

One shot. There would be one, and only one. Cougar hadn't seen him. In the crosshairs the animal looked off toward the far hills. The big cat was a magnificent male, the picture of wild virility, a feline in the prime of his life. Miss and he'd be gone forever.

The mountain lion yawned. His open maw dominated the view in the Bushnell rifle scope. Something about a warm day and a full stomach to make anyone, especially a cat, sleepy. His red-tawny coat gleamed like warm caramel in the afternoon sun. Shoulder muscles pulsed as he panted on a flat rock five hundred yards from Peter Romero's cover behind a dead stump. Aside from an oozing cut near his nose, Cougar seemed healthy. Why had this mountain lion attacked two people?

The wind shifted. Cougar's head swiveled to face him. Maybe he sensed Romero's presence, the smell of his breath, or the tension of a slow trigger squeeze.

In the scope, Cougar's eyes looked like cold black whirlpools centered in yellow seas. The eyes showed intelligence, revealed a spirit. Here was a being aware of its past and conscious of a future.

Ancestors knew a person could become an animal and an animal could become human. They respected animals and held deep reverence and honor for them before and after the hunt. Shame burned Romero's skin. He was about to betray that bond for money.

Cougar alerted. Romero fired. Cougar died with eyes asking, Why?

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Romero looked down at the dead feline. This cat had killed one hiker and injured a second in separate attacks near Bandelier National Monument yesterday. The first victim was discovered partially eaten in a ravine after another trekker had found her abandoned backpack. Later that day, the mountain lion had pulled a second hiker into a ditch. The woman's companion grabbed her legs and fought a tug of war until a group of passing mountain bikers chased the feline away with rocks. One hit Cougar in the face, cutting the left side of its muzzle. No question, this was the offending predator.

Romero took measurements, but stretching out the two hundred pound carcass proved difficult. He avoided the cat's eyes, still open, asking the same question.

"Should've stayed away from people, *mókats*," he said, recording on his cell the girth of the body and the size of Cougar's paws. The length nose-to-tail measured nearly eight feet. "Gonna send your stats to Boone and Crockett so you can join the immortality of records."

He flipped his braid back; then checked the cat's mouth. The gleaming canines measured just short of two inches. No teeth were broken or missing. This was one healthy animal. If Cougar had reasons to prey on humans, injury or sickness was not the cause.

Romero was pleased his tracking skills had not deteriorated doing things policemen do like writing speeding tickets and tracking down the occasional psychopath. Now the shooting was over and what he'd done brought no pride, no exhilaration, only exhaustion and shame because, to him, Cougar was sacred, a creation of *Sus'sistinako*, Thinking Woman, a spider and creator of all things.

The elders believed each animal exhibited its own defining characteristics, and over the years, he'd come to believe it true. Cougar, the master hunter, displayed leadership. He was

intelligent, loyal, courageous, took responsibility, and enjoyed foresight. Elders said Cougar linked humans to the higher spirits.

He spotted a ragged pelt a few yards away, walked over. Coyote had torn into it, but Romero recognized it as a mountain lion's skin. Smaller, female, most likely. Had Cougar been standing guard over a lost mate?

"Oh, man," he said. He exhaled, stood, and started down hill. The ancestors bonded with their prey. Is that what just happened? Maybe there was some prayer meal at home. "I'll find something to honor your sacrifice," he said over his shoulder.

A necropsy was required for all killer cats, but there was no way to manhandle the heavy carcass to his Jeep parked on St. Peter's Dome Road. The hike from the Jeep was a bitch, so he'd need a horse and a pack mule to get the cat out to the road.

New Mexico Game and Fish had contracted him to kill the cat because he had a rep as a tracker and the mountain lion had trailed toward Cochiti Pueblo. Game and Fish figured Romero still held his job as pueblo policeman, a technicality he had no inclination to correct.

He was no longer a cop. He was a fired cop. Fired not because he had killed a dirty cop years ago, or because he'd dodged numerous state and federal charges over the years. He'd been fired for failing to pay a towing charge. The pueblo governor, a prick who could not resist the opportunity, insisted Romero was out of jurisdiction at the time of the tow and had to pay. Romero declined. The pueblo council demanded payment. Romero refused, so they fired him. When the paydays stopped, he'd pondered his decision, but refused to reconsider. He understood his stubbornness surprised no one in the pueblo.

Broken hills that dropped cliffs several hundred feet toward the pueblo slowed travel. He'd shot the cat near a cliff face, one of a half-dozen he'd have to avoid before he got to the road, not an easy task. Didn't matter how difficult, though: no cat, no pay.

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It was late by the time he returned with a trailer containing Phil, his neighbor's dun gelding, an animal as stubborn as he was skittish, and the mule, Chupitos, a shaggy coated gray-face whose only redeeming quality was his calming effect on Phil. Romero backed Chupitos, then Phil, out of the trailer, checked and tightened cinches and straps, mounted Phil and headed uphill. Now, it was a matter of finding the mountain lion and hauling him out. The mule followed with head pulled back, nostrils working the evening breeze. Damn mule wanted to be home.

"Me too, Chupitos," Romero said.

At the trailhead, Phil paid more attention to the mule than he did to the path, looking back often enough to scrape Romero against several trees. A slap to Phil's neck caused him to dance, but he settled down with renewed attention. Chupitos stumbled behind. The trail avoided the many cliffs in the area, but was steep. Both horse and mule puffed like old steam engines. Romero feared the mule might have a tough time with a two hundred pound cat on his back.

In the thirty minutes it took to get up the hill, the sun had dropped but not before piercing white clouds with vermillion, gold, green, and royal blue lances. Lightning illuminated thunderheads to the north, but rain wouldn't come this way. Far off and downslope, lights

sparkled. As Romero climbed, he disappeared behind dark hills. Soon civilization faded away and Romero found himself in a world with little reference except overhead where ten thousand stars provided light and the North Star direction.

Chupitos coughed and snorted. The mule was older than Phil, old enough to have known Christ as a corporal, Marines say. The animal was a good trooper, but on his last legs. It seemed the only thing that kept the old boy going was Phil's rear end, the way he nosed it.

Romero had lived in this area all his life and knew the land. Despite the dark, he found the place where he'd shot Cougar, then tied Phil and Chupitos to a tree. At the rock where Cougar died, there was no dead cat. He fished out a flashlight from Phil's saddlebags, and then circled the slab. In the white beam, blood covered the rock. No way the cat had crawled off: the animal was stone cold dead when he'd measured him a few hours ago. If a scavenger had stolen the carcass, it left no drag marks, no discarded fur, no entrails, no bones. What kind of beast, or man, could carry off a two hundred pound mountain lion? Romero checked for tracks, but the night hid detail. The tattered female pelt remained where he'd seen it last.

Phil screamed. Romero whirled. Chupitos lay on the ground. Phil pulled at his tree in a panic while kicking the mule. The pack animal's head wobbled at each thudding impact.

Romero ran to the horse, repeating "whoa" low and slow, faking calmness in the face of horse panic. The animal snorted, pawed the ground, and jerked his head as Romero said, "Easy, easy." He grabbed Phil's reins. "It's okay, Phil. It's okay."

The gelding's rear legs had become entangled in the mule's lead. He leaned in, grabbed the rope. Sparks lit up the sky, then everything disappeared.