

Raging Alone

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D. Moonfire

Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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Chapter 1

Sulking

There is no more graceless being than a teenage boy coming into his age.

—Nagufiga Makinàfu, *Sexuality Among the Sands*

There were a few descriptions for those willing to brave the midday sun in the Shimusogo Valley but most of them were uncomplimentary and rude. Smarter adults escaped the hot winds blowing along the valley by retreating into the home caves carved into the sides of the mountains, the deep chambers that made up bedrooms were the perfect time to pass away the time in private. The children and younger teens spent the noon hours in the shadow of the entrance to the valley or in the lookout point above.

Normally, Desòchu would pass the hours playing card games and chatting with the teenagers closer to his age. There were four of them in the small clan. They claimed one of the smaller, unoccupied caves near the valley entrance as their stomping ground. The adults allowed it, as long as the teenagers didn't get into trouble, no one got pregnant, and they did their chores when required.

He wasn't in the mood to be around anyone. Heading home wasn't an option either since his mother was stuck in bed because of complications with her pregnancy.

She had been pregnant at least four times that he could remember. Each time she raised her hopes on a flag: talking about children names, asking him how he would take care of his new siblings, and pestering Desòchu's father with the same repeated questions.

He scowled to himself. All of her pregnancies had also ended the same way, with her stuck in bed until one night his grandmother took him away without warning. When he returned home, she was no longer pregnant, happy, or talking. Each loss drew more out of his mother, hollowing her out even as she talked about "next time."

With a sigh, he grabbed a rubber ball from his pocket and stretched back over one of the communal tables that the clan used for eating. He flicked the ball from one side to the other.

A hot wind blew past him, sucking the moisture from his lips and nose. If it wasn't for the canvas tarp stretched over the table, he would be baking in the oppressive heat of the noon sun.

He rolled ball back, catching it with his fingertips.

A rushing noise caught the edge of his hearing. He felt the air rising up and then a brief tickle of currents going in the opposite direction from the previous winds. Reflexively, he closed his eyes before the wind rose into a blast that shoved his entire body.

When the air cooled and the wind stopped tugging him toward the edge of the bench, he opened his eyes. When he saw his ball rolling toward the edge, he lurched forward to grab it.

"Why aren't you inside?" asked Kiramíro.

His heart beat faster at the sound of her voice.

Kiramíro had arrived only a few months ago, a seventeen year old stranger with a full gamut of powers on par with the rest of the other clan warriors. Where most of the couriers could run thirty or forty miles an hour with bare feet, she and the other warriors were able to go ten times that speed not to mention throw rocks with brutal force or somehow rapidly accelerated in a blink.

He found her curiously attractive. He knew everyone else in the clan for his entire life. Fourteen years of seeing the same muscular legs, slender bodies, and small breasts. Kiríshi's more pronounced curves drew his attention, sometimes to the ire of other adults. He wasn't the only one though, many other males would follow her with their eyes or make comments behind her back.

Moving slowly in hopes of hiding his interest, he turned his head until his cheek pressed against the hot wood. He dragged his eye along her body, taking in the sight of her muscular thighs and abdomen before focusing on her breasts.

Looking at her brought a strange sensation to his groin. He squirmed uncomfortably but didn't take his eyes away from her dark cleavage.

Kiramíro cleared her throat.

Desòchu blushed and tried to draw his gaze up to her eyes but his eyes remained focused on her chest. Her skin was the color of niráchu nuts, darker than his own coloring but with lighter highlights in the sun. Part of him wondered if he would ever see more of her.

Her body ignited into flames. The heat beat against his face as the bright yellow fire traced along her curves. It didn't burn her clothes or skin but caused the fabric to ripple from the rising heat. She leaned forward and cleared her throat.

Fear prickled his skin and he yanked his gaze away from her breasts and up to her glare.

Kiramíro's lips pressed into a tight line.

He blushed hotly. He knew he should haven't been staring but it was hard not to. "S-Sorry."

She grunted but the glare didn't fade. She crossed her arms over her chest and she worked her jaw.

Humiliated, he looked down at the table.

"Why aren't you up with your mama? It's hot out and she could use the company."

Still blushing, he rolled the ball to his other hand but missed. He started to grab for it before it fell off the table but Kiramíro's presence halted him and the toy bounced across the hard-packed ground toward the cooking shed.

Kiramíro leaned over the table and the heat beat against him. She planted her palms against the wood. "Your mama hasn't left your cave since I showed up. Your papa keeps going out on jobs and won't be back for a few more days. There is no one else at home. Go visit her. She's scared, she's tired, and she's lonely."

"S-Scared? Why—?"

Kiramíro gestured angrily to the side of the valley where "What do you think is happening in there? Do you think she wants to spend every day and night unable to move from her bed? Do you think it is fun to have to use a pot to shit in? Do you think she's comfortable with a child, your brother or sister, in her belly?"

The flames around her body flared with her raised voice. The white and yellow reaching almost to the canvas above them.

Desòchu inched further away. "Look, I'll go after—"

She smacked the table and the surface ignited into flames. "Boy! Get your ass home or I will break your moon-damned legs and make you crawl!"

With a gasp, Desòchu scrambled from the bench. His leg caught on the bench and he tripped. By the time he could stand up again, Kiramíro was gone in drifting clouds of dust.

He considered ignoring her but he couldn't be sure she wouldn't notice. His punishment would be far worse than if he just obeyed and visited his mother.

Scowling, he shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and started to shuffle his way back home.

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Chapter 2

Comfort

It is a verifiable fact that the desert barbarians have no love or even compassion for their offspring.

—Chasen dea Fabrin, *Tears of the Abandoned Desert*

Desòchu scuffed his feet as he trudged along the path. The stone underneath his bare feet was free of rocks and sharp edges; countless years of Shimusògo racing back and forth had blown clear even the smallest mote of dust from the smooth surface.

He sighed as he came up to one of the junctions along the path. It had a small bench looking out into the mile-long valley. A scorched pole had been impaled into the stone next to it.

In a few hours, children and teenagers would run around to hang lanterns on the pole's hooks to light up the paths. It was part of the nightly tradition in the valley. It was also tedious and annoying but it was better than being forced to carry garbage out after dinner.

He started to walk past the bench but noticed a bit of fabric fluttering around from the hook. When he noticed it looked like one of the orange straps Hyonèku wore around

his thighs, he smirked. Gemènyo must have been pulling pranks again. Both of them were older than Desòchu but they acted much younger; Gemènyo had less of an excuse, he had already gone through his rite of passage and was considered an adult.

Shaking his head, he headed up to the upper levels and his home. The caves had been carved out of the sides of the valley years ago. The unoccupied ones were empty holes into the side of the valley. His home and the other populated ones had woven blankets covering the entrance; the fabric kept out the heat and wind.

He stopped in front of his own. It was a bright yellow blanket with four lines of dark red embroidery. The first was the clan name, Shimusògo. The other were his mother, father, and himself: Chyojímó, Hikòru, and his.

He stopped and pulled the blanket to the side. There would be a fifth name soon, within the week if nothing went wrong.

Desòchu hesitated. He had his doubts if there was going to be his sibling's name on the blanket. The last four had ended abruptly, why would this one be any different?

Desòchu didn't know if he could take seeing his mother in pain again. It wasn't the physical discomfort of being pregnant that bothered him but the haunted look in her eyes after she lost her child.

He sighed and stepped back, letting the blanket slip from his hand to cover the entrance once again. He shook his head.

“No, I can't do it.”

He took only a few steps before stopping. He had to remain. Kiramíro was right about him avoiding home. She was also right about his mother needing him.

A tear ran down his cheek. He wiped it away while he struggled to mask the emotions that were leaking down his

cheeks. It took a few deep breaths before he could enter without breaking down.

Inside, the home cave opened up into a relatively large chamber with low couches forming a circle. A table made from southern wood stood in the center; that was where they ate meals when they weren't down in the communal areas. On the far wall, one of the clan had painted a large mural of a feathered bird racing across the desert. It was a shimusogo dépa, the racing bird that the clan had been named after. He had never seen one but most of the adults talked about chasing them when they were running at high speeds.

He wiped his hands on his trousers and headed to his room. It was a much smaller quarter, maybe five or six feet across and an equal distance deep, but it had his bed and a pair of dressers in the same style as the table.

“Sòchu?”

He froze at his mother's voice. She sounded broken and exhausted. Her thin voice didn't even fill the room like it used to.

Sadness threatened to choke him again. “J-Just give me a second, Mama!” He fled to his room to wipe down and change into something cooler, a loose fitting red tunic. By the time he managed to return to the main room, he was once again in control of his emotions.

His mother smiled brightly as he entered her room. She was pale, her normally dark skin almost tan. Deep shadows hung underneath her eyes and her skin looked like it was sagging except for the large mound centered on her belly. Her hair was a mess, the tight curls reaching out in all directions but mostly leaning to the right.

“Sòchu!” Her smile seemed to make her glow.

“Hi, Mama.”

Her belly jerked and she pressed a hand to it.

Desòchu hesitated.

She patted the bedding next to her. “Come on, up on the bed. Please? I miss you.”

A flush on his cheeks, he crawled next to her. It took a moment for him to roll over as she slipped her arm underneath him.

As soon as he settled down, she leaned over and kissed the top of his head.

“Mama... I’m not a little boy.” He batted at her but didn’t have any force behind it.

“Hush, you will always be my baby,” she said with a smile. She kissed him again before slumping back against the wall.

“Are you okay?”

“Just a little tired, Sòchu. Everything seems to tire me out.”

He rubbed the side of his finger with his thumb for a moment. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No, please stay.” His mother squeezed him weakly and then groaned. Grunting, she turned slightly up on one hip and pointed to the small of her back. “C-Can you put a pillow there?”

Desòchu’s hands shook as he did. Then he mutely crawled around her to settle on her other side. It was a little cramped with her swollen belly but he managed to prop himself on the edge.

Chyojimo smiled broadly at him as she took his hand. “Thank you, my little river rock.”

He blushed.

She said nothing, just stroking his face. Her smile remained but it looked haunted to him.

“Are you going to be okay, Mama?”

“Of course. The last days are always the hardest.” He could see her eyes shimmering in the glow light hanging

from the ceiling. She moved her hand down to his and squeezed. “It’s going to be okay this time, I promise. I promise,” she repeated.

He didn’t know what to say or do. Looking into her eyes, he rested his head against her palm and just smiled back.

They held each other for while. Her eyes moved back and forth as if she was trying to take him all in. He held himself still, balanced on the edge of the bed as he felt little kicks from her belly and the beat of his heart in his ears.

She broke the silence. “Are you looking forward to having a little sister or brother?”

“Y-Yes,” he said, his throat dry.

“Do you think it’s a boy or a girl?”

“A... a girl.”

“Do you know what we’re going to call her then? Piróma.”

“Piróma? Why?”

Chyojìmo leaned back slightly, her back arching as she wiggled to get comfortable. “The first time your papa and I were on a job together, we ended up making a delivery to the Piróma, a mountain clan. They grew these little juicy fruits called grapes. They would harvest and crush them before putting the juices into bottles to ferment into something called wine.”

Desòchu frowned, trying to picture it but failing.

“It was pretty strong, like bichíru, but sweeter. I really liked it but the bottles couldn’t survive the trip back. So all we had left was our memories.”

She smiled and stroked Desòchu’s cheek with her thumb. “That was the first time I realized I loved your papa and I don’t want to ever forget it.”

“What if you have a boy?” Desòchu asked.

“Oh, Rutejìmo.” She smiled sweetly.

“What does that mean, Mama?”

“The Tajìmo River ran in step with the Kesōchu River, the one you were named after. They came together just south of the Pirōma clan. Both of them watered the lands that made up the grape fields of the winery.”

She sighed happily and closed her eyes. “It was nice, I miss that region so much. Your papa and I were gone for almost a year for that job, it was one of the best years of my life.”

A little idea rose up. He wanted to do something, anything. “D-Do you think we can all go there? Just the... four of us? Maybe get a job that takes us to that part of the desert?”

The haunted look came back. “I’m sorry, we can’t.”

“Why?”

“It’s all gone...” She cleared her throat. “We can’t go back. Not anymore. Those places are in my head are nowhere else now. But when I look at you, I’m reminded of all those memories.” She smiled, leaned forward, and kissed the top of his head. “My sweet little river, I will always love you until the end of my days.”

Chapter 3

The Call

Pregnancy far from cities is fraught with danger. A single complication can quickly become fatal.

