



STEPHANIE FLINT

**THE
HUNT**

A ~1000~ WORDS SHORT STORY

The Hunt

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A 1000 Words Short Story

by Stephanie Flint

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Ali crashed through the underbrush and scrambled to a stop at the edge of the ravine. If the thick vines above her didn't hold, she'd meet her end in the surging river hundreds of feet below. Better than dying by spear-point. "Please, dear Maker, don't let this break!"

She wrapped her legs around the vine, knotted her foot in the strands, and fumbled with the satchel on her belt. She buried the poison-covered dart in her fist, trying not to prick her skin. It might not kill her, but it'd still make her sick.

A flash of fur, and Ali shrieked, swinging off the cliff's edge. The vine dropped, hurtling over the raging water and rocks beneath, but it held.

The cougar skidded to a halt. He stood taller on his hind legs than any human male, and the spear in his clawed hands was covered in rabbit fur and human hair. His snout had stripes of red and blue paint marking him as Quino, and tawny fur covered his muscled body. He flicked his tail and licked his lips, his

golden eyes waiting for Ali to swing back into his spear.

As the vine swung back, Ali tightened her fingers on the rope. If Kenneth didn't show up, it wouldn't matter that she'd done everything right. The cougar would kill her with a single thrust. She closed her eyes, breathed deep, waiting...

A sharp whistle pierced the air, and Ali's eyes snapped open. The edge of the cliff was nearer than she expected, but the cougar cried out in pain, dropping his spear and covering his ears. Ali stabbed the dart into his chest and the cougar hissed, tumbling into the brush. He roared, furious as she kicked his head and darted away, and he scrambled to right himself. She dodged his hand and disappeared into the brush.

"You could've made that poison stronger," she cursed, ducking into the dirt hole she'd made the day before. "Or slowed him down."

The cougar tore away the branches and leaves, opening a path between him and Ali. She yanked her knife from her belt, trying to fend him off, but his claws caught her cheek. She gasped, pressing her hand to the bloody scratches. The cougar darted back, retrieving his spear and snarling.

Ali gulped. Kenneth wouldn't make it this time.

The spear slammed into the brush and Ali rolled aside. The cougar hissed, and the spear head nicked her skin, leaving a whelp across her shoulder. She gasped, watching the cougar withdraw his spear and crouch, preparing for the final blow. Before he struck, his golden eyes rolled back before he collapsed to the ground, shuddering.

He was still.

Ali sighed. That had taken all too long. Kenneth needed to work on his poisons if he was going to remain as her partner. The last partner hadn't fared so well. She touched her cheek, cringing from the four ragged gashes. She removed a healing poultice from her belt and applied it to the wound, knowing she'd need to clean it later.

For now, she wasn't leaving this hole until Kenneth proved the cat was dead.

Minutes later, the young man finally showed up, though it felt like he took the whole day.

Kenneth inched toward the cougar's body, his spear ready. He nudged it with his foot, and when it didn't respond, he swiftly slit the cougar's throat. Ali climbed out of her hole and stretched, glad the ordeal was over. That was the fifth cougar they'd killed so far, and there were still seven more to find. Ali and Kenneth weren't the only hunters, of course. There were others culling the danger, but Ali had been the most successful-- and the longest lived.

"I started to think you'd missed," Kenneth commented, nudging the cougar's body. It didn't move.

“Your poison was slow. Make it stronger next time, unless you want to do the running.”

Kenneth scoffed. As it was, sweat beaded down his bare chest. “No, thank you.”

Ali was the fastest in her village. She was eighteen, and had hoped partnering with someone older would eliminate the likelihood of mistakes. She’d been sorely disappointed.

“Let’s get his body back to camp,” she said. She couldn’t return to her village until the Quino threat was gone. The guards didn’t particularly care *what* was moving up the stone wall-- they’d still throw stones down the side.

Kenneth nodded, hoisting the cougar in his arms and straddling it across his shoulders. Together they returned to camp, a ways off from a larger grove. A secluded ring of fire smoldered underneath a giant willow tree. The long leaves held in the smoke from their fires, but it also hid them from wandering Quino.

Ali got the fire going again while Kenneth dumped the body by the thick tree and checked for footprints. “It’s clear,” he said.

Ali stepped back from her fire and nodded. “Good,” she said. “I’ll check the snares. Why don’t you start preparing the body?”

Despite Ali’s youth, Kenneth didn’t hesitate. A mile out, a portion of the grove was reserved for tanning the hides. The process stank, and Ali gave Kenneth incense to keep the smell from escaping the grove. She detested the perfume, but so did every other creature nearby. The process of skinning and tanning the hides disturbed her ever since she’d seen the Quino’s intelligence, but it was the most effective way for her village warriors to go unnoticed through cougar territory. The furs were similar enough to the size and shape of the human body to be an effective disguise. It wasn’t like the Quino were innocent in this matter. She’d lost at least half her family to the terrifying creatures.

Ali retrieved a rabbit she caught that morning and skewered it over the fire, then added sweet incense to the flames to hide the coming smell.

She just had to live long enough to return to her remaining family.

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About Stephanie Flint:

Stephanie Flint is a photographic illustrator and author. *1000 Words* is a project consisting of 1000 word short stories, each accompanied by Stephanie's photographic illustrations. She often goes by the online name of SBibb.

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