Marmalade

The luminescent snow fluttered in the light, crisp breeze, falling down on its brethren below. It was the first snow of the season. Ill leaves littered the barren ground only to be veiled by the icy fragments, sinking from the heavens. The sun hung” heavily in the marmalade sky, her attenuated rays of light gleaming off the snow like pieces of shattered glass. Across the woods stood the grand stature of a horned elk; his antlers reigned high above the eloquent ebony eyes that stared into nullity.

As a veteran of many winters, the old elk, protected by a thick, luscious coat of fur, enjoyed the sharp cold air. He snorted; a torrent of humid air escaped his large black nostrils. Fat and sated from feeding voraciously over the summer, the elk slowly plotted through the soft powdered snow, occasionally stopping to lower his heavy head and graze on the few shivers of green shooting through the pallid landscape.

Snap. Instinctively, the elk reared his head, both ears pointed tall and firm against the wind straining to hear the faintest of sounds. The large brute stood motionless not generating even a whisper. His eyes scanning the numerous trees for any movement or flicker or shadows. The sound of the woods always materialized at the sound of wind brushing in the trees, snowshoe hares or birds soaring high above. Wise from many years, the elk realized long ago, he had few natural enemies. But the last snap brought a seven inch scar on his hind left leg. The mild ache even now reminds the elk of the death struggle against a young snow lynx.
Two miles away, a pack of three canines trudged through the snow; three timber wolves decrepit from traveling and pursuing prey. The alpha trudged along the ridge overlooking the valley. The two smaller and young wolves followed in single file. Their coats muddied with the failed attempts of previous hunts. Their last meal vanished from their empty stomachs and left a gnawing pain in its place.

Through his weary ochre eyes, the alpha saw a silhouette move. An umber elk against the trees was nearly invisible at first glance, but he cast a hazy shadow. Animation in the placid woods meant food to the pack. Eventually spotting his next collation, the alpha stalked his prey's anterior. The two young wolves following suit, flanked the titanic beast. The alpha leaped, heaving himself towards the elk, taupe fur bristling and oily. With a swift movement, the elk dashed away, desperate to escape the hasty jaws of the canine.

Ivory tipped antlers dug into the frozen dirt as the cervid was brought to the ground, the wounds the beasts inflicted too much for him to bare. His chest heaved, the weight of his skeleton ultimately obscuring his only will to survive. The yellow-eyed beasts absentmindedly tore at the steaming flesh, their profane minds driven mad with the pangs of famine. Their off-white muzzles stained maroon, displaying to all their successful hunt. Soon all that was left was an empty carcass left in a muddied trampled pile of rosy snow.

Here, the wolves reigned: relentless and bellicose. Survival drives them mad and instinct makes them murderers. These traits warp a gregarious playful dog into a pugnacious imprudent carnivore. Was there nothing that could stop them? Would the eventual greed of these creatures drive nature’s caste system into social dismay?

An onlooker stared straight ahead. He witnessed the wolves bring down and tear the elk to pieces, still alive. He had viewed this phenomenon multiple times, but yet, it chilled him to the
bone. Shifting uncomfortably and making minimal noise, he unleashed his camouflaged hunting rifle in his stash from behind the bush. He eyed the beasts ahead where they were lazily rolled on the cracked dirt, drowsy from their sizeable meal. Brushing the chunks of snow sloppily off the barrel of his firearm, he pointed the weapon at the wolf. He steadied his ashen, gloved hands, ready to fire. His eyes peered through the rifle scope at the alluring fawn canine, waiting for that precise moment to shoot; their line of sight met for a brief moment before a shot rang out. The deafening sound radiated throughout the open plain.

The thickly draped shadow hoisted itself up onto its legs, watching the two diminishing shapes that scurried into the foggy woods. It then looks down at their brethren; excreting a thick, conspicuous, velvety liquid, the once rhapsodically, callous fiend now turned innocuous. The shooter, detached from the mortal world, gazed beyond the wolf’s half open, slightly glazed amber eyes.

As he leaned against the rifle butt wedged upon the frozen ground, a wicked smile slowly formed from raggedly unkept beard of nature’s apex hunter. This hunter killed for sport, for enjoyment, for entertainment, for recreation. His favorite prey were wolves: he valued them for their luxurious pelts and challenging hunt. Those disgusting vermin were hunters like himself. When he killed wolves, he felt a warmth in his frigid heart as he conquered nature’s apex predator. He coughed in rejoice as the most fearsome killer of the valley.

Deep in the man’s lower lung, Nature took her role. Microscopic bacteria rapidly divided and multiplied. The hunter’s healers had a name for this tiny creature - Streptococcus pneumoniae. Slowly at the beginning then progressing rapidly, the bacteria spread and encased the right lower lobe. The hunter rejoiced warmth in this cold and empty wasteland but this grew unbearably hotter. His forehead broke out into a sweat from the hot fever. One minute later, he
shook uncontrollably from chills. He wouldn’t believe he was both simultaneously sweating from the fever and shivering from the chills. He coughed up green purulent sputum which repulsed even himself when he saw it fall to the white snow. His rib throbbed from the violent coughing spasms. His gasps for air as his wheezing and coughing deepen. He felt fatigued - so very tired. His body forced him to sit down on a small boulder. Leaning forward using both hands, he grasped his rifle for support. He struggled to breath, gasping for any gulp of fresh air. His eyelids grew heavy and he closed his eyes. He slowly slid to the ground. Snap. A twig broke under the hunter’s weight. He laid there, still as the air saturated around him, lacking the life that had once inherited the now cold indisposed body.

Nature had just resumed her position on the top of the food pyramid. Given the false notion of tranquility and pulchritude, Nature is truly just an aggressive sullen beast with a beautiful marmalade sky.