—Graston Wilnur, *The Case for the Establishment of Mandatory Hospitals*

The sun had dipped below the horizon and the eighty-eight stars were out like gems scattered across black fabric. The cool wind buffeted Desòchu as he headed home with his favorite deck of cards in his pocket and his rear sore from playing games almost the entire day.

When he reached the heavy blanket at the entrance, he noticed light shining along the edge and bottom. He hesitated with a spark of fear; he was also an hour late coming home.

Desòchu took a deep breath. He pulled back the curtain and stepped inside. When he saw two people sitting on the couches of the main room, he froze.

Tejíko, his grandmother, looked up from her steaming cup. “Busy day?” she asked in a tone that would freeze the desert. She had a large mug of steaming liquid in her hand. She was sprawled out on one of the shorter couches, her

feet propped up on the far end with her long braid measuring out her length from nape to her knees. At the end of her braid was a thick, iron ring that she played with using her toe.

“Mother,” started Desòchu’s father, Hikòru. He was wearing a familiar outfit, a simple shirt and pants both of orange. It was his favorite color.

She tilted her head to the side, her braid pulling along her shoulder. “My apologies, I’m sure you and your son have come to an agreement about staying out well past sundown. It’s not like we require the other children to be home by now.” Her voice grew even more tense.

His father’s jaw tightened for a moment. “I’ll deal with it. You aren’t the clan leader, Great Shimusogo Tejíko. You don’t have to demand obedience. Not yet unless you are planning on poisoning Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso.” He used her formal name to show he was being polite, though it was obvious he was talking through grinding teeth.

“Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso has decades before she takes her final run.”

Desòchu cleared his throat. “I’m just... going to my room.”

Tejíko looked at him sharply, her bright green eyes almost piercing him. She gestured with her chin toward Chyojímó’s room. When he didn’t immediately move, she repeated the gesture.

Ducking his head, Desòchu reversed direction and headed for his mother. His bare feet scuffed on the stone ground as he slowed down at the entrance of her room. It was dark which meant his mother was sleeping but Tejíko’s orders, though silent, pushed him forward. “Mama...?” he asked quietly.

There was no answer.

He stepped further in but kept his hand resting on the entrance. “Mama, are you sleeping?”

When she didn’t answer, he let out a sigh of relief. He could at least tell his grandmother he tried. Even Tejíko wouldn’t blame him for letting his mother sleep so close to giving birth.

Turning around, he started to leave when he caught a strange scent. He stopped as a frown ghosted across his face. It smelled sharp but sweet, a metallic scent that reminded him of when they butchered sheep.

He almost kept walking out of the room but something pulled him back. It was the smell, it was wrong. He turned on his heels and padded deeper into the room. The thick calluses of his feet made a faint scuffing noise.

However, when he stepped into something wet and sticky, he stopped. With a sharp inhale, he fumbled for the glow light that would be on his mother’s side table. His hands patted along the wood but he didn’t find a light.

“M-Mama?” he whispered. He patted the side of the bed, thumping on the blankets.

His fingers hit something wet and warm.

With a gasp, he yanked his hand back. His pulse beat loudly in his ears and he felt dizzy. Shaking violently, he clutched his hand to his chest as he stared into the dark. He didn’t know what to say, what to do.

Desòchu tried to swallow but his throat didn’t seem to work. Shaking, he reached out but pulled back before he touched. “Ma... ma...” The word choked in his throat. Shaking his head, he stepped back as tears burned in his eyes.

Gasping for breath, Desòchu tried to move away but his feet wouldn’t move. He sobbed with the effort. He had to do something, anything. He needed to call out for his grandmother but the words refused to come.

It felt like forever when Tejíko's voice cut through his fear. "Boy? Why are you still in there and not talking? Why isn't a light on? Why are you standing in the dark?"

"G... Grand..." He choked on the words.

"Boy?" She was getting closer. He could hear the heavy ring in her hair thumping against the side table.

"Ma... mama. There's something wrong with mama."

"Some... Chyojímó!?" Tejíko's voice grew sharp as she launched herself from the couch. The ring in her hair rang out against a table and then the wall. "What's wrong!? Get the light on!"

He saw her briefly silhouetted in the light of the room entrance but then she plunged into the darkness.

Desòchu tried to track her movement but when they collided with each other, the impact threw him into the dresser. The sharp corner dug into his back and he cried out in pain.

"Out of the way... oh, my blessed sun, no! Kòru!"

From the main room, Hikòru started to get up. "What is —?"

"Get help! Jímo is bleeding!"

All the air in Desòchu's lungs rushed out in a sob. "Ma-Mama!?"

"Kòru! Move your ass!" There was crashing as Tejíko fumbled with the side table in the dark. She swore violently as her hand slapped around the top. "Damn it, where are the lights!?"

"I'm... I'm..." stammered his father. Desòchu heard the side table crash to the floor.

"Damn it. Help me, this is your wife!"

"Give me a second, old goat! I'm getting there."

"Just get a light!"

"Make up your—!"

Tejíko swore violently. "Useless toe of a man!"

She took a deep breath then screamed at the top of her lungs. It was a wordless cry, one that pierced Desòchu's ears and drowned out everything with the inhuman sound that resembled some sort of tortured bird's scream instead of something from a human's throat.

The terrible sound rose in pitch, turning from a scream into a high-pitched screech. The sound pierced his ears. He clapped his hands over them but the terrible noise somehow managed to seep through his fingertips.

Tejíko staggered back, her body lighting up in the dim light coming through the entrance from the main room. The sound finally faded from her throat as she stopped. Slowly, she bent over as if it pain before dropping to her knees.

Light flashed into the room. For the briefest moment, he thought he saw a small dépa disappear into the darkness. A golden glow disappeared with it, but the brief light was enough to orient himself to his mother's bed.

A blast of air slammed into him, kicking up blankets, papers, and everything else as two brilliant fires appeared. Heat slammed into him, drawing out the moisture from the air and shoving him back with the force of the searing wind that howled in the confines of the room.

Used to the darkness, he was blinded by the arrival of the clan's warriors. He could feel as they moved further into the room, barking orders.

"Kiramíro, get to Chyojímó," said one of the warriors. It was the deep voice of Somiryòki, the eldest. Desòchu caught the edges of his movement as he knelt next to Tejíko. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Get her!" snapped Desòchu's grandmother. Even with the exhausted sound in her voice, she had a commanding, icy tone that cut through all the fear.

Heat flashed across Desòchu's face. He found that he could focus better and looked to see the two warriors on each side of his mother's bed. The flames surrounding their bodies were scorching the blankets as they hurried to inspect his mother.

"How bad?" asked Somiryòki.

"Bad," Kiramíro's voice was tense and low. "There is a lot of blood. We need Nàga from the Ryayusúki here and fast."

Tejiko pulled herself up. Her entire body was shaking as she clutched the side of the bed. "Get Desòchu out of here."

Desòchu looked up at her and shook his head. "No, I can —"

"Out!"

Kiramíro spun on her heels and splattered blood everywhere. She didn't seem to even notice as she stepped away from the bed and toward Desòchu. He had never seen such an expression on her face before.

When she reached down for him, he flinched.

She scowled. "I don't have time for this." Pulling back her hand, she slapped him hard across the face. The force of the blow throwing him into the ground as stars exploded across his vision.

Kiramíro grabbed his shoulder. Her burning fingers dug into the joint painfully. Then she yanked him from the ground in a flash of heat and wind.

His legs smacked against the opening of his mother's room.

When he blinked, he was standing in the middle of the main room next to his father.

The warrior dropped him.

He tried to catch himself but failed. His arms flailed before he stumbled into his father's side.

Hikòru growled and shoved back hard, propelling Desòchu into a wall. "Out of my way, Boy!"

Desòchu caught the rock with his shoulder. The smoothed curve smacked painfully against his palm. His arm started to collapse from the impact but he managed to avoid smashing his face into it. Stunned, he pushed himself away as the world spun around him violently.

His father wasn't looking at him. With his jaw set, he was trying to step around Kiramíro to get to his room. "Get. Out. Of. The. Way!"

Kiramíro held up her hand, the flames flickering along the edges. "Stay. We are dealing with it."

Hikòru turned on her and shoved her with both of his hands.

The warrior didn't even budge but the flames grew brighter.

"Keep it to yourself, Fijimòsu."

Desòchu wondered if Kiramíro's other clan was Fijimòsu, but he wasn't familiar with the name. He thought he knew all the clans in the surrounding areas.

His father continued, "I'll have my skull filled with shit if I'm going to stay out here like some castrated sheep. Now get out of my way and—"

There was a blast of heat and air as Somiryòki rushed out of the room. The speed of his passing left a burning afterimage of a bird.

Both Hikòru and Desòchu turned their heads to protect their face from the wind. Kiramíro didn't flinch as the flames flared to protect her. Around them, small items were ripped from shelves and smashed into walls. The sound of breaking glass and ceramic filled the air.

Hikòru snarled and shoved forward.

Kiramíro moved to block him. "Stay here. Your wife is—"

"I'm not going to lose her!" At his side, his hand balled into a fist.

"Somiryòki is going to get—"

“Move, Fijimòsu!” He swung his fist.

There was a flash of light and Hikòru flew back. His body slammed against the cave wall and he slumped to the ground. Strands of his hair clung to the wall and his ring fell to the ground. It rolled across the floor before clattering against another wall.

Kiramíro pulled back her flaming fist. “Stay down!”

Hikòru rolled over, a glare painted on his face. He wiped blood from his nose.

Stumbling over, Desòchu ran over to his father. “Papa!”

Hikòru surged to his feet. Desòchu saw his father’s lip pulled back to expose the white flash of his teeth.

He didn’t see the punch coming.

His father’s fist caught the side of his head. He opened his mouth as his entire world exploded into white light. A second explosion blast across his senses as he crunched against the stone wall.

Stunned, he couldn’t do anything but slide down the wall.

“Stay down, Hikòru,” said Kiramíro. “If you want your wife to live, you need to stay out of our way.”

The air exploded as she disappeared, a flash of light streaking out of the entrance of the cave. The heavy blanket was ripped off by her passing, torn from its moorings. It fluttered away in the darkness as the burning path traced her route out of sight.

Hikòru stumbled forward, intent on heading to his bedroom.

Tejíko came out to block him. She looked older than usual, as if seeing her daughter bleeding had drained her of all life. “Not now, Kòru.”

She sniffed, there were tears in her eyes.

Hikòru didn’t seem to notice. “Mother, out of—”

“What happened?” asked Yutsupazéso as the clan leader came shuffling into the room. Her breath came in and out with rattling wheezes. She wore her sleeping gown, the ancient material had some rips that Desòchu hadn’t seen before.

Behind her, there were others milling around outside of the cave entrance with a few following her inside.

Tejíko turned to the clan leader. “Jímo is in trouble.”

“Somiryòki and Kiramíro?”

“Getting help.” Tejíko looked at her son and then back to Yutsupazéso.

“Get out, Hikòru,” commanded Yutsupazéso.

“Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso, that’s my wife.” Hikòru turned to her. “Please, I need to be in there.”

Instead of answering, Yutsupazéso turned and headed over to Desòchu “How are you, Boy?”

Desòchu groaned and rubbed his jaw as he pushed himself up. “I’m good.”

“Go outside.”

“But—”

Yutsupazéso leaned forward. “You are in the way. Either you go on a walk or I send you to clean out the latrines.”

Desòchu paled. “Yes, Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso.” He bowed briefly and hurried out toward the exit.

The old woman turned and glared at Hikòru. “Latrines or walk?”

“I’m not a moon-damned calf that needs—”

“Go clean out the latrines,” interrupted Yutsupazéso.

Hikòru’s mouth opened.

Yutsupazéso pointed a finger at him.

Desòchu’s father closed his mouth. His shoulders slumped.

“Yes, Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso.”

She turned back to Desòchu. “Go on, Boy. You don’t need to see this.”

“Is... is mama going to lose...?” The words caught in his throat.

She shook her head but there was something in her eyes that told him she was lying. “No, not this time. Now, go wake up Gemènyo and play cards with him for a couple hours. I’ll send for you when your mother is safe.”

He nodded and then followed his father out of the cave.

Chapter 4

Baby Brother

The green eyes of the barbarian reveal their cruel nature, their unnatural lusts, and the darkness in their spirit. They cannot be allowed to step off the sands and into our holy lands.

