

**Let His
Memory Go**

Let His Memory Go

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Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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Chapter 1

No Tears Allowed

To the Pabinkúe, the eyes of the herd are windows for her masters.

—Pabinkue Nigakúmi

Mikáryo felt Rutejìmo's anguished gaze against her back like a knife stabbing into her kidney. She didn't have to look over her shoulder to imagine tears rolling down his cheeks, tracing along the fresh cuts and bruises before mixing with the blood that ran from his lips. He had been beaten badly and the sight of his injuries—when he left her healthy and unharmed only a few hours ago—tore at her heart.

Her vision blurred with her effort not to let the tears roll down her own cheeks. Her lungs ached to hold back the sob that threatened to escape her throat. Everything inside her screamed for her to go back and comfort him, to hold him and tell him that he could join her.

Next to her, riding his black horse, Tsubàyo glanced at her with concern in his gaze. He started to look back but then she hissed at him to stop.

Tsubàyo obeyed and then looked forward. His eyes seemed to soften for a moment and his face relaxed. Slowly, he reached up to scratch his scar; as a child, spilled hot oil

had marked him from the top of his brow, along the side of his face, and down to his chest. The scarred flesh frequently drew unwanted attention and Tsubàyo did everything in his power to avoid calling out attention to his old injury, but he still touched it while concentrating.

She barked out a laugh. He was using his magic to look through the eyes of one of the horses in the herd. She could do the same, but where Tsubàyo could use any horse in his herd, she could only share her senses with her black steed, Datobàpo.

“He’s still there,” Tsubàyo said in a low voice.

“I wasn’t going to look.”

A faint smile quirked the corner.

Mikáryo rolled her eyes. “Fine, I want to look but I can’t use any horse nearby to peek like you.”

“Don’t worry, Káryo. I’ll tell you when he stops wailing.” He used the familiar and her preferred form of address. Outside of the endless scraping and bowing of the cities, she never saw a reason to use her full name.

“Thank you.”

He shrugged. “Explain later though?”

She smiled at him and then nodded. With her thoughts, she had Datobàpo pace closer so she could reach Tsubàyo.

The horse obeyed her telepathic command, smoothly stepping along the gravel until the two riders’ legs brushed against each other. His body moved in perfect harmony with Tsubàyo’s mount, Gafhán, as they stepped in time with each other.

Mikáryo rested her hand on Tsubàyo’s shoulder for a moment. The black tattoo on her hand blended with his dark outfit. She squeezed before the two horses parted.

He briefly smiled at her and then returned to his efforts. Before them, there were thirty horses pulling the large, brass scorpion mechanical. He commanded all of them

with his thoughts, directing them to work together to haul the large device on their way to the northern city that had paid for the war machine.

“He’s gone.”

She turned and peered over her shoulder. She couldn’t see any hint of Rutejìmo’s presence though she knew if she went back, there would be blood on the ground and scattered rocks in the way of his leaving. “Can you follow him?”

Tsubàyō shook his head. “He’s moving too fast, I can’t catch the horses fast enough to watch.”

Disappointed, Mikáryo turned back on her horse and settled down. The sadness still choked her and she struggled with the urge to chase him down.

“Why not bring him along?”

She flinched at the question. “He couldn’t travel with us. You know that. He’s a banyosiōu now. Without a clan, he couldn’t be welcomed at any oasis or shelter.” She felt sick saying it and the tears threatened to rise up again.

When Tsubàyō said nothing, she peeked up to see him staring at her.

Gulping, she asked, “What?”

“You don’t care about those things, Káryo. All the bowing and scraping? That isn’t you. If no one would give him food, you’d share your own. If an oasis wouldn’t accept him, you’d camp out in the sands with him.”

With every word, she felt even worse. Tsubàyō knew her too well.

“So why?”

She smiled at him grimly. “Because I think he’s on a path we cannot assist with.”

“A path besides wandering into the desert and dying because he’s too stupid to realize... no...” Tsubàyō took a deep breath and his face untwisted. “It’s one of those desert

things, isn't it? Keep someone in the dark to make sure the knife of experience scrapes the bone?"

Mikáryo chuckled. "Yes."

