, Kat felt the same way for John. The wolf now three strides away, Kat raised the items she was looking above her head. They were her knitting needles.

You’re Kidding! John thought as he saw Kat now inching down the base of the tree. There was no way for John to signal Kat to stop and stay hidden without alarming the wolf. With the wolf nearing one fatal leap to pounce on John, he could only watch in horror as Kat climbed down.

The timber wolf, its eyes still locked on John, had his two front legs reached out and its rear end stood firm in the air. Its upper half was now low to the ground, ready to attack. A creaking snap of some tree bark startled both John and the wolf. The wolf wheeled around to find that Kat had fallen from the tree, and was now in a vulnerable position. Facing the wolf, Kat desperately crawled back. The wolf, now focused on her, sprung into a sprint. Kat slammed into the trunk of the tree, nowhere to go as the wolf rushed towards her. She closed her eyes and turned her cheek, expecting to be eaten in the next second. She was only met by the sound of dirt being punctured. Kat turned and opened her eyes to find John’s spear between her and the panting wolf. In an act of desperation, John lobbed his spear over the wolf hoping it would scare it enough for it to stop, and hoping it wouldn’t end up in Kat.

With no other weapons, John took a running start and threw himself at the wolf, tackling it and rolling away from Kat. She then quickly climbed back to her safe spot in the tree. John and the wolf wrestled wildly in the grass, barreling over each other countless

times. The wolf, finally landing on top, wasted no time in trying to take a chunk of face off of John. The wolf's feral fangs snapped inches above John's face. He barely was able to grasp a handful of fur on either side of its neck. John fully extended his arms, lifting the wolf's face as far above him as he could. The wolf's hot slobber rained down on John's face, some drops briefly blinding him. The claws of the wolf's two front feet were thrashing viciously towards John's chest, some swipes were landing. Luckily, it only tore claw marks into his brown leather trench coat. John winced, as his arms weakened and the wolves thrashing about grew more ferocious. Carefully, but firmly, John scooped his shoulders from under his arms and in turn was able to reverse the wolf's momentum. John pulled his arms down as he pulled himself upwards, slamming the wolf's head on the ground. After the wolf let out a pained yelp, John landed a punch to its snout then pushed it away while backing up quickly.

It was tired, John could tell. The wolf stood itself back up in a daze, as John continued hastily towards the tree Kat was perched in. The wolf shook itself back into action and leaped into a sprint towards John again. When John felt his spear behind him he grabbed it behind his back, then tucked into a shoulder roll as the wolf jumped at him. The beast soared past John and hit the tree with a thump. Kat held tighter to the base of the tree, the weight of the wolf shaking the tree had almost set her off balance. With tears almost breaking through her eyes in fear, she watched the watery image of John returning to his feet and squaring off with the wolf. The wolf walked back into stalking distance of John, and the two circled each other. John kept in a good stance, knees slightly bent, arms covering the distance between the middle of the spear rod to the end leaving a little under half of the spear ready to slash at the wolf. John dealt a few fake stabs as they circled to try and get a feel of the wolf's reaction time. The wolf was lagging but still could put up a good defense. John couldn't get sloppy now. One mistake would mean his last.

When the wolf finally took the offense springing at John, he slashed his spear from the right and put his body behind it swinging him around the wolf. Blood pooled in a gash on its left shoulder. The wolf turned to face John hardly acknowledging his wound. They began circling once again. You've got this! John assured himself. He jabbed his spear at the wolf and surprisingly made connection. Upon the spear's return, a thin stream of blood followed it out of the wolf. Ha! John began to smile, now that the battle had shifted into his favor, he was starting to have a bit of fun. I'm actually doing this! He digressed. I'm actually fighting a wo- His thoughts were brought to an abrupt stop as he tripped over a stray root from a tree. His elbow landing first, all John could think up now was a shrewd compilation of swear words. The wolf, laughing -if it could- leaped atop of John once again. John stopped the wolf from feeding this time by separating the beast's jaw with the shaft of the spear, John's arms spread to each end. This did not stop the wolf from gnawing on the wood, now instead of just saliva, splinters of his spear sprinkled on John's face. When John heard creaking from the wood, he knew he needed to move... fast. Struggling, John was able to

work his feet up to the wolf's stomach and used all the power in his hip and thighs to fully extend his legs and kangaroo-kick the wolf, launching it up and over his head as the spear finally gave and snapped in half. The wolf landed on his back with a thud, but remained there for less than a second, rushing back to its feet.

John threw the pointless end of the spear away. As it whipped through the air, he hoped the wolf would be a good dog and go fetch the stick. It didn't. John's hopes were dashed as the stick hit the ground. Both the wolf and John stood for a moment, catching their breath. The wolf's fangs hung of its mouth, primed to chomp when any sign of meat came between its chops. As the two began circling again, John twirled the short half of his spear over his hand and caught it in a firm grip again. John's right eye twitched, he was eager to leap into action again and just finish this, but he was fatigued and with only half of his spear, his range of attack was limited. He needed a solid plan of attack that wouldn't expend too much energy but still end in his favor. Unfortunately, the wolf didn't want to let him think of one. It took a giant leap, the highest one yet, and was now soaring toward John. Taken by surprise, John used the momentum he'd already gained from circling at a good pace and was able to do a quick full spiral, landing a well-timed spinning back fist with his left hand. He struck somewhere around the wolf's eye which completely knocked it off course and sent it sliding into the dirt.

John now only saw red. Seeing the wolf in such a defenseless position on the ground had triggered a fury within him. All of his pain was no longer felt, his muscles no longer sore, arms no longer weak, lungs no longer gasping for air. He had gained a second wind. He gripped the end of his short spear with both hands lifting it over his head. With almost a jump, John used all of his strength and plunged the spear into the neck of the wolf. It let out an ear-bleeding howl as its head lurched up. John, now kneeling beside the wolf, pulled the spear point out the wolf with a stream of blood following it. He returned it to its starting position above his head and jammed it back into the dog's neck. Its yelp was loud again, but not as loud as the first. John pulled out, and stabbed back in, another yelp... fainter. John pulled out, he was hardly blinking, stabbing the wolf continuously, blood splattering with every strike. He stabbed and stabbed, the yelping grew fainter and fainter until they were no more, and even then John continued to stab. Now with each strike to compensate for the lack of sound John made his own grunts yells. After a few minutes of grunting and stabbing, John's adrenaline faded, and with a final large stab, he stopped. There was now a wide and deep cavity where John had been stabbing on the timber wolf's neck.

John stood but leaned over his knees, trying to catch his breath. He stared at the wolf's fur. What was a sleek silver, was now a crimson-stained grey. He could feel the soreness returning to his body and his fatigue had set back in. He wanted to collapse. Timidly, Kat walked towards him, eyes wide, staring at the hole in the wolf's neck. John could see the dried tears on her cheek and wanted to assure her everything was alright. He

was, however, way too out of breath to say a word. Thus, there was an awkward silence with only the sound of Kat taking her post-crying breaths of relief, and of John's leathery coat sliding over his forehead, wiping away the blood and sweat.

"What on Earth," John broke the silence, gesturing at the knitting needles Kat was still holding. "Were you planning on doing with those?" Eventually, the two were laughing together once more. John threw the wolf over his shoulder, and the two headed home.

Moments after their departure, a single inquisitive wolf cub came sniffing around the battle site- searching for its mother.

Word Count: 2500