—Detoil da Robin, *Threats from the Most Forbidden Lands Known*

Desòchu carried a breakfast tray carefully between his hands as he backed into his cave. The new blanket dragged along his shoulder before it slumped to the side. It was heavier than the old one. It was also a different design and he wasn't used to seeing five names on it.

The sounds of high-pitched crying stopped him. Ever since Rutejimo was born, the newborn had been crying every moment he was awake. The little baby was in his mother's room, still bawling at the top of his lungs.

Desòchu cringed but kept backing further into the room. As soon as he was clear of the entrance, he turned and padded into the main room. He held his breath for a second but then call out, "I'm back, Mama. Give me a second and I'll bring your breakfast in."

"No, hold on," Chyojimo gasped. "Please, put it on the main table. I need to get out of here."

He stopped in surprise. “O-Out here?”

“Yeah, just let me figure out how... to... carry... Jìmo.” She chuckled with amusement. “There!”

Somehow none of the adults realized that both his mother and his new brother had nearly the same short name. Only the gender accent was different. He rolled his eyes. Adults were idiots. He set the platter down on the center table.

His mother groaned as she staggered into the room. She stopped against the frame between the bedroom and the main room. She was cradling Rutejìmo with her other arm, the little baby nuzzling on her bared nipple. “Good morning, Little River.”

Desòchu looked away uncomfortably then busied himself pulling the bowls of thick soup and steaming eggs in front of his mother’s and his customary spots.

Rutejìmo let out a cry, shrill and desperate.

His mother cooed softly until the baby’s fussing faded into wet sucking noises. After a moment, she sat down on the couch and pulled a few pillows closer so she could rest the arm holding the baby in them.

Desòchu glanced at his brother. The brown body was lighter than his mother’s skin tone. He looked content as his eyes opened and closed in time with his nursing.

“Don’t worry, he won’t bite.”

Desòchu said hesitantly, “He doesn’t have teeth, Mama, but he cries a lot.”

“Babies do that. It just means he scared and need to be held.”

“Papa doesn’t like it.”

“Hikòru...” She sighed before she continued. “Your papa has beetles in his shoes. He’s... happy that we finally have little Jìmo but it takes a bit to get rid of those bites.”

Desòchu took his own bowl of eggs and a bit of baked bread. It was crispy with a taste of the fresh batch of cactus oil he had helped harvest last week.

She gestured with her other hand toward her bowl.

He gave it to her. “Will he ever stop crying when you put him down?”

His mother smiled at him, her dark green eyes almost black for a moment. “You did, Little River. All babies cry. They like to be held.”

She hesitated. “Do you want to hold him?”

Desòchu froze. “W-What?”

“Your brother. Come on, take a few more bites and then hold him while I eat.”

Sweat prickled on his brow. “What if I drop him?”

“You won’t. I trust you.”

Desòchu opened his mouth to say something but then closed it. He grunted with agreement. Leaning forward, he shoved in a few mouthfuls of eggs before sitting back.

Chyojìmo got up and helped him arrange a pillow under his elbow before setting his brother into his lap and the cradle of his arm.

“There you go,” she whispered. “Just keep your hand under his head and hold him along your arm. Babies are tough but not too strong. His neck is the weakest.”

When she pulled back, she trailed her fingers along his cheek with the sweet smile he always loved to see. “My River.”

He smiled back. Except for the baby in his lap, it felt like life before she got pregnant. It brought a smile to his lips and he reached down to caress his brother’s face.

Rutejìmo reached up and clamped his tiny hand around his finger. It was a surprisingly strong grip. The baby opened his eyes.

Desòchu did a double take. “Why does he have blue eyes?”

“Almost everyone has blue eyes.”

“No, everyone has green,” he said.

His mother grinned and tapped him on the nose before she picked up her own bowl. “No, everyone you know has green eyes. But you only know the valley and a few traveling merchants. We live far away from cities and villages. I’ve met thousands across the desert, clear up to the borders of sand and green.”

“They don’t have green eyes?”

“Most of the desert folks do, but the pale barbarians to the north have brown eyes. I heard there were others with blue eyes too.”

“You’ve seen them? Other people?”

She leaned over and grinned. “It’s hard to believe, but not everyone is brown like us.”

“Why? Why wouldn’t they be?”

A shrug. “I don’t know. All I know is that Tachìra watches us from above and his bright gaze darkens our skin. Maybe the others don’t have a sun spirit like ours?”

Desòchu nodded without really understanding. He knew who Tachìra was: the sun spirit, the source of all magic in desert, and somehow the boss of Shimusògo, the clan’s spirit. However, he couldn’t wrap his thoughts around who Tachìra other than just a name for the sun.

His mother smiled at him and leaned back on the couch to eat. She ate slowly. As she did, Desòchu saw flickers of pain across her face. It made her look older than every but the age faded away when she smiled at him.

Desòchu alternated talking about little things with her and playing with his brother. The baby kept squirming around, twisting one way and the other as he looked around the room with wide, dark eyes.

“Thank you, Sòchu.”

He looked up. “For what?”

“Being a good brother.”

He blushed and ducked his head. “Thank you, Mama.”

Before he knew it, Desòchu found himself yawning. He leaned against the back of the couch as he held a now-sleeping Rutejìmo to his chest.

His mother reached over and rested her hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you take little Jìmo into my room and take a nap yourself. You can sleep but just keep an ear out for him.”

“What are you going to do, Mama?”

“I think,” she said as she stood up. “I think I could use a little walk. I feel much better and I miss the sun. It’s been months since I was able to pray to Tachìra while feeling his warmth.”

“O-Okay.” Desòchu struggled to get up but with his mother’s help, he managed to head into his parent’s room with his brother still cradled on his arm.

His mother groaned as she walked with him in slow, unsteady steps.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

“It just hurts. It will for a while.” She pushed her curly hair back over her ear. “I think I’m good enough to walk.”

She smiled brightly. “Take care of him. He’s going to be your brother for the rest of your lives.”

“I will, Mama.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “I love you, my river. I always will.”

“Have a good walk.”

D. Moonfire

Chapter 5

Waking Up

There are no words for the dead and dying. They do not exist in the eyes of the living. Only the desert can take what she demands.

—Erochitsu Mikōgyo

Desōchu woke up to a scream that wouldn't stop. The shrill sound beat against the walls of the cave, echoing inside his head and chest as much as it beat against his ears. He couldn't tell if it was a nightmare intruding into his reality or his brother crying.

Dazed, he fumbled for the side table. Everyone kept a couple glow lamps in easy reach otherwise it was too hard to get any light into the back chambers of the cave. His fingertips knocked one off the table before he caught a second.

The scream started to fade when he sat back and twisted the light to turn it on.

A second scream rose up, overlapping the first. It was loud and shrill, far more than any babe could produce. It reminded him of the sound his grandmother made when his mother was bleeding.

Desòchu's muscles tightened painfully at his thoughts. He twisted the light harder until the room filled with a faint blue glow. His eyes automatically turned toward his brother's bassinet.

Rutejimo pawed the air as he screamed but no sound seemed to escape his open mouth. The sound that filled the cave drowned out any sounds his brother could make.

The screams started to fade but then there were more. They rose up in a cacophony of bird-like screeches that came from everywhere at once.

The air shuddered as someone ran past the front of the cave. The air beat against his chest as he felt others racing in front of his home.

In his cradle, Rutejimo's finally rose up over the fading scream. His high pitched wails beat against the stone walls of the inner chamber, magnifying with every echo.

Desòchu managed to get his legs clear of the blankets. "Quiet," he snapped as he got to his feet.

The baby continued to cry.

The fourteen-year-old boy stood there, peering into the dark as he struggled with a decision to remain with his brother or find out what the commotion was about.

The air thudded around him as another person blew past the front of the cave. The passing wind was fast enough it caused the entrance blanket to pull away and the air to be sucked out before it came rushing back. The breeze wafted past his face.

Curiosity won. "J-Just stay here," he said to the newborn before he hurried out of the room. His hand ran along the stone wall with practiced habit until he got into the more lit areas. Then he was able to run outside just as more people zipped past faster than most humans could ever run. A flash of heat beat against his face right before wind tugged at his clothes and nearly ripped the entrance blanket free.

He turned his back to the wind and he traced the paths of the running elders. Their trails were marked with eddies of dust and sand. All of them were heading out the main entrance of the valley.

Ignoring his brother's cries, Desòchu ran after them. He felt slow and weak compared to the adults who raced past him in a blur but he couldn't wait until they came back to explain what had happened.

By the time he got to the valley entrance, there were no more elders racing past him. However, he could see where they had gone from the paths their high-speed passage had left behind. To his surprise, the swirling dust and exposed rock didn't go further into the desert but instead turned to the side and followed the outer cliff that marked the valley's boundaries.

He jogged after the others.

The sheer wall was easily a hundred feet tall and smooth as glass. During a prosperous year, the clan had the cliffs carved out of the mountains to prevent raiders. It worked, no one dared to break into the valley but it also meant there was only one exit for the mile-long valley.

It didn't take long until he spotted a large knot of adults clumped together next to the cliff. Seeing them, he ran faster to find out what had woken him.

Two people stepped away from the crowd, turned on their heels, and sprinted away. Before they went ten feet, their bodies igniting into flames as they accelerated into a blur, leaving a plume of dust and sand behind them.

A large, translucent bird—a shimusogo dépa—appeared over both of their bodies. The burning, ethereal creature shrank down until it was the same size as a human. With a crack of air, both of them shot out of sight as a massive burst of wind ripped the desert apart along their path.

He looked back to see Kiríshi running away from the others and toward him. Her long, curly hair fluttered behind her. She normally kept it bound into a braid which meant she had just woken up herself.

Concerned and worried, he pushed himself to his limits to race toward her. Like countless times before, he wished he could have the speed of the elders to bridge the distance in a matter of seconds. Without magic, he had to pump his arms and legs, straining his muscles to their limits.

Every second passed added more questions. What was going on? Why were they gathered together? Why did the two warriors race off? Sweat prickled along his brow as he glanced where the other two had run off but the wind had already erased their passing.

Finally, they came to a stumbling halt in front of each other. Kiríshi gasped for breath twice before she held up her palm to stop him.

Desòchu struggled himself: the heat of the midday sun beat down on his shoulders and head, his legs burned from the effort, and his lungs ached from sprinting. He nodded and bent over to take deep gulps of air. The long moments it took for his ears to stop ringing where agony, he desperately wanted Kiríshi recover faster.

He took a deep gulp and straightened. “What... what is going on? Why are they running?”

“Hold... on... Sòchu.”

“Kiríshi, please? What? What?” He stepped forward and grabbed her sweat-soaked shirt.

“We... we...” She batted his hand away. “She was just walking along the upper trail. I swear. She just...”

Desòchu’s heart almost skipped a beat. Every muscle in his chest and neck tightened. “Mama?”

“Fell. I’m so sorry—”

He looked over her shoulder. The gathered people were standing over something. Fear surged through his veins. With a gasp, he grabbed her shoulder and shoved her to the side.

Kiríshi stepped to block him. She grabbed his shoulder. “Don’t.”

“That’s my mama!” He flailed at her, but couldn’t connect.

She yanked him around to face her. Her unbound hair clung to her nose and obscured one of her eyes. “Please, don’t look. Don’t go.”

He tried to pull away but she tightened her grip.

“Sòchu, you need—”

Desòchu looked at her hand. Without thinking, he brought his arm up to break her grip. As soon as he felt her fingers slip away, he stepped back.

Kiríshi grabbed his other shoulder. “No, you—”

He punched her in the stomach.

The instant look of hurt betrayal stopped him for only a moment. She bent over and vomited onto the sand.

Desòchu turned on his heels and sprinted toward the others. He had to get to his mother. He pushed himself again, straining his physical limits to cross the distance. When his body wouldn’t move faster, he tried to will himself to accelerate.

His vision blurred for a moment and the sands distorted around him.

A flicker of movement caught the corner of his eye.

He stumbled and lost his balance. He slammed against the glassy-smooth cliff and then dropped to his knees.

His vision sharpened.

Shaking his head, he scrambled back to his feet. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Kiríshi racing after him. “Go shit yourself,” he muttered under his breath and turned back to

the gathered people. They were only a few chains away. He bore down and raced toward them.

When he approached, some of the adults turned to face him. The nearest reached out. “No, you don’t need to see this.”

Desòchu shoved his way past.