"Those sun-addled assholes of the Shimusògo." He spat out the name of the clan that he was born into. It was Rutejìmo's clan now just as Tsubàyo was now a member of the Pabinkúe clan. Well, it would be Rutejìmo's again if he managed to survive a year.

"Trauma does increase the power."

"Trauma also leaves children to die in the middle of the desert. It inflicted me with nightmares for the last ten years and I still can't get my heart away from it. Every damn day, I worry I'm going to turn into those assholes and hurt my daughter with their horse shit attitudes and obsession with destroying lives." His voice grew sharper with every word.

Mikáryo reached over and rested her hand on his shoulder. She left it there instead of parting, now that Rutejìmo wasn't watching. "You have to admit, you are the most powerful of the Pabinkúe, even without being a warrior."

He glared at her.

"I'm sure Múchi would never let you hurt your foals. I sure wouldn't."

Tsubàyo relaxed and chuckled wryly. "No, she'd have me drawn and quartered if I even suggested it. Being her husband would mean she'd be the one quartering me personally. Besides, at least the Pabinkúe don't have their heads shoved up their assholes. They talk about the trials, in vague terms but they at least explain that it has to be stressful to manifest magic."

Mikáryo patted his shoulder. "You ended up a good man, Bàyò."

Chapter 2

Regret

Formality in the desert is strict and brutal. The barbarians wouldn't hesitate to beat anyone who addresses a superior without "great" and their full name.

—Trasid Malafun, *Strange Customs of the Sand-Blooded*

The light of the fire pushed back the darkness that surrounded Mikáryo. She could enjoy the near daylight brilliance of the merchant clan's bonfires but the horses were spooked by the noise. Both Tsubàyo and her preferred to camp a few chains away from the rest of the caravan, the relative quiet made a far more enjoyable night.

She took a deep breath and inhaled in the sweet smell of the burning wood. The sap from the local trees reminded her of home, at least in the way it popped and hissed in the fire. She wondered if the locals smoked it or used it as incense like her father did.

"Smells like dochīga wood," Tsubàyo said as he set down a platter of food and a large mug of hot tea next to her. He then took a few steps to sit down on his own riding blanket. The sand underneath shifted slightly with his weight.

"I thought the same thing."

“Getting homesick already? It’s only been five months since you visited.”

Mikáryo glared at him. “You know I don’t go home.”

He nodded and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t mind it.”

“You have a gorgeous wife and three beautiful children waiting for you. I suspect you are the one anxious to ride her like a horse the moment you get home.”

He picked up his mug and spoke into the steaming liquid while grinning. “Maybe...”

“Going for four?”

He shook his head. “Three’s enough. Any more and the house will get cramped and I’ll start spending more time out here than at home.”

“You can always leave kids behind you on the sands. Some of those merchants do.” She gestured dismissively at the gathering behind them. The others were celebrating something, probably some wind blew or another thinly veiled excuse to drink.

Tsubàyo scratched his scar. “I wouldn’t do that to Múchi. I would never stray.”

Mikáryo reached out and grabbed a stick. She rolled it along her fingertips for a moment and then used it to shove one of the logs into the center of the pit where the flames were the hottest. “Is she still okay with us fucking?”

“Of course, you’re the Great Pabinkue Mikáryo.”

Mikáryo glared at him sharply.

He grinned and took another bite. “What? That’s what she calls you. Not everyone insists on using childish names, you know.”

“I just don’t like—” she started with a rising tone.

“It’s okay, Káryo. I’m just teasing you. She knows exactly what we do out here.”

“If she ask you to stop?”

“I’d do in a heartbeat,” he said firmly.

“Good.” Mikáryo picked up her plate and ate quietly.

After a few minutes of silence, Tsubàyo broke the silence. “Why the questions? Jìmo?”

The muscles in her stomach and shoulder tightened.

“I know our relationship has been settled for years. The only thing that has changed is him.”

Mikáryo wasn't sure how to respond. He didn't have to be right and she hated admitting it. “Jealous?”

Tsubàyo pulled a face. “I mean, I don't really care for what you did. However, it's been a long time and I'm not the same boy who tried to kill him. You know that. But I also know that if he was just a cock, you wouldn't have ridden him...” He suddenly smiled wryly. “... like a horse in the night.”

