

The Prey – Annabelle, Year 8, NSW

The constant thrum of crisp, white snow against warm, thick coats provided a comforting beat to the sound of our pounding feet. The crepuscular shadows were drowned out, washed astray by my swift run. Looming mountains stood over us, mammoth structures that mimicked tombs of giants. Our hunt had just begun and was looking promising. Game was abundant, spirits were high. The ground below us shifted gradually. A slight downhill greeted us and we followed its silent message. Soon a clear sign awaited us: splatters of blood so small they were placed with a fine brush. It gave way to swathes of red, as if thrown from a bucket.

A quick descent into the valley ahead was followed by shouts of victory as we witnessed the artist of the blood: an injured stag straggling through the skeletal bushes, fingers looming ominously out toward it. Painfully vulnerable prey. Breathing in the smell of the twilight mixed with fear, I leapt upon it with glee, hacking inwards with my primary weapon. A layer of fur, tendons escaping, ribs bared. The kill was perfect, if a little messy.

Soon, the carcass was no more, a blot of misshapen ink on fresh white paper. Carving, we pulled it apart, dragging dismembered limbs and chunks of flesh into our nearby shelter. With our close-knit sleeping arrangements and limited space, we had to bring with us only the freshest, largest parts of the corpse. Everything else, we left lying in the cold.

We headed off again into the night, following our leader, pausing only when we heard “STOP!”

Only when our surroundings whispered louder than us did we continue ahead, prodding, stalking, listening for the telltale *snap* of a branch, the rustle that announced another chase. Likely another bloody, brutal death.

Soon the trackers laid eyes upon the slightest indent in the otherwise unbreached snow. A short yell and a sudden whipping of heads signalled the fervent chase! The terrible symphony of our bloodlust preceded our arrival, a horrible fanfare feared by all. Racing, overridden senses. Pounding. Pounding feet, pounding snow, pounding hearts. Eyes darting, swivelling in sockets. A view of a bushy tail. A standstill that sent several snowdrifts soaring ahead. Locked. Aimed. Weapons readied, teeth bared.

We communicated silently, slight movements: the secretive language of the hunt. Then *BAM!* Each of us narrowed in on a target, striking and slashing. Together our movements were like a grinding cog. The technique was burnished, the execution ideal. I moved in to kill my allocated prey, locked around its throat, ready to spring. Drawing back, I gathered power, gasping at the effort. Then.... the claws stabbed through my stomach.

Behind me, my assailant, the cougar staggered and slumped. I followed. Toppling to the floor took a millennium. Dreaded impact. Whimpers. Concerned eyes that looked through mirrored blinds. In my delusion, my ears caught only snippets that danced in the wind.

“... We do?” “Heavy...” “Resources few.” “... good us. Not do it.” “His fault.”

“Please. Sore.”

Closing my eyes, unwilling to witness the severity of my wound. I heard them run away, blending into watercolour streaks that began to soak into the darkness. Streaks of green and grey. Black and red, so much red, melted around me.. Red was my wound, the colour of my fury - the dye that seeped into the crisp quilt covering the ground.

Blood has a peculiar scent. Metallic and sweet, it mingles in the nostrils and exudes a perfume that no one wants to smell, a perfume that will portent sepulchral news. I smelt it as I lay there, reduced to that I had worked to kill my whole life.

Prey. I was prey.

I was not as I thought. I was not an irreplaceable member, a pillar in their team. I was a placeholder. Now, when I was at my most desperate, my weakest, I was otiose.

Mustering the last dregs of my strength, I crawled forward, stopping frequently to regain my breath and to rest my aching middle. Stumbling past the felled animals, toppled over like dominoes, was an exhausting exercise. A bloody stream trailed after me. In it swam my thoughts, my feelings and my trust. They struggled. They drowned. Quenched in the red as bitter as my circumstance.

The realisation of how futile my travel was struck me like the cougars claws. I collapsed once more upon the snowdrift. It was as cold as death. Feverish and coated in grime, I paid that no heed. My ears pricked up for the last time at the sound of a distant howl. I tucked my tail under me and waited to die.