More tried to stop him but their attempts were weak and distracted as they kept looking toward the center of the gathering. He easily dodged and shoved his way past, working his way past the clan members until he reached the center. Bursting out of the wall of bodies, he found himself in a clear space.

He saw his grandmother and father first. They were kneeling in front of his mother’s body. When he saw the twisted, blood-soaked body, something snapped. With a cry, he threw himself forward and dropped to the ground. “No!”

Tejíko turned and pulled him to her. Her entire body shook with her sobs.

He punched her, his fist catching her shoulder. His knuckles thudded against bone before sliding off.

She gripped tighter and wrapped her arms around him. “No, no,” she whispered in a choked voice. “Don’t look, please don’t look.”

A blast of air indicated another clan member arriving. Desòchu reflexively turned away until the the wind settled and then looked back to see Yutsupazéso stumble forward. She looked around only a second before she spoke. “Everyone back to the valley. Kòru, take your son. Tejíko, stay here.”

“Rot in hell, old lady,” snapped Desòchu’s father. “I won’t leave her.”

Desòchu’s eyes burned with tears and he looked away. He couldn’t leave, not now. He turned to peer at his moth-

er's body. The bones of her arms had snapped, the sharp edges ripped out of her skin in many places. More bones stuck out of her chest and hips. One leg had been bent back until her foot had been twisted behind her neck; the joint had torn apart like a roasted bird's.

He sobbed but he couldn't look away. The smell flooded over him, the metallic scent of blood. It came from the blood-soaked sands that surrounded them, the impact of her fall marked by a splatter that radiated from her both. More of it bubbled from her broken limbs and crushed face.

Desòchu started to look away but then noticed a larger puddle had formed between her legs where it soaked the outfit she had been wearing right before her walk.

Tejíko dug her chin to the top of his head. He could feel her straining to turn him away. "Don't look, Boy."

He wanted to tell her it was too late but the effort to speak surprised him. He relented and let her turn his gaze away. He blinked at the tears and looked around.

To his surprise, no one remained near them. They were all walking away toward the valley entrance.

He gasped. "W-Wait! Why are they going?"

Tejíko pulled him to his feet. "Come on, Sòchu. We need to get you home."

"No, I can't leave her! I can't. That's my mother!"

With tears in her eyes, she nodded. "I know. Please, I'll explain later. Right now, I need you to just walk away."

"I can't. I—"

Her face twisted into a tear-filled scowl. "Now."

Desòchu glanced at his father who remained kneeling next to his mother's corpse.

"Hikòru," started Tejíko.

"I won't leave her," came the tense reply.

Tejíko looked at Yutsupazéso who gestured for her to leave. Then she turned to Desòchu. “Come on, where is your brother?”

“I... I need to stay.”

“You need to take care of your brother. Where is he?”

“I won’t leave my mama!”

Tejíko’s slap caught him across the face. She grabbed his face with both hands and forced her to look at him. “I will explain but right now, you need to just listen. You cannot help—”

He shook his head and shoved at her. “No, I can. I—!”

“Walk. Away.” Tejíko grabbed his arm and yanked him away from the horrific scene.

He resisted, twisting his arm to break her grip. “No!”

“Leave!” bellowed Tejíko. She slapped him again.

He slapped her back, throwing all his weight into the blow. “Rot in sands!”

His grandmother staggered to the side. When she looked up, her face was a mask of fury and anger.

“Stop!” snapped Yutsupazéso.

Desòchu stopped out of respect and fear. Yutsupazéso was the clan leader and her command could inflict a month of garbage duty with no change of respite. Like his grandmother, she had a reputation of being curt and brutal.

“I only have time for one child,” said Yutsupazéso. “So, Boy, if you don’t walk away this moment, I will make your life a living hell.”

He ground his teeth together. “Yes, Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso.”

Desòchu looked toward his father. Hikòru hadn’t moved from his spot next to the corpse.

“Hikòru,” said Yutsupazéso.

“Take a dump, old goat.”

“You know why you need to walk away.”

Hikòru turned his head to glare at her. “Shut up, you festering pile of feces. I’m not afraid of garbage duty or cleaning. So take your wrinkled tits and walk away yourself.”

“Boy!” snapped both Tejíko and Yutsupazéso.

Yutsupazéso gestured angrily toward Tejíko and Desòchu.

Tejíko grunted with annoyance and then tugged at Desòchu. “Come, we can’t stay here.”

He resisted. “But mama—”

“—doesn’t need you right now. I do. I need you to be home and away from this place. Do you remember last night with your mama? I’ll explain later, I promise.”

Desòchu shook his head. He couldn’t leave her, not like this. He sobbed and turned toward his mother but then stopped when Yutsupazéso stepped toward him. He lifted his gaze toward her and saw nothing but hard determination.

Tejíko pushed him away.

He relented for a moment, his mind furiously spinning. He didn’t want to go back to the cave, or to have his grandmother lecturing him. He stepped away and shook his head. “I-I can’t.”

His grandmother looked at him. He could see her fighting for words. Then her shoulders slumped. “Anywhere but here. For me?”

Desòchu stepped back. Even though he desperately wanted to be kneeling in the blood next to his father, he knew the repercussions would be severe. He wiped the tears from his face.

“I promise,” said Tejíko. “Tonight.”

With a sob, he turned on his heels and raced away.

D. Moonfire

Hiding

Desòchu groaned as he crawled out of a small opening in the cliff along the southern side of the valley. His hiding spot was near the highest point along the southern cliff in the valley. A low outcropping of rock scraped against his back as he managed to haul himself the last few feet before standing up on the narrow ridge.

Rubbing his scrapes, he peered around. It was dark but between the moonlight and a pair of nearby lanterns, he could see enough that he wasn't in danger of falling and breaking his neck.

The thought brought a scowl to his face as memories of his mother plastered themselves across his mind. The smell of blood tickled his nostrils and he stepped back until the cold stone of the cliff stopped him. He choked on the memories, a raspy sob rising up in his throat. His eyes ached from the need to cry but there were no more tears left.

He took a long, shuddering breath. His throat ached from hours of grief. Everything else was sore from cowering in a cave. He wiped the dried tears from his face and peered up at the night sky.

“That you, Sòchu?”

He turned toward Gemènyo's voice. His friend stood on a lower trail, the light behind him masking his face in a shadow. Desòchu's memories filled in the rest: his friend's broad nose, the easy smile on his lips, and the wide eyebrows over green eyes. From the corner, he could see a twig of matakila bobbing slowly as Gemènyo chewed on it.

"You still among us? No desire to walk toward the stars off a tall cliff?"

Desòchu gave a bitter snort. "Yes. I'm fine."

Gemènyo reached up and began to crawl up on the next level. Rocks cracked further down the hill as he grunted with effort. "Give me a second."

The idea of Gemènyo coming close turned Desòchu's stomach. He already felt hollow inside, as if his mother's death had carved him out. Another person touching him was too much.

Desert shook his head and wave off his well-meaning friend. "Not tonight. Just leave me alone."

He stepped over Gemènyo's outstretched fingers and headed down the path toward the main part of the valley.

Behind him, Gemènyo crawled up and walked after him. "Hold on. I don't think you should be alone right now."

"No."

Gemènyo stopped Desòchu with a hand on his shoulder. "Please?"

At the touch, Desòchu stopped in mid-step. The muscles in his chest tightened painfully. Tears rose up, choking him. He yanked his arm away and walked away.

"Sòchu!" Gemènyo grabbed Desòchu's other shoulder.

Something burst inside Desòchu as a surge of anger rose up. Spinning around, he punched Gemènyo hard in the chest. "No!"

Gemènyo looked stunned for a moment before he stepped back. His bare feet scraped against the narrow

path but he managed to keep his balance. His outstretched hand remained in the air, as if poised to touch Desòchu again.

“Leave me alone!” Desòchu belted out and swung again. His knuckles brushed against Gemènyo’s shirt but didn’t strike flesh.

His friend flinched away from the blow. Then his eyes grew wide as one foot slipped off the trail.

His cry of “Shit!” echoed off the cliff walls as he tumbled down, scraping his side and hand as he fell to the lower trail and then bounced off it to continue down.

Stunned, Desòchu watched as his friend landed near the bottom of the cliff. He hoped that Gemènyo would hit a rock and get some sense knocked into him, Desòchu wanted to be left alone.

Gemènyo groaned as he pushed himself up. His eyes were dark shadows as he yelled back at Desòchu. “Asshole!”

“Drown in shit, you festering boil!” came out before Desòchu realized it. Spinning on his heels, he stormed away as Gemènyo continued to swear him out. His frustration and anger beat against his chest, pounding his ribs with a steady beat that followed him around the circuitous route around the valley, past the shrine, and then back toward his home.

He half expected Gemènyo to ambush him but he was left alone. Despite the long route, he arrived at his family cave faster than he expected.

To his surprise, there was a pile of small items by the side of the door. At first, he thought they were Shimusògo’s colors: red, orange, and yellow. As he peered down at the small boxes, bottles, and letters, he realized they were white and gold instead. He frowned, not understanding the significance.

Desòchu reached up to grab the blanket. He started to pull it aside when he realized it had been changed. The plain red cloth had no embroidery, not even the clan name. Even his mother's name had been erased from his home.

Tightening his jaw, he yanked it hard. It tore from one side of the mooring. The fabric dipped into the pile of mementos and knocked them over. He let out a low growl and stormed inside.

Tejiko, his grandmother, looked up from the couch. She was holding Rutejimo in her arms as she bounced the newborn gently.

Desòchu stopped and waited for the tirade his grandmother was famous for.

She stood up without a word. In her other hand was a leather skin. Droplets of milk ran down from the tip of it. She gave Desòchu a thin smile before turning to his father. "Kòru, are you up to handling the little one tonight? I need to meet up with—" She paused to look Desòchu. Her face seemed to grow older. She sighed. "—someone, and I can't bring the babe with me."

Out of sight, Hikòru grunted. "I know how to feed and change a baby, Mother. You made me do it before. Go see the man in white."

She clicked her tongue. "Make sure you show Desòchu how to do it also. Both of you can handle little Jìmo if you take turns. I will come back at sunrise."

Another grunt.

She shook her head, her long braid waving like a tail.

Desòchu entered further into the cave as his grandmother handed the gurgling baby to his father.

Hikòru looked like he was being presented with a pile of severed heads. He scowled his face for a moment before sitting back on the couch. He set Rutejimo between his

crossed legs, bracing the little one with his head up high and his legs kicking.

Tejiko came around to Desòchu and held out her arms.

Desòchu hesitated.

She hugged him. “It will pass, I promise,” she whispered.

“Why couldn’t I stay?”

Her eyes shimmered. “I’ll explain later.”

Desòchu felt the frustration rising up again. He balled his hand into a fist but didn’t dare even threaten his grandmother. She would beat him within an inch of his life he even looked like he would hit her. And then Yutsupazéso would make his life hell. After a moment of shaking, he hugged her back.

“If you need anything, Sòchu, please find me. Even if it is in the middle of the night, wake me up. I’ll be in my cave or near the front entrance. If not me, a warrior.”

“I will, grandmama.”

She squeezed him and then slipped around. “I’ll check on you in the morning. I’ll bring breakfast for all four of us,” she called out before exiting through the opening Desòchu had left. She stopped briefly to restack some of the items but gave up after a few moments.

He stared at the entrance for a moment and then headed toward the couch. Sitting where his grandmother had been, he let out a sigh and leaned back.

Hikòru stared at the ceiling as the baby squirmed in his lap. He didn’t move, didn’t say anything. Desòchu wasn’t even sure he was listening to anything.

The dark-skinned babe let out a little cooing noise as he waved his limbs. Then he stopped.

Desòchu tensed.

Rutejìmo burped and then let out a high-pitched cry.

Their father dropped a hand down to Rutejìmo’s face. He rested one finger along the baby’s lips.

Rutejìmo promptly grabbed it and brought it to his mouth.

Hikòru continued to stare at the ceiling, his chest rising and falling with his deep breaths.

Desòchu felt a kinship for the silence. He had just spent the last few hours in a cave letting the memories wash over him until he was sick to his stomach. It was too soon and the memory of his mother's death felt like a knife in his gut.

His thoughts brought a dry sob into his throat.

He looked up to see his father glancing at him.

Hikòru looked back up. He pulled his hand away from Rutejìmo and rested it on his knee.

The baby jerked and then let out another wail. His dark brown hands clutched at the air as one wail ended and a second one quickly followed.

