Kinga Jacewicz

Berry Picker

I lay half-awake, feeling the warmth of the campfire on my face, when the flap of the tepee rustled, and my father stepped in, a gust of crisp morning air following him inside. I shuddered when I saw he was holding two bows. I had been hoping this day wouldn't come.

We moved swiftly through the forest, the snow crunching beneath our boots, the fur on our backs blending our outlines with the pines and withered shrubs. I spotted some winterberries peeking through the snow and started filling my pockets.

"Chaske," my father's voice cut through the silence. He gestured for me to move closer, then pointed ahead. In the distance, barely visible through the trees, stood a lone, young elk. Its dark eyes were scanning the forest, watching for predators. For us.

"Remember what I taught you," my father whispered into my ear.

As we crouched and crept closer, my palms were all sweaty inside my gloves. The bow in my hand felt heavier with each step. Suddenly, my father squeezed my shoulder, silently telling me it was time. I didn't want to see an arrow sticking out of the elk's side, blood staining its tan fur as it limped trying to escape, having to shoot another arrow, then take a knife and cut its throat. But that was what I was expected to do, just as I had seen my father do hundreds of times.

I felt my father's eyes on me, so I reached for my quiver, nocked the arrow, and slowly pulled back the string. I prayed for the elk to somehow notice us, but it didn't. I took aim. My father impatiently nodded at me again, but just as I was about to release the string and see the arrow fly, I coughed.

The elk's ears perked up, and in a flash, it ran away, kicking up a cloud of snow. I stood still, clutching the bow. I looked at my father. He only let out a slightly annoyed sigh. Surprisingly, disappointing him didn't feel too bad, and neither did faking a cough.

Throughout winter, my father kept bringing me along for the hunt, and I kept messing it up. I even had some fun doing it. Once, I lined up my arrow, aiming at a rabbit hidden in the underbrush, but just as I was about to release, I sneezed. Another time, I fumbled so badly that my arrow slipped and dropped at my feet. And I hit a tree more times than I could count, which always earned me a quick smack on the back of my head.

Each time we came back with nothing to show, just a basket full of berries I'd picked along the way, and my father's silent disapproval in the form of a frown on his face. By the summer, he had cracked my bow in half and used it as firewood, but all I felt was relief.

One day, when my father was out hunting, I wandered outside. A warm breeze rustled through the tall grass, and in the distance, I spotted a shadow moving across the field. Squinting, I realized it was an elk I was looking at, a large one, with a full crown of

antlers. I liked to think it was the same young elk I had failed to kill in the winter. And that it liked to pick berries, too.



Olga Ottenheijm-Selyshcheva