A memory of lust warmed her body for a moment. “Fine, a point for you.”

He chuckled and returned to his food.

They finished their meals in relative silence. Tsubàyo gathered up the plates and mugs and took them to the main group to get cleaned.

Alone, Mikáryo returned to staring at the fire. Her thoughts were dark with Rutejìmo. Tsubàyo had guessed correctly, the last two nights with him had been more than just mindless passion. She felt drawn to the whimpering young man, the desire to protect him coloring every conversation she had with him.

That was one mark of the kojìnōmi, speakers for the desert. Whenever one of the Pabinkúe was in danger, she felt a calling to rush to help. With Rutejìmo, she heard the same call though it was quieter and less pressing.

She knew that being banished from his clan was just the first step for something more. The desert had plans for Rutejìmo, ones that would hurt him in ways that no human

fist could match. She wanted to rush after him, to shield him from the pain and agony he was about to suffer.

She couldn't, she knew that.

An earlier conversation came up: trauma manifested power. Normally everyone had only one moment in their lives where their needs measured out the depth of their magic. Rutejimo would have two and his second life had just began.

A tear ran down her cheek. She tried to wipe it away but more dripped down her face. After a few moments of trying, she just let them fall.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

A log in the fire shifted and sent up a spray of embers into the air.

The ground crunched with Tsubayo's return. He stopped next to her, resting one hand on her shoulder. "I'm heading to my tent."

Mikaryo didn't want to be alone for the night. She reached up to hold his hand against her. "Would you be...?"

"Would you like company tonight?"

"Please?"

"Come on," he said warmly before helping her to her feet.

Together, they gathered up their belongings and placed them back into the packs. One never knew if they would have time when the sun rose, it was best to be prepared to leave with a moment's notice. It took another half hour to check on the horses; Tsubayo could do it mentally but both preferred to touch and interact with their herd.

When she returned, he held the flap open to her tent.

Murmuring thanks, she crawled in and stripped down to her underwear. The wires in her armored cloth resisted folding, but she coiled it into a roll of black fabric that would double as a pillow for later.

When she turned around, Tsubàyo had removed all of his clothes. The scars marked his flesh down to the peak of his hip, bisecting his body with the darker slash of hardened skin. Kneeling next to her, he helped her pull the black cloth from her breasts before sliding his arm around her bare waist. Their black tattoos rubbed together and the images of horses that covered both of their bodies looked like a herd.

He was hot against her body, a warmth that pushed back the cold of night and the darkness that haunted in her thoughts.

She sniffed and reached up to cup the side of his face, her fingers resting against his scars. “Thank you, Bàyò.”

“What are friends for, Great Pabinkue—?”

She silenced him with a kiss.

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Chapter 3

Answers

To speak the desert's name is to invite a visit from death. To even think her name is to request attendance.

—Rojikinomi Ridáchi

Days later, the question Mikáryo expected finally came.

“What is Rutejìmo going through?”

She reached up and pulled the black fabric from her face to take a deep breath. It seared her lungs and prickled her lips.

Next to her, Tsubàyo rode his horse with one hand resting on the back of his mount's neck and the other hefting his water skin. The Pabinkúe didn't need reins or saddles to ride, not with their minds connected with their creatures.

Mikáryo held out her hand for his skin. When he handed it to her, she drank from the metallic-tasting liquid before returning it. “Thanks.”

“Please don't change the topic.”

Her heart beat faster and her muscles clenched.

Underneath her, Datobàpo stumbled when her thoughts disrupted his pace. He shook his mane angrily, followed by a wave of emotion that made his point clear.

It took her a moment to calm her thoughts and mount.

To her relief, Tsubàyo didn't press his question. He watched the scorpion being hauled in front of him, his eyes glazed over and his fingers absently rubbing the scar near his collar.

The desert passed slowly while she struggled for how to start. Finally, she found the words. "We find our spirits during our rites of passage. We found Pabinkúe, he found Shimusògo. Sometimes, there is only one spirit, other times there are many."

"So I could have been a Shimusògo if I wanted to spend my life running around on my bare feet?"

She shrugged and then nodded. "The passage is more than just stress, it's a judgment. The spirits are choosing you for your actions and your thoughts. For some, your personality just meshes and there is no doubt which spirit is for you."