With a wince, Desòchu watched his father.

His father sighed. Reaching down, he picked up Rutejìmo and then set him down on the couch next to him. With a grunt, he stood up. "I'm going to bed."

Desòchu started to say something but his father turned his back on him and headed out of the room. It was only a matter of seconds but then Desòchu was alone with Rutejìmo.

Rutejìmo wailed again, his cry scraping against Desòchu's ears.

He flinched and glared at the baby.

The cries grew in volume.

"Boy! Deal with it!" snapped Hikòru from the other room.

Glaring, Desòchu got up. He walked over to his new brother and looked down.

Images of his mother's broken body flashed across his mind.

He tightened his hands into fists as the tears threatened to fall again. It took all of his effort to push it down. Panting, he scooped his brother up from the couch and grabbed the skin of milk. He looked around before he spotted the crib; it had been moved from the bedroom to the main room. With a shrug, he set Rutejìmo and the skin down next to it.

Rutejìmo's eyes were wide as he wiggled from one side to the other. He opened his mouth and let out yet another cry.

With another wince, Desòchu reached down and pushed the skin filled with milk over to the baby. It took another few pushes to bring the nipple to the babe's mouth.

Rutejìmo turned and mouthed it for a moment before he caught it in his lips. He squirmed as he sucked on the tip.

Desòchu stared at his brother for a moment. A wave of exhaustion slammed into him, as if the entire day piled on his shoulders in a moment. With a groan, he staggered to his own room and landed on his bed.

He was sleeping before he even considered taking his clothes off.

D. Moonfire

Duties

Desòchu woke up to his grandmother screaming.

“... steaming pile of castrated balls!” Her voice filled the room with a fury that brought on a reflexive shudder of fear.

He scrambled to his feet but his legs caught on his blankets. With sweat prickling his skin, he struggled to yank one free before either his father or grandmother called him.

Outside, his grandmother continued her tirade. “You know how to take care of a baby! Why didn’t you change his diaper!?! He’s covered in spoiled milk and vomit! Why did you leave the milk skin in with him!?! You know better!”

“Moth—”

“You know this stuff! You know how to take care of a baby!”

Desòchu froze with one hand holding up his blanket. They were fighting over how he had left his brother last night. Tears burned in his eyes with fear. No one had ever told him how to take care of a baby. His father never explained anything, he had just went to bed.

“Listen, you loud-mouthed goat! I didn’t do those things! I know better!”

“You are blaming the boy instead of yourself?”

Rutejimo’s cry rose in a high pitched whine.

“Yes! He’s the one who did it!” Desòchu could almost hear his father pointing.

“Did you tell him how to take care of a newborn?”

“No, of course not. Why—?”

“Then how would a fourteen year old know what to do!?”

Desòchu flushed. He yanked a shirt on and then started toward the entrance.

“Then he should have asked!” his father roared back. “He’s smart enough!”

Desòchu didn’t think either of them would stop yelling soon. He took a deep breath and steeled himself before entering the main room.

Tejiko knelt with one knee on the couch. She had a blanket spread out across the other cushions with an almost naked Rutejimo flailing in the middle. Her eyes never left his father’s face while she smeared on something white and thick across the baby’s rear and penis. Her movements were curt but the baby didn’t seem to mind.

Hikòru stood near his own room on the opposite side of the living room. His face was dark with rage and he seemed to have forgotten the bottle in his hand. His eyes flickered from one side to the other.

Desòchu stepped toward his room.

His father caught sight of him. Hikòru pointed accusingly at Desòchu with two long fingers. “Boy! You—!”

Desòchu’s grandmother threw a bag at his father. “Don’t blame him!”

His father batted the bag away and it hit the wall next to him. A clay jar from the pack fell out and shattered against

the stone floor. He stepped over the mess and pointed back to his mother. “Boy, deal with the old goat.”

Desòchu gulped but started toward the couch.

Hikòru turned and headed for the outside.

“Asshole!” snapped Tejíko. “Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“You have a child who needs you!”

Hikòru spun on his heels. “I don’t want it, Mother! I never wanted Chyojímó to try again and now I lost her because of it!”

Tejíko’s eyes shimmered with tears. “I also lost a daughter yesterday.”

“She wasn’t your child,” he said with a growl. “I’m your son, not her. Me.”

“How could you say that, Kòru? You both were my children. For twenty years, she’s been in my life. I spent countless dinners together, chased Shimusogo for thousands of miles next to both of you, and I held her hand when she lost so many.” Tejíko sniffed and wiped a tear from her face. “I lost... someone precious to me.”

“Bullshit.”

Tejíko’s jaw opened in shock.

“I see what you’re already doing. Yesterday you were calling her Chyojímó. Today, it is just ‘her.’ Tomorrow you won’t even pretend she had ever existed. You even had someone take down our name on the entrance.”

“I took it down. I will embroider—”

“Yes, you! You and your traditions. The second my Chyojímó dies, you steal the rest of our names. Just like you did with Rifòma!”

Tejíko flinched at her late husband’s name.

Hikòru smacked the stone wall next to him. “That’s your way, the way. You and your traditions, Mother. Well, your tradition isn’t helping me right now, is it?”

“Boy, you need to stop—”

“Enjoy your horse shit.” Hikòru turned and stormed out of the room. “Do what you want, Mother. Take it and get out of my life!”

Tejíko let out a choked sound.

Desòchu’s father gestured rudely with his thumb and then stormed out.

She stared at the door for a moment and then sniffed. Tears ran down her cheeks as her eyes shimmered in the light. Then she wiped her face before turning back to change Rutejìmo.

Desòchu sniffed and rubbed his face too. “I-I’m sorry, Grandmama.”

She jumped. “Oh, Sòchu! I had forgotten you were there.”

When she held out her arm, he came over and she hugged him.

He turned his head to rest on her shoulder. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know I did something wrong. I thought I did the right thing, I really did, Grandmama. I really did.”

Tejíko squeezed him tightly and then kissed him. “It’s okay. No harm, he just messed up the crib. We can clean that up. Same with little Jìmo’s rash.”

“Is papa really going to...?”

Tejíko shook her head. “We are all struggling with Chyo... your mother’s death.”

She worked in silence, using a cloth to pat Rutejìmo’s body dry and then to wrap a fresh diaper around his bottom. She had four pins which she used to fix the fabric into place. The red material looked stark compared to Rutejìmo’s darker skin.

“Why don’t we talk about it?”

Tejíko gave him a heart-breaking look for a moment. Then she turned back to Rutejìmo before speaking quietly. “Mifúno has her now.”

“The desert, why does Mi—?”

She held up a finger. “Don’t say her name too often. The desert is where all things are born and all things go when they die. She is cruel. She takes when you need someone the most, like my... my husband.”

Desòchu sank on the couch across from her and reached down to his brother.

Rutejìmo grabbed his fingers firmly.

He smiled and tugged on the tiny fingers as his grandmother started to speak.

“It didn’t matter if... he fought to save those farmers from that sandstorm, she still took him. He tried so hard to find that little girl but the wind threw him into the well.”

Desòchu froze.

“He drowned.”

A choked sob rose in her throat. She pressed her palms tight against her chest for a moment. “I-I saw that he broke his fingers trying to hold himself up. His leg was broken from the... fall. I have no doubt he swam but she still took him in the end.”

“A-And the little girl?”

“Crushed to death when a wall fell on her.” When she looked up, her eyes were shimmering. “Naming the desert is to ask for death in your life. To dwell on it is the same. We don’t speak of the dead because the desert hears everything and she listens.”

She closed her eyes tightly and wiped her face with her shoulder. “You can’t dwell on death, Desòchu. If you do, you are asking the desert to pay attention to you and no one survives long when she watching.”

Tejìko chuckled. “All this talk of death may have brought her attention upon us... me.”

Tejìko seemed to gather her thoughts. When she spoke again, her voice was steadier. “So we let the dead deal with

the dead and we focus on the living. Like little Rutejìmo here.”

“Did Rutejìmo kill—”

Tejìko looked at him sharply.

Desòchu closed his mouth.

“It doesn’t matter why death comes to us, not anymore.”

It wasn’t an answer.

Tejìko tapped the couch. “Here, let me show you how to change him. He’s your brother, so you might as well learn how since he may only have to take care of him. Until your rites, he’ll be your responsibility.”

“And Papa?”

“Hikòru will calm down, he is just grieving.”

Trapped

Desòchu used his thumb to catch a dribble of pulped fruit from Rutejìmo's chin. It ran along his digit and into his palm. He could almost taste the bland sweetness in the back of his throat.

Rutejìmo made a gurgling noise and spit up his lunch over the back of Desòchu's hand, coating it in half-digested milk and fruit.

"You're so disgusting." Desòchu shoveled the food back into his brother's mouth before wiping his hand on a stained cloth. He used the spoon to capture more from the bowl before holding it near Rutejìmo's mouth.

The baby reached out for it while making grunting noises.

"First finish throwing up," he said in a low voice. With his other hand, he patted Rutejìmo's back to encourage the burp he knew would be coming.

Movement caught his attention. Hyonèku and Kiríshi were walking toward him, their hands clasped together. He stared for a moment with a feeling like he had somehow missed something critical.

The last he knew, Kiríshi had laid her claim on Gemènyo not Hyonèku. The two were together for years, the last few involved them sharing kisses and intimate touches whenever the four of them were alone.

Sadness flickered across Desòchu's thoughts. Kiríshi was right on the edge of her passage into adulthood. The elders were waiting for something and none of the teenagers knew what. Until they, they were willing to let Gemènyo pretend he wasn't an adult until she caught up. But if she wasn't holding him back, he was going to be drawn into the world of responsibilities and obligations. He was going to lose one of his friends soon, at least until he was considered an adult himself.

Unaware of his thoughts, she sat down across from Desòchu and reached out for Rutejìmo. When the baby caught her finger, she smiled and pulled his arm in different directions much to the baby's amusement.

Rutejìmo giggled, the abrupt laughter rising up.

"How could you ever get tired of this, Sòchu?"

Desòchu's face twisted into a scowl. "I had to change three diapers this morning. The little ass drinks too much and then shits it out within an hour."

Kiríshi pulled a face.

Next to her, Hyonèku slid onto the bench next to her. "Doesn't sound too bad. How much shit can he possibly create?"

"Mountains," Desòchu answered. "All watery crap that always leaks out of the sun-damned diaper. I don't know how he does it since he seems to be spitting up this crap as fast as I can shovel it into his mouth."

The three teenagers remained silent.

Uncomfortable, Desòchu returned to the futile task of feeding his brother.

"When is your father coming back?" asked Kiríshi.

“Does it matter?” His father’s attitude had not gotten better in the last few months since Rutejìmo was born. If anything, he seemed to drink more and spend more time out on jobs instead of remaining at the valley. Sometimes, he took another job before ever returning from the previous one.

She continued. “We were thinking about heading over to the Ryayusúki and picking a fight.”

Desòchu looked up at Hyonèku. “A fight? They kicked your ass last time and then chased you all the way back with those damn horses of theirs.”

Hyonèku grinned and ran his fingers through his dark hair. The short strands flared out from between his fingers. “Yeah, but nothing else to do. Besides Fumaràchyo should have just gotten back from Wamifuko City and he promised to sell me a couple bottles of something strong. A bit of drinking before fighting is exactly what you need.”

The idea of getting drunk with the Ryayusúki sounded appealing. It had been months since Desòchu had gotten more than an hour or so away from Rutejìmo. He noticed his temper had been fraying with the constant wailing at night and endless diapers.

Hyonèku beckoned. “Come on. With all four of us, they won’t kick our ass this time. I’m sure your grandmother will watch him.”

“She’s on a job right now.”

Kiríshi frowned before she turned to Hyonèku. “You said Yutsupazéso has Mènyo, right? After he threw rocks at Hikòru’s honor with that... ballad?”

Desòchu ducked his head to hide his smile. Gemènyo managed to get five stanzas into a relatively lewd but epic poem about Hikòru before one of the elders pulled him off the table. Given how little Desòchu saw his father recently, he thought the song fit with his current feelings. However,

he wasn't going to stand up for Gemènyo in front of Yutsupazéso; no one in their right mind would do that.

Hyonèku chuckled and he stroked his fingers along the back of Kiríshi's hand. He nodded twice then he shook his head. "You really think Zéso would let us go?"

She smiled and turned her hand over to grasp his fingers.

Desòchu cleared his throat.

