

The Hunter

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

Even at night the desert swelters. Sweat drips from my forehead, fogging the scope, veneering the sparse mustache tracing my lip. Perched in the granite outcropping and hidden behind camel thorn, I wait for dawn, when animals venture forth for food, for water and mating, before the sun sends them back to shadows.

“Do it for honor,” the elders said. “Do it for your manhood.”

I am blessed with a sharp eye, a steady hand, and do not yet taste fear. The elders chose me for this hunt, for of all our clansmen, I have the greatest accuracy. With one shot I can kill a hare from a stone's throw or fell a bat in flight. This week I killed the leopard preying on our goats after other men had failed.

But I am a poet, not a hunter; even as I crouch amidst the rocks I weave words in my head.

*Listen to the sand, to the tale it tells,
the spirits of the prophets joined with the One.*

Gold silhouettes the distant ridge. My arms tremble, from the heat, from the weight of the Kalashnikov, from the exhaustion of anticipation. Below, a pale rectangle of light spills from the hut onto the scorched poppy field. My finger curls around the trigger, and I pray for the animal souls I have taken — panther, gazelle, hyena, vulture.

“It is only meat,” I murmur as the Commander greets the day.