"Jìmo would be one of those."

"And that other girl."

"Chi..." He frowned. "I don't remember her name anymore. She was a bird chaser if there was one."

"Of course. Shimusògo had already picked her by the time I found you." She pointed accusingly at him. She had stumbled into Tsubàyo's rite of passage when she chased after the man who killed her sister while stealing a horse. The horse thief ended up being Tsubàyo but Mikàryo had to shove aside the pain when it became apparent that her clan spirit had chosen the sister's murderer. The loss had faded over the years, the wound scabbed over by the companionship Tsubàyo had given her.

She tore her thoughts from her past and pointed again. "For you, there was a doubt. I'm sure if you acted differently, you would have been Shimusògo or some other clan. Or a bloody corpse in the sands."

She saw the flicker of pain in his eyes. He knew the price Mikáryo had paid. Guilt burned in her thoughts and she turned away to break the conversation.

Datobàpo shook his mane as a prickle of annoyance radiated from his thoughts.

She patted him.

“So what does that have to do with Rutejìmo? He has a clan.” Tsubàyo also wanted to change the conversation.

Thankful for the respite, she answered, “Who do you pray to?”

“The moon of course. You taught me that. Every night at moon rise, when the magic runs through my veins.”

For a moment, she remembered the sullen brat who she brought home. Tsubàyo had grown up a lot in the last ten years. “There are two others.”

“Yeah, the sun and desert.” He waved his hands dismissively.

“Who prays to the sun?”

“The day clans.”

“Who prays to the desert?”

He opened his mouth and then closed it. His brown skin paled for a moment. Licking his lips, he finally said, “No one.”

She looked at him pointedly.

“What? No one would dare to mention her name. Just saying it would be asking death to visit you.”

Mikáryo’s stomach twisted as she struggled to fight her emotions. She could feel the tears threatening to come again as she pictured the hell the desert had in store for Rutejìmo. If he survived, his second life would have begun.

Realization dawned on Tsubàyo’s face. “A kojìnōmi!? He’s going to be a tender of the dead? H-How? I mean, how? It’s... he’s... Jìmo.”

Around him, the herd stumbled.

The giant brass scorpion lurched to a stop.
Ahead of them, the merchants began to yell.

“The horses!” snapped Mikáryo.

His face darkening with a blush, Tsubàyo concentrated for a moment and the herd began to strain against their ropes again. A minute later, the mechanical device continued along its route.

Kojinōmi. In a society that refused to name the dead to avoid drawing the attention of the desert mother, they were the men and women who willingly carried bodies to the funeral pyres. They risked proximity to death herself to make sure the dead passed on with dignity, honor, and grace.

Mikáryo choked back a sob.

Like warriors, almost none of the kojinoimi died of old age. Their end came from attacks by grieving lovers, diseases from hands they held, or the blood from the guts they held in while listening to a dying confession. They never had a clean death, only a terrible one.

Rutejimo didn't have a chance. He didn't have the strength to survive death's attention. A great warrior would be hard pressed with the shadow of oblivion following them, a pathetic fighter like Rutejimo might not even make it a day before his end.

“He'll make it.”

Mikáryo jerked her head up to look at Tsubàyo.

He glanced at her and shrugged. “Jimo will survive.”

“How can you see that? Have you seen how he fights?”

Tsubàyo held out his hand with a silent question.

“Fine, you tried to kill him. But that's the point. You would have succeeded. If it wasn't for that girl, his blood would be on the sands.”

“Except you said that you feel the need to protect him.”

“I would have never told you that!” she proclaimed even as she tried to imagine when she revealed that secret.

Tsubàyo grinned.

“You, sun-stroked, rancid chunk of horse shit, you guessed!?! You guessed?”

“Yes and no. It’s pretty obvious with the way you were instantly affectionate toward him. But you know our koji-nōmi. She won’t tend a follower of sunlight. Not in a hundred years. And that old bastard we met a year ago? He wouldn’t touch us because we were of the night. Kojinōmi don’t care for the dead on the other side. Sun and moon, that divide always remains.”

“So, what does that matter?”

With a grin, he said, “Jìmo has the blessing of both. It’s obvious that he is touched by the sun. And you also feel that need to protect him, as if he was one of us.”

She mulled over his thoughts. “How can you be sure?”

“I can’t, but I have a lot of trouble believing that... the desert wouldn’t choose him unless he had a chance.”

“I know others that failed. These moments of a new life are deadly and this time, he’s playing with death herself.”

“A child died during my rite of passage too. But most of us survived. Trauma brings power. If someone is going to get traumatized, it would be Great Shimusogo Rutejìmo.”

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Chapter 4

A Curious Person

The sun and moon war endlessly in their courtship over the great desert. Their children and their children's children are their pawns in the endless war.

—Rechyokoni Asamōno

Mikáryo slumped back with a contented sigh. The sweat that clung to her skin caught her hair, plastering the curls against her face and nose. She ignored it and enjoyed the fading glow of her orgasm instead.

Her lover, Ridáchi, crawled up her body, her nipples tracing along Mikáryo's tattoos, before she settled into place with her cheek on Mikáryo's breast. She had long black hair with a little curl to it. The strands clung to the sweat on both of their bodies.

Ridáchi looked up at Mikáryo and smiled brightly. "I love it when you come home, you know that? I miss... just listening to your heart beat."

Mikáryo reached down and ran her hands along her lover's shoulder. Ridáchi's dark skin matched Mikáryo's tattoos, black horses that raced over almost her entire body

except for bare spots of brown skin shaped like a horse's head centered on both her abdomen and back.

Ridáchi reached out and ran her fingertips along Mikáryo's tattoos, tracing the various horses until she got to one of the older ones. She outlined the horse's mane. "I love your horses. Is this one Mìna?"

"To the right two, there he is. That's my beauty." Tomìna, the second horse she had bonded to. His death came when a bridge collapsed underneath them during a battle. Mikáryo hunted down the people responsible for eroding the stone before she got a tattoo in her horse's memory.

She lifted her head to cup Mikáryo's breast and press her thumb on a small horse near her nipple. "Fòbi? I remember that foal. You were in tears when he got sick." The smile on her lips faded slightly. "I remember his flames and the little girl calling out his name."

The memory brought a smile for Mikáryo. "My father kept trying to tell me to stop calling out his name but I wouldn't listen."

"At least until you escaped and found me." Ridáchi lifted her head to push back her hair, just a few strands of white marking the black. She kissed Mikáryo's nipple before moving her cheek down on the empty spot of her lover's belly. "Most people are afraid to name the dead. You wear them on your body."

She stroked her fingers along the horses. "Every one of these is named, a memory of a horse that the Pabinkúe lost. So beautiful. It reminds me of my Book of Ash."

Her fingertips slid to one of the small spots that was unmarked. The brown skin had a few scars from healing, scratches from a fight that Mikáryo couldn't remember anymore. "This one is still for Great Pabinkue Datobàpo?"

"Yes."

Ridáchi slid her fingers up to another empty spot, this one near joint of her left wrist. “Who is this for? Your ride after Bào?”

“Yes.”

Ridáchi started to chuckle but then a shudder coursed through her body. It similar to the same shiver that raced along everyone’s body when the moon rose above the horizon, the brief moment when magic became suddenly possible again.

“Dáchi?”

“Someone just died.”

Mikáryo closed her eyes for a moment.

Ridáchi crawled to her knees, her breasts swaying with her movements. “I’m sorry, the desert is a cruel mistress and demands me.”

“I know. We all have our duties, right?”

Ridáchi leaned over to kiss Mikáryo’s nipple again. “I like these.”

Then she sat up and blindly reached behind her. Somehow, a pile of plain white clothes had been stacked near the entrance of the tent. Mikáryo never heard anyone approaching; neither did her horse.

“Oh, I’ve been meaning to tell you. I met one of the most curious of *kojinōmi* last month. A new one, maybe only a few years since he had the call.”

Mikáryo shrugged. “That happens every month or so anyways, right? There is always a need for someone to tend to the dead.”

“Yes, but this man came from a sun clan, a speedster.”

Mikáryo’s heart skipped a beat. Her lungs refused to inhale for a moment and her throat tightened.

Ridáchi continued, “It was one of the nastier battles I’ve seen: blood and shit everywhere, bodies ripped apart, even children dead. Some hot-headed clan took offense and in-

vaded a village for slaughter. The other responded, allies were brought in. Warriors died, innocent died. Three kojinōmi were called, he was the last.”

She pulled on her clothes while she talked, her voice growing quieter with every piece of white she pulled on. Then she came up to the last piece, a plain rope belt. “Usually when a bright kojinōmi shows up, they piss on our corpses while respecting their own. I don’t shit on theirs but... I don’t really take an effort. So a bright and I were pulling apart bodies for our pyres when this man comes rushing it really fast, faster than anyone could run, and starts to help.”

A tear rolled down Mikáryo’s cheek. She was talking about Rutejìmo, it had to be him.

“He’s a sun from the bright flames so I figured there would be pissing. None of us really fight when being a kojinōmi, but you’d be amazed how much of an ass we can be while silent. But, to my surprise, he didn’t walk past me but started to help. He didn’t care who it was, only that it got to the right pyre. He even knew the prayers of Chobìre when he helped me. I saw his lips, he knew the words.”

She chuckled to herself, her shoulders shaking. “I have never seen one who truly gave himself to the desert. He just hauled bodies to the right places. Said the right things. Moon and sun, night and day.”

Ridáchi ran her fingers along the rope. A breeze rippled through the opening of the tent, tugging on the edges of her plain clothing. She shook her head as if to clear it. Then she began to pull the belt on. As she did, she lifted herself up and turned to Mikáryo.

“So I started to learn the sun prayers and...” Ridáchi’s eyes widened. “Are you crying?”

Mikáryo nodded fiercely as she sobbed with joy. She didn't care if the tears were mixing in with the sweat or soaking her chest.

Ridáchi froze, her mouth open. "You know this koji-nōmi?"

"I-I do. He is the Great Shimusogo Rutejìmo, I'm sure of it."

Her lover's mouth opened more. "I have never heard you call anyone great in—"

The wind rattled the tent hard. The force almost picked up the corner.

Ridáchi jumped and looked out with a guilty look. She finished putting her belt on but stopped at the last cinch. Mikáryo knew that as soon as the last piece went on, she would stop talking until the dead were sent on their way. "I have to go. After this, please?"

Mikáryo couldn't speak without sobbing. She managed to make it until Ridáchi left before she broke down in tears.

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Chapter 5

Blood and Ink

No clan of the sun and light would ever ruin their bodies with the foulness of ink.

—Kosobyō Nikàfu

In the shadows of Wamifuko City, Mikáryo worked her way around the tents that had sprung up over the years. Situated along the south side of the city, the area consisted mostly of moon clans with only a scattered bright color to indicate a daring member from the sun.

Thankful that the tents in her current location were more permanent, she knew where to walk without offending anyone.

Her destination was a set of three tents: two small ones and one large. A small fire burned brightly in the center. There were three people around the fire, two women and a young man in his late twenties.

She stepped over the braided rope that marked the area around the tents.

The man looked up and then smiled brightly. He had a long beard and a bald head. Every inch of his body, from his eyelids to his ears to his toes, had dark tattoos covering

him. They were fantastic scenes of monsters, magic, horse, and wars.

He beat his chest twice and then opened up his arms. “My favorite horse lady, the Great—” He winked at her glare. “Káryo.”

She hugged him tightly. “I missed you, Chìko.”

Kichìko broke the embrace with a look of horror. “Oh, no, Datobàpo? You lost him? Oh, poor—”

Mikáryo shook her head. “No, I still have my Bàpo. He’s going to ride with me until the end of my days. He’s a good old man now.”

“Then another?” Kichìko’s eyes shimmered. “You Pabin-kúe have much tragedy in your lives. You should come closer, move near the Wamifūko instead of being so far south.”

“No, this is a happy memory. I never want to forget it. Right here.” She tapped the plain spot near her left wrist, the one that she had spent years reserving for her next horse.

He cocked his head, but said nothing for a moment. “Come on, let’s cover you in ink and blood.”

Mikáryo followed after him into the larger tent. Most of the space had been filled with a padded cushion ideal for lying on for hours at a time. There were other pillows for propping and adjusting position. Along one side, Kichìko had shelves of bottles filled with colors of all types. The largest were black, the primary base for inking.

“Come, sit, get comfortable. Take off anything you want.” He winked. “I always love to see you naked.”

Comfortable with Kichìko’s attention, Mikáryo stripped. She didn’t need to, but he had seen every inch of her body since he had been ten. She was his first tattoo, a horse that wasn’t quite perfect on her right shin. It ended up being ideal for the memory though, since the foal had died due to a twisted body in his mother’s womb.

“A work of art.”

She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled. “My body or your tattoos?”

“Both, as always. Come, get into position and tell me about this horse. Is it a big northern beast or a smaller southern one?” While he talked, Kichiko pulled out various needles and sticks.

“A man.”

A pair of sticks slipped from his fingers. “A human man?”

“Yes, Chiko. Is that a problem?” She had been thinking about the tattoo for a few months. It was different than anything else on her skin but one she needed.

“I wasn’t aware Káryo was capable of respecting a human as much as one of her horses. I’m just surprised. Here, I need clean sticks for this.” He glanced around and picked up fresh supplies before bringing them over to her.

“This human man, does he have a name?”

“Rutejimo.”

Kichiko’s eyes flickered up but then down again to his hands. He arranged his tools carefully. “Black?”

She realized she had tensed all of her muscles. She took a deep breath and leaned back, resting her back against a pile of pillows before setting her wrist on a block of wood.

Kichiko wiped the area and picked up his tattooing stick. She wasn’t sure how it worked but she knew it had countless tiny needles at the tip that would insert the ink underneath her skin.

He didn’t bother with an outline or sketch out the pattern. He always seemed to know what she wanted, it was part of his clan’s powers. He started quickly, tapping the stick into her skin with precise strokes.

Mikáryo winced at the discomfort but then sank into it. The pain helped remind her of the good memories she had of Rutejimo. A few tears gathered when she recalled the

feeling the night she learned he had survived to become a kojìnōmi.

“Not many have the name Rutejìmo in these parts. It’s from the northwestern area of the desert, far from here.”

Mikáryo glanced at him.

“In fact, the only one with that name that I remember was from a big hunt about four years or so ago. He disappeared here in the city and no one could find him, though I heard that he was in a certain horse rider’s bed for two days.”

“And you are a gossiping whore, Chìko,” she said playfully.

He winked at her. “Of course.”

The smile faded. “Do you plan on seeing him again?”

“No,” she sighed. “Our ride together has long since passed. He went one way, I went another. We will never meet again.”

“Like the other memories on your skin, cherished and never forgotten. That’s for the best, that way his present will not mar your thoughts of his past.”

“Yes.”

Kichìko worked quietly, moving his body along her body as with his effort to shape a man on her skin. She didn’t dare look in fear that she bump his hand. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what his powers insisted he tattoo into her skin.

He worked for almost an hour before she realized he had said something important. “You’ve seen him lately?”

“Of course, more than once. A repeat customer, actually.”

“Where? What?”

Kichìko gave her a hard look. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Please?”

“He is now one of my customers. I’ve marked him some months ago. The strangest thing, for a day clan, he wanted only black. That seems like a very moon thing to do, don’t you think?”

“Of what?” A small part of her hoped it would be a horse, a symbol that would represent her.

“A bird. A small running bird of their clan. Nothing more.”

Mikáryo slumped.

“No, no, don’t move. I want to get your kojinoimi drawn just right.”

She started to relax but then her eyes snapped open. She opened her mouth to say something but he used his other hand to press a finger against her lip.

“I am a gossiping whore, right? I know who your Rutejimo is. He and his wife are friends of everyone here.”

Mikáryo sniffed and used her free hand to wipe the tear. “Is he good?”

“Very much so. Everyone respects him, day and night. He still gets beaten up a lot but his presence has stopped more than a few fights just by showing up. No one wants to upset the man who speaks for the desert and treats the sun and moon as equals.”

He switched tattooing sticks. “Ever since, I’ve gotten more customers from both sides. More color though, not everyone with a sun up their ass is into pitch black.”

She grinned.

Kichiko leaned over to continue to work. “He is a good one to never forget. He will need it because no one speaks for the kojinoimi when they die.”

D. Moonfire

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

D. Moonfire

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