"Why not?" he said rolling his eyes. "We ask Yutsupazéso if someone could watch Rutejimo? What's the worst that could happen?"

Desòchu's heart beat faster. "Really?"

Kiríshi smiled broadly at him. "Come on, you need to get something. If anything, you need to wrestle in some blankets. I know you've been sniffing around Mádi."

With a snort, Hyonèku said, "Yeah, until Ràchyo found out that Sòchu was interested in his sister."

Desòchu grinned with the memory. The slender beauty from the horse clan had returned his affections more than a few times on a quiet evening. His body grew hotter with the thought of stealing more than kisses.

"See?" Hyonèku pointed at Desòchu. "I told you he still had a dick."

Kiríshi rolled her eyes and pulled her hand free from Hyonèku to poke him. "Give him a break. Come on, let's ask the old bird."

Desòchu stood up slightly to bow respectfully. "Thank you for trying."

"We missed you." Hyonèku winked at him.

"For playing cards?"

Kiríshi shrugged. "Cards, talking, fighting, whining, and drinking. There are too many things missing when it's just three of us."

When they left, he returned to feeding his brother with a little more hope than before.

Rutejìmo finally burped, spraying Desòchu's face with milk and fruit. Then he sat back and laughed happily while clutching the spoon.

This time Desòchu didn't care. He thought about spending the night with the Ryayusúki clan. The horse rider's valley was an hour walk away but it would be no time at all if all four of them were together.

A half hour later, he finished cleaning up and changing his brother. He just finished nestling Rutejìmo into a bassinet when Yutsupazéso and the others arrived. He turned and sat down on the bench next to his brother.

The clan leader looked older than the sky and rocks. Deep wrinkles scored her face but somehow that only highlighted the many cuts that scored her skin. Rumors had it that she had been tortured but Desòchu didn't know anyone who knew for sure. No one would risk asking her directly.

She limped over to the table. She had a walking stick twice her height with feathers dangling from the top, one for each of her three children. When she reached the bench, Hyonèku and Gemènyo both rushed to help her sit down.

Yutsupazéso grunted with discomfort. Slowly, she rested her stick on the side. Another grunt. Then a third. Time seemed to stretch out painfully as she shifted. No one would risk her ire by hurrying her up and Desòchu suspected she knew that. Finally, she looked at him sharply. "You want to run away, right?"

Desòchu cringed. "Yes, Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso."

"Who's going to take care of the babe?" She didn't even look at the now sleeping Rutejìmo.

“I was hoping someone else.” When no one said anything, Desòchu continued, “... just for tonight? Please? I need a break.”

Yutsupazéso glared at the three teenagers near her. “Well, which one of you is going to do it?”

Gemènyo opened his mouth.

“Not you, asshole. You have a run coming up.”

He closed his mouth.

Yutsupazéso pointed her two fingers toward him. “You aren’t even remotely sorry for insulting Great Shimusogo Hikòru last night.”

“I said—”

“You said what you wanted me to hear.” She pointed him again and then leaned forward to poke him roughly. “I can see you smirking when my back is to you. Not to mention I heard you humming it under your breath while cleaning this morning.”

Gemènyo ducked his head. He had a faint smirk on his lips.

She turned to Hyonèku and Kiríshi. “Which one of you is going to give him a break? Both of you are old enough to watch a baby for a night.”

Kiríshi opened her mouth. She looked like she had been stabbed in the stomach. With a pleading look, she glanced at Hyonèku and then Desòchu.

“Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso,” Hyonèku said with a bow. “I... we were hoping that one of the other adults could watch him, just for a few hours.”

She stared at him for a moment. Then she scowled. Somehow, the wrinkles on her face grew deeper.

Hyonèku shifted to one foot.

“Do I like look like I just got out of diapers, Boy?”

“N-No.”

“You plan to be gone until morning. When you get back, you’ll probably still be drunk and strapped to the ass of some horse.” She waved a hand around her. “You plan on being useless for a day, like some little brat without a worry in the world.”

All four of them blushed.

“I don’t have time to deal with a bunch of puking kids.”

Desòchu cringed again. He wasn’t going to be able to leave.

“If anyone is going to go, it should be Desòchu. The boy is probably hoping to fuck Great Ryayusuki Domádi.” It sounded like a curse the way the old woman said it.

With a sinking feeling, Desòchu blushed hotter. The conversation started poorly and he suspected that the old woman planned on making them all suffer for even asking.

Yutsupazéso cleared her throat. He looked into her dark, cloudy eyes. “She got married last month. No more playing around.”

Desòchu closed his eyes tightly for a moment. He was missing so much of his life since his brother became his responsibility.

“So, which one is going to stay here and watch the babe? Everyone else has jobs. Real jobs that help the clan.”

Kiríshi sighed. “I—”

“No,” interrupted Desòchu. “I’ll take care of my brother.”

“Sòchu?” started Hyonèku.

“Just go.” Desòchu reached down and scooped his brother from the bassinet. He missed and fumbled again, his fingers growing clumsy with everyone watching. “Have fun, I’ll stay here.”

He held his brother tightly when he hurried away, his cheeks burning with his humiliation and frustration. In his arm, Rutejìmo made a little strangled cry before Desòchu realized he was holding the baby too tightly. He relaxed his

grip as he rushed home to get away from everyone except the one person who caused all of his problems: Rutejimo.

Chapter 9

Birthday

A rod is a standard unit of measurement of sixteen and a half feet.

Desòchu sat outside of the family cave. He had a mug of cactus tea resting next to him, the heat from the heavy ceramic container contrasting to the cold air of the desert night. Below, the central fires were dying down and only a handful of the clan milled around as they finished their card and dice games.

It was a breezy but dark night. He couldn't see the moon, only the eighty or so stars in the sky. They were almost peaceful compared to the rest of his day. He wondered what it would be like to spend his nights out on the desert, like the so-called night clans did. What did they do when they weren't attacking sun clans like the Shimusògo? He didn't really know anything about them, other than the horror stories the clan warriors told of battles in the past.

He let his mind drift to when his mother used to sit out on the ledge with him, telling him about the stars. Apparently, the eighty-eight bright points in the back sky wasn't entirely true either. Other lands saw different stars. She

didn't know why but she knew the names of all eighty-eight of the fallen warriors that brightened the night.

A tear threatened to roll down his cheek. He wiped at it before anyone noticed.

The scuff of bare feet interrupted him.

He closed his eyes but didn't look back.

"Happy birthday, Sòchu," said Gemènyo in a low tone. His friend sat down next to Desòchu and let his feet dangle over the edge leading to the lower paths.

"Thanks." Desòchu hadn't had a long conversation with Gemènyo since the night he punched his friend. Except for a few words here and there, it never seemed to be the right time to talk about it. For all he knew, Gemènyo kept a grudge burning but Desòchu doubted it. His friend was rather calm about things. Besides, even if they fought, Desòchu would easily win.

"I saw your papa wasn't down at dinner. Didn't he come back today?"

Desòchu gestured to the blanket covering the cave behind him. "In there."

"Drinking?"

"Of course."

"Think he'll join the celebrations tomorrow?"

"I doubt it. I don't think he has said anything to Tejíko or Yutsupazéso since..." The word choked in his throat. He hated that he wasn't allowed to talk about his mother's death. It haunted him at night while he listened to his brother's cries.

Gemènyo said nothing for a long time. Then he chuckled. "Remember when Chyojímó sat out here telling us about the stars?"

Desòchu's chest tightened with sorrow. To his surprise, he also felt relief. Surprised, he looked over at Gemènyo.

His friend shrugged and then pointed to one of the stars. “You and I used to make up so many names for those things.”

Desòchu smiled through the pain. “Yeah, rude names.”

“I liked Fart-Biter the Stinky.”

“Or Sour Ass?”

Gemènyo chuckled. “Yeah...” his voice trailed off. “I miss her. She always had so many stories to tell us.”

Desòchu bowed his head to avoid revealing the tears in his eyes.

A firm hand rested on his shoulder. “It’s okay to miss her.”

“Not according to my grandmother.”

“Yeah, but Tejíko and Yutsupazéso both have cactus growing between their legs. They are barren as the desert now. They have even my parents scared. Everyone shuts up when the topic of Chyojímó comes up.”

The insult didn’t make Desòchu feel any better. “I know. I just miss her. Everyone acts like she doesn’t exist.”

“Your papa doesn’t.”

Desòchu shook his head. “Papa doesn’t think about anyone but her. I can hear him crying her name right before he passes out.”

“He drinks too much.”

Lifting his hand, Desòchu pressed his palm against his cheek. A recent bruise throbbed. His father had backhanded him when Desòchu had tried to move an empty bottle away from the baby.

“Tell Yutsupazéso.”

Desòchu glanced at his friend. His vision blurred with tears. “I can handle it.”

“You shouldn’t. A father shouldn’t hurt his son. You should tell the old bat about the drinking.”

“What is she going to tell me? Pretend my mother didn’t exist? Tell me to stand strong to make me a man?”

“Or that your father is drinking too much?”

Shaking his head, Desòchu lifted his head back to the stars. He reached down and grabbed the edge of the cliff. It would be so easy to push himself off, though he knew that he would catch himself less than a rod lower with the wide path.

“It isn’t right, Sòchu.”

“He’s my papa.”

“He shouldn’t—”

Unable to handle the direction of the conversation, Desòchu interrupted. “Where is Kiríshi?”

“With Somiryòki tonight.”

“Somiryòki?” Desòchu thought about the old warrior. Then he realized why. “Is he... showing her the way?” The clan warriors had the duty of introducing teenagers to the world of sex, despite the fact that Desòchu knew that Kiríshi had both Gemènyo and Hyonèku long before the adults realized it.

“Yeah, Yutsupazéso wasn’t fond of Hyonèku and her grinding against each other at breakfast. Somiryòki’s showing her how to properly do it. He probably has a cadence or a maneuver for it. Probably getting his boulders off in the process.”

Desòchu shrugged. “Why not? He can’t have children and she would have to asked him to teach her.”

A strange look crossed Gemènyo’s face. “Yeah, she did.”

“What about Nèku?”

Gemènyo shrugged. “I’m sure he’s fine with it. He’s with Kiramíro and heading over to Ryayusuki Valley.”

“Probably getting an education in fucking too.”

“Yeah... maybe. She does have a home cave there too.”

“She has a cave everywhere. Everyone calls her friend when she visits.”

Gemènyo looked around. He grabbed a small tuft of grass, peeled back a single leaf, and then shoved it into his mouth. With a grin, he leaned back on his hands. “Everyone is different. Your mother taught us that.”

Desòchu nodded.

Inside the cave, Rutejimo began to cry again.

A moment later, his father yelled out, “Boy! Get... in here and deal with this thing!” His slurred voice betrayed his heavy drinking. “Boy!”

Gemènyo glanced back. “Want me to wait?”

“No, it will take a while for it to calm down. By then, I’ll just head to bed.”

“Good night, Desòchu. Take care of your brother. You are the only family he has right now.”

“Thanks, Gemènyo.”

D. Moonfire

Hauling

Desòchu staggered down the narrow path leading from the smaller caves by the entrance. His head swam with the buzz of alcohol, he and the others had enjoyed a long evening of cards and drinking with a trio of teenagers from the nearby valleys. He burped and then had to grab the cliff for balance as the world spun violently around.

As soon as it settled, he continued to shuffle down the path. If he cut through the bottom of the valley, he could be in his bed in twenty minutes.

“Had a fun night?” asked Somiryòki from a lower path.

His twenty minutes to get home became an hour of lectures.

Desòchu’s muscles tightened. “Y-Yeah. I’m a little tired though.”

“You are also drunk.”

He started to smile and then realized the older warrior wouldn’t appreciate any humor. Forcing it from his face, he leaned against the cliff to avoid falling over. “Maybe.”

Somiryòki lifted one foot and then disappeared in an explosion of dust. Part of the cloud was yanked to the side,

pointing a line along the trail that would take Somiryòki off his path and up to Desòchu's.

Desòchu almost fell as he tried to clap his hands to his ears but missed.

The warrior caught him with a powerful grip that dug into the joint between Desòchu's shoulder and neck. "Maybe?" he said in his low voice.

Up close Somiryòki's graying hair looked almost ghostly. He had a short, close-cut beard and mustache that made his face look like it was painted with night. The few gray hairs appeared to be floating in Desòchu's fermented imagination.

"Okay, yes."

"What about the others? The Ryayusúki boy and the two Nikogāmi?"

"I... they are back in the cave." Desòchu tried to straighten himself. He could get in a lot of trouble being drunk. He could already imagine what torture Yutsupazéso had in mind for him.

"Hyonèku?"

"Headed back home. So did Ríshi."

"Mènyo?"

Images of dark-skinned limbs intertwined among the blankets rose up. The four teenagers had fallen asleep in the afterglow from fucking and Desòchu had no desire to join them when they started. The idea of remaining after was just as distasteful. "T-They... he's back at the cave."

Somiryòki scowled. "I'll have to do something about that."

Desòchu nodded and then grabbed Somiryòki's arm for balance. Underneath his grip, the older man felt as hard as the rock he was clutching earlier. Cords of muscles flexed underneath his grip.

Somiryòki pulled Desòchu firmly back on the trail. “Come on, I’m expecting a delivery.”

Desòchu frowned and looked up. It was night. A crescent moon peeked up over the edge of the rim of the valley. “Now?”

The warrior nodded. “Come on. If you aren’t at the entrance by the time I count to a hundred, you won’t be sleeping for a long time.”

Fear surged into Desòchu’s veins. He dredged his thoughts from the drunken haze.

Wind blasted past him as Somiryòki disappeared.

Even bleary-eyed, Desòchu could see a plume of dust that marked the warriors passage down to the floor of the valley and then doubled back to head toward the valley entrance. It was almost a quarter mile walk if Desòchu followed.

He peered down the paths. Crisscrossing the sides of the valley, it looked like there was only a dozen of them before he got to the valley floor. Even in the dark light, he could see enough to avoid the dangerous outcroppings. If he slid down, he could make it.

As Desòchu pondered, a wave of dizziness slammed into him. With a sickening lurch, he tried to pull back but managed to slip. His ass slammed into the rock and then he was sliding down before he was ready.

“Shit!” he cried as he hit the next trail down. Bouncing, he fell off and continued to fall. Sharp rocks slashed at his skin, tearing open gashes as he bounced from one trail to the other.

He tried to grab something, anything, but his fingers were clumsy. By the time he managed to clamp down on a root or bar, it had already slipped past him.

Desòchu hit the ground with a smack and an explosion of white stars in the back of his vision. He groaned and

pushed himself up. Blood welled up along his lip and he sucked at it before pulling a sour face.

“Asshole,” he muttered. Wiping the blood with the back of his arm, he staggered toward the entrance.

He found Somiryòki leaning against the door, watching out into the night. It was impossible to see anything beyond a few rods of the torches that marked the valley entrance. A cold wind blew across Desòchu and tugged at Somiryòki’s beard.

With a groan, Desòchu limped over. “What is it, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki.”

Somiryòki smiled. “Cut a few corners heading out here?”

Desòchu glared at him. When his arm twinged, he winched. Grabbing it, there was a flash of pain and he had to pull back from the abrasion that tore open the flesh near his elbow.

The older man leaned slightly and smiled at him. “Shouldn’t go wandering the valley at night.”

“You should put rails on the paths.”

“Only the paths near those caves don’t have trails.”

Desòchu sighed.

“Tomorrow you can start putting them in.”

Desòchu’s muscles tensed again. “Thanks, old man.”

“I’m not the one wandering around drunk.” Somiryòki focused a hard stare toward Desòchu. “Boy,” he finished with a warning tone.

Flushed, Desòchu bowed. “Sorry for my disrespect, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki.”

“You’re young, stupid, and drunk. It isn’t safe, but I’m not Zéso doling out punishments left and right. Tomorrow, consider putting in railing or at least stop drinking where you can fall and break your legs. Without the ability to run, the Shimusògo are nothing.”

Unsure of how to respond, Desòchu eased himself to the wall and leaned on it.

“They’ll be here soon.” Somiryòki seemed relaxed as he spoke but there was just a hint of edge in his voice.

“Who?”

“The Fijimòsu.”

“Fijimòsu? I don’t know that clan.”

“They’re delivering firewood and supplies. They come once a month.”

With a start, Desòchu realized that he had never questioned how the clan could burn fires almost every night. There was a large pile of cut wood near the shrine, it would shrink and grow but he had never seen anyone rebuilding the piles. It only took a moment of searching his memories to realize he didn’t remember ever seeing when supplies were brought to the valley; they were always waiting by the entrance when one of the elders sent him and the others to haul it inside. The realization that the supplies came during the night surprised him. He stared around with curiosity, a sensation that something momentous was happening surrounded his thoughts. “D-Delivery? At night?”

Somiryòki shrugged. “Safer and easier to travel at night for the Fijimòsu.”

“Why?”

“Because they follow Chobìre.”

Chobìre, the spirit of the moon and sworn enemy of Tachìra, the spirit of the day and the source of Shimusògo’s power.

Desòchu inhaled sharply. He looked around for something to use as a weapon. “A night clan? Are we fighting them? Is it an attack?”

“Why?”

“They are a moon clan.”

“They are delivering firewood.”

“But...?”

Somiryòki looked at him. “Do you think being a warrior is just fighting endlessly against the moon? Is that how you see me? Fighting until my last breath to save you and the others?”

Desòchu almost said yes but didn't. Instead he blushed. “N-No, Great Shimusògo Somiryòki.”

A pat on the shoulder. “Good, because realize we all need allies. While the Shimusògo can travel quickly during the day, the Fijimòsu travel slowly at night.”

“Why is that better?”

Somiryòki chuckled. “Because when a Shimusògo runs, we carry letters and small packages. We are couriers for legal documents, letters to loved ones, and bringer of news to the isolated clans. When the Fijimòsu bring their bulls, they bring tons of supplies: food, water, wood, and trade goods.”

As if to emphasize the point, a creak and a grunt filled the air. Desòchu looked around sharply but he couldn't see through the night.

“Calm down and don't do anything stupid.”

Trembling, Desòchu forced himself back against the wall. “Don't warriors fight?”

“Oh yes,” came a sad response. “Just because we are allies with one clan of the night doesn't mean all call us friend. The same with the sun clans. We have enemies out there from both sides of the skies. You just can't determine if someone is friend or foe by the powers they have.”

Thinking, Desòchu worried his lip for a moment. He glanced at Somiryòki and then back to the sands. “Do couriers meet up with the Fijimòsu?”

“As the clan leader, Yutsupazésò does, but otherwise it is normally warriors.”

“Why?”

Another smile. “Because young boys like yourself don’t understand that the stories we tell around the fires don’t always match reality. Also because the staunchest ally will turn on you when you least expect it. Our stories are filled with betrayals and we don’t forget.”

In the distance, he could hear the heavy thuds of something massive coming toward him. It was followed by the whisper of sand and fabric. Something creaked followed by a whisper of a noise.

“Does Tejíko know about this?”

At Desòchu’s grandmother’s name, Somiryòki’s face seemed to soften. “No, she doesn’t. It isn’t important to her.”

“More things to keep secret?”

Somiryòki nodded.

“Like when my mo—?”

“Quiet!”

Desòchu snapped his head back toward the noise. Fear surged into his veins as he looked for an attack. When none came, he took a deep breath to calm down. “What?”

Somiryòki shook his head. “We don’t talk about that.”

“Why?”

“Because out here, outside of the valley, you are asking the desert to come. No one speaks to or for the sands.”

It was the same thing his grandmother said. Desòchu crossed his arms over his chest. It took all of his will to remain against the cliff as unknown clan members approached. He let his mind drift.

“Ready for your passage?”

Desòchu jumped at the interruption. “When I become a man?”

“Yes. You are sixteen soon, it should be soon.”

“My birthday was a few days ago. But, yes. I can’t wait.”

“Why?”

Desòchu tightened his arms across his chest.

“Your brother?”

It took strength to speak again. “I can’t wait until I have my own place. Some peace and quiet.”

“It must be louder now that he is speaking.”

Desòchu groaned. Rutejimo had started speaking only a week or so ago. When he was just saying nonsense words, it was easier to ignore but now there was just enough that he found himself distracted by his younger brother’s incomprehensible speech.

The old man grunted and smirked. He looked out into the darkness. “And your father?”

Desòchu inhaled through his teeth. “I wouldn’t be opposed to leaving that either.”

“Is it bad?”

Reflexively, Desòchu rubbed his wrist where his father had grabbed it the night before. It still felt bruised though there was no sign on his dark skin.

“How often does he drink himself into darkness?”

The question was uncomfortably precise. Desòchu knew he couldn’t lie. “Every night.”

“Does he take care of your brother?”

With the second question, the tone seemed less casual and more of a probing. He knew he should just lie and tell the warrior that everything was fine. The words were coming out of his fuzzy head before he realized it. “No, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki.”

“Did he bring anything home for either of you when he got back two days ago?”

“No, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki. He hasn’t brought anything back in a while, I figured I had just grown out of it.”

The warrior sighed. Slowly he turned to Desòchu. “Do you miss him when he’s gone?”

Before Desòchu could answer, a massive horned ox came over a ridge and into the light. It had a black leather har-

ness that tied it to a large, six-wheeled wagon that rolled after it. Even from the short distance, Desòchu could see the wagon was filled with tons of firewood. With a gasp, he turned as dark-cloaked people spread out on either side of the bull and wagon.

One of the Fijimòsu stepped forward. It was a woman with a black robe made of a stiff material. There was darker green and brown trim along the fabric with the name of the clan embroidered along the hem in white threads. Most of her body was covered by the material but he could tell that she had a weapon half-drawn from a sheath.

Somiryòki patted Desòchu on the shoulder. “Don’t say anything. No reason to start a fight tonight.”

He stepped out and held up his hand. “I am Somiryòki and I speak for Shimusògo,” he said in a loud voice.

The lead newcomer bowed. “I am Ochisári and I speak for Fijimòsu. Well met, Shimusògo. I bring what we agreed upon as we have for years past.”

Another bull came trudging into view. It dragged another large wagon but the second had boxes piled high on it with leather straps keeping everything in place.

Desòchu stared in shock. He had never seen a member of a night clan before, but they all looked evil with their dark outfits and sharp movements just outside the circle of light near the valley entrance. His clan wore light colors and slept at night, not traveled in darkness.

Ochisári looked at him, her green eyes a startling pale color. She had a close-fitting hood over her head but he thought he saw a hint of a black tattoo on her cheek. “I’m not familiar with this one. Your newest warrior?”

Somiryòki waved his hand toward Desòchu. “Boy, head home. I’ll deal with you later.”

“Thank you, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki.” Nervous, Desòchu bowed deeply.

“Think about your answer, please?”

Desòchu only hesitated for a second. He continued toward the entrance but spoke louder for the warrior to hear him. “I don’t have to, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki. I wouldn’t miss him at all.”

Chapter 11

Drunk

Desòchu sighed as he sat on the couch in the living area of the cave. He toyed with an empty mug trying to decide if he wanted to get up and refresh his water or let it sit. There was much else to do at the moment; his friends were getting drunk again but he couldn't find another adult to watch his brother to join them. With a groan, he set down the mug.

He was hoping to spend some time with the visitors from Nikogāmi before they headed back home in the morning. The other three were already joining in a private celebration and Desòchu wanted to more than a few hours to enjoy before the overwhelming pressure to watch his brother mounted. The last time he had a break, it was a rushed hour before he had to return to his brother.

On the floor in front of him, Rutejìmo looked up. His bright green eyes looked just a bit too large as he held up a brightly colored ball almost above his head. "Sochu play? Play boll?"

Desòchu winced at his brother's words. Rutejìmo didn't inflect anything which made everything a muddled mass of

noise. Desòchu sighed and shook his head. “No, I don’t want to play.”

“Boll?”

Desòchu waved his hand abruptly toward his brother. “No.”

“Oh,” said Rutejìmo as his eyes shimmered with fresh tears.

With a groan, Desòchu turned his head as the high-pitched wail echoed off the walls.

It took almost a minute for his brother to calm down. As soon as the cries stopped, the questions resumed. “Play ball? Play?”

“Just shut up.”

“Play?”

Desòchu turned on his brother. He yelled back. “Stop!”

Rutejìmo froze, his eyes growing wide. Then he fell back as the tears ran down his cheeks. The ball rolled away, bouncing against the other couch.

“Just... play by yourself.”

Sobbing, Rutejìmo rolled on his hands and knees and crawled over to his ball. His cries scraped against Desòchu’s thoughts but soon quieted as he rolled the ball forward.

Desòchu watched as the bright red sphere bounced on the wall.

Rutejìmo giggled and crawled after it.

“Simple pleasures.”

A grumble and low, hacking cough alerted Desòchu that his father was home. He turned and watched as his father whipped the entrance blanket aside and staggered inside.

Hikòru’s hair was wild and hung to one side. With sand and rocks clinging to his left side, it was obvious that he had fallen. He leaned to the side for a moment and made a halfhearted attempt to straighten the entrance blanket before he turned back.

Their eyes caught.

“What you looking at, boy?” Hikòru’s slurred voice and red-rimmed eyes told Desòchu that his father had been drinking for some time.

Guilt flooded Desòchu, he knew he shouldn’t ask his father to watch Rutejìmo while drunk. But the allure of spending one more night of frivolity was difficult to resist. He cleared his throat. “I was hoping you could watch Jìmo tonight.”

Hikòru stopped and leaned against the wall. “What? Why?”

“It’s just for tonight. The Nikogāmi are heading home tomorrow and I want to... spend time with them and Nèku, Mènyo, and Ríshi. It shouldn’t be—”

Hikòru spat. The saliva struck the wall before dribbling down.

Gulping, Desòchu held up his hand palm up, as if he was begging. “Please, Papa?”

“Why would I give a flying shit into Chobìre’s skull if you go out?”

Rutejìmo’s head lifted up and he smiled. “Papa!”

With both hands, he grabbed the couch and pulled himself to his feet. Turning around, he swayed for a second before toddling toward the entrance. “Papa home!”

Hikòru’s head ducked down as he watched Rutejìmo approach. Then he reached out with one foot and gently shoved the child to the side before staggering past.

Rutejìmo tumbled to the ground. He sniffed and rolled over to get on his knees. With outstretched fingers, he grabbed the embroidered blanket at the entrance and pulled himself up again. One of the rings that kept it in place made a ping noise as it snapped. Turning around, he followed after his father. “Papa papa papa papa.”

Hikòru went straight for his customary spot on the couch and dropped into it. As he did, his foot caught Rutejìmo who had chased after him.

The child tumbled back, a surprised look on his face.

The older man made no effort to look at what he had done before he slumped back. “The spinning will stop soon. Then I’ll get another drink.”

Desòchu fought with his desires. It was only an hour or so. Rutejìmo should be okay, he knew it. He gulped and then sat up straighter. “Papa?”

“What? Go, just go and have fun.”

“A-Are you going to be okay with Jìmo?”

Hikòru’s face darkened at the shortened name. It was too close to Desòchu’s mother.

“I-I mean, Rutejìmo.” Inwardly, Desòchu berated himself for slipping up. He may have just ruined his chance to enjoy the night.

Hikòru groaned and patted the couch.

Knowing that he was looking for a fresh bottle of bi-chìru, Desòchu got up and headed into his father’s room. Hikòru had brought a supply with him when he came back from Wamifuko City. He was getting low, which meant he would be leaving soon. Despite the room being dark, Desòchu went straight for the dresser that kept his father’s alcohol. There was only two bottles left of the fermented cactus wine. He grabbed one and returned to set it down next to his father.

Hikòru grunted.

Desòchu returned to his seat. He had to wait for his father to take a swig from the drink before he asked his question. “Are you okay with Rutejìmo?”

His father focused on him, his red-rimmed eyes almost hiding the green. Then he closed his eyes and slumped his head back. “Whatever. I don’t care anymore.”

“Play boll?” Rutejìmo stood in the center of the room, holding his ball above his head as he looked back and forth between his father and brother.

Desòchu glanced at his brother a moment. Then he glanced at his father.

“Sochu? Play boll?”

“Just...” He started to tell his brother to play by himself. After a moment, he reached down and grabbed the ball.

Rutejìmo let out a squeal and clapped his hands.

Desòchu rolled it across the room. As his younger brother chased after it, he grabbed his mug and hurried out of the cave before Rutejìmo turned around. If he could get down the path, he wouldn’t hear the cry.

He would only be gone a few hours. Just a little break and then he would come back. Rutejìmo will be fine with his father, Desòchu told himself.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 12

Guilt

It was past midnight but Desòchu couldn't enjoy the celebration. For the last hour, all he had been thinking about his father and brother. It felt like a knife hanging over his head, the rope holding it slowly fraying with every passing second. His breath puffed out in the desert night as he crossed the common area on his way home.

"Sòchu!" called Kiríshi as she ran up. She wore a yellow dress that fluttered behind her. The fabric was from the north and lighter than most things they wore during the day. He could see how it molded against her breasts and shoulders as she hurried after him.

He waited.

"Heading home already?" She had the faint flush of too much to drink.

"I have duties."

"Someone is watching your brother. You can take one night off. You need to take a break, you've been getting so angry lately."

Desòchu sighed but didn't say anything. He was getting short tempered with his brother, not unlike his father's attitude. He didn't mean to, but it felt like his self-control

crumbled every time he was faced with another dirty diaper or hours of nothing but Rutejìmo.

She rested her hand on the back of his hand. “Your father is watching him. Please?”

He glanced up toward his family cave. “Yes, but I don’t... I...” He realized he didn’t have the words. Letting his voice trail off, he looked away.

“He’s fine, I’m sure.”

Desòchu looked at her. He wanted to go back with her, to spend time with the overly friendly couple from the other clan. It would be a promising night of being naughty and drunken entertainment. There was even a chance he would enjoy a bit of company. The thought of coming home drunk or sleeping the night away in the arms one of the girls from Nikogāmi would be appealing; it wouldn’t be the first time. However, he felt exhausted.

He shook his head. “He’s my charge, Ríshi. I may not be the best person for him, but I’m what he has. I have no.”

Kiríshi stroked his hair, looking at him with a slight frown. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’m just... tired.”

“It isn’t too bad, is it?” She said with a smile. “We’ve all watched him together. Not every hour of every day does the Great Shimusogo Desòchu have to watch over his brother alone. You aren’t the lone warrior at the mountain.”

He snorted. “Yeah, and how many of us actually finished a round of cards with Jìmo wandering around? Ever since he started walking, we have to keep him from the cliffs, the rocks, the drinks, the glass, the... then... everything. He’s everywhere. Breaking everything.”

Kiríshi stroked his shoulder. “It’s going to be okay. We are all helping.”

As much as he knew the others took their turns with Rutejìmo, it was only an hour or so before Desòchu would be

called back to take over. His brother was his obligation, either from the demands by the clan elders or his own realization that he would never escape taking care of him. His friends might offer to help but he could see in their eyes the struggles to handle the responsibility.

He sighed. "I know, Ríshi. It's... he's just, my duty right now."

"Tomorrow, I'll take him for the morning. I promise."

He chuckled. "You'll be sleeping off the drink tomorrow morning."

She rolled her eyes, shook her head, and grinned. "Probably with Zéso doling out punishments. At least you don't get many of those lately."

Because he didn't have the free time to get in trouble like the others. Desòchu kept his thoughts from his lips. "One small favor, right?"

Her hand slipped from his shoulder. "Well, maybe that new clan moving to the valley will help? It's more adults, maybe they can watch Rutejìmo too?"

"The Tateshyúso? We don't know anything about them."

"If the elders trust them to let them move in, then they are probably good enough to watch your brother for a day. Right?"

"Y-Yeah, I guess. I wonder how big the clan is? I haven't seen more than three of them."

Kiríshi shrugged. "It doesn't matter tonight. Come on back. Just another hour."

"I... shouldn't."

With a frown, she hugged him. A small part of him hoped it was something more than a friendly embrace but he and Kiríshi had never really connected like she did with the others.

He squeezed her back. "Thank you, Ríshi."

"Tomorrow, I promise."

Desòchu smiled knowing that she wouldn't wake up in time. When she bade him a good night, he watched her run back toward the celebration before returning to his own route home.

To his surprise, there was light leaking underneath the blanket. He heard Rutejìmo giggling and a rattle being shook.

Ice ran through his veins. There was no way his father was playing with his brother.

Trembling, he pushed aside the blanket.

His grandmother was kneeling on the floor, a couch cushion underneath her knees as she changed his brother. Her shoulders were slumped as she moved with practiced grace.

His brother was on his back, shaking a rattle and giggling. His eyes caught on Desòchu and then a brilliant smile crossed his face. "Sochu play!"

Desòchu froze.

Tejìko wiped her face with the back of her hand before she turned back.

When he saw her red-rimmed and glistening eyes, the world began to spin Desòchu. The shadows of her face giving her the impression that she had aged a decade in the last few hours. She sniffed and gestured for him to come in.

"Grandmama? What are you doing here?"

"L-Little Jìmo was... he was crying." Her voice cracked and the sense that something was wrong rose up. The sound of it twisted Desòchu's stomach and squeezed his heart. It had been years since his grandmother had cried. The last time was when Desòchu's mother...

His fingers clenched as he inched into the living area. His eyes automatically went to his father's place but it was empty. Not even a bottle marked Hikòru's customary spot.

He stopped and stared, his eyes scanning for a discarded bottle, a blanket, or even a cap.

There was nothing.

“Where is Papa?”

His grandmother made a strange, choking noise in the back of her throat. She turned and fumbled with Rutejimo’s diaper. The cloth slipped from her finger before she caught it again and pulled it over his brother’s groin.

“Grandmama?” When she didn’t respond, he spoke more forcefully, “Where is Papa?”

“J-Just don’t ask that, please?”

“Grandmama? What is going...?” His voice trailed off. He felt something claw at his throat. Spinning on his heels, he rushed to his father’s room.

It was dark.

He fumbled for the glow light he knew was on the table. His fingers scraped along the empty surface. He frowned and stepped forward. His toe caught one of the lights. Reaching down, he grabbed it and twisted the handle. A faint clicking noise rose up as the light flickered to life.

His father’s room was almost empty. The bed was still there but it had an entirely different blanket. The dresser stood there with open drawers but he didn’t see even a hint of clothes or bottles.

A low gasp rose in his throat as he hurried around the other side of their home, to his father’s room.

There was nothing besides an empty room.

“Grandmama?” Desòchu rushed out of the room and back into the main one. “What is going on!?” he yelled.

She looked up, tears in her eyes.

“No, no.” He stopped and shook his head as his own throat began to seize. “N-No, he can’t be dead.”

“Stop.”

“Where is my papa!?” He yelled.

She planted a hand on the couch. Her face twisted into a scowl but it wouldn't hide the tears in her eyes. "Boy!"

"No, not this time! I won't let you do this again! What happened to my Papa!?"

Tejiko shoved herself up. "Stop asking!"

He stepped forward, inhaling as he did. "No!"

Tears ran down his grandmother's face.

"Listen, you wrinkled sack of a dog's balls! You told me to stop asking for my mother. Now you tell me not to ask about my father!" He smacked his chest. "My family. My parents! Do you honestly expect me just to roll over and pretend they didn't—"

Tejiko slapped him.

Desòchu stared at her for only a minute before he slapped her back. The force of his blow cracked in the room.

His grandmother stepped to the side. Her hand flew up to her cheek as she stood there, half bent over with tears in her eyes.

He knew he shouldn't have struck her back, but he couldn't stop himself. Grinding his teeth, he turned on her. "I'm not going to forget my mama and my papa just because you tell me. I don't care if Mifúno herself—"

She stood straight, her hand snapping up to strike. "Do not say that name!"

"Why not!?"

"Because I don't want to lose you too!"

"I'm not going anywhere, you wrinkled cow!"

Tejiko pressed her lips into a thin line. Her hand shook for a moment before she lowered it. He could hear her drawing in a deep breath with a shudder. Slowly, balled her hand into a fist before she spoke in a forced growl. "Take care of your brother."

He watched as she left. He wanted to chase after her and punch her but he kept himself still. When the blanket came down, he counted to five before relaxing slightly.

His father was gone. Dead for all he knew. He hated the man and everything that had happened, but he was still Desòchu's family.

"I can't handle this."

He scooped up his brother, made sure the diaper was firmly secure, and then deposited him into his crib. "Good night."

Rutejìmo reached up with both arms. "Sochu hug?"

"Go to sleep," Desòchu said before heading to his own room.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 13

Grief

Desòchu woke up to a full bladder and his brother's cries. He opened his eyes to the dark ceiling above him. His room had no outside openings and the glow lights were all dark. He peeked over to the entrance where the blue-tinged light from the living room shone into the opening.

The light reminded him of seeing his grandmother standing in the doorway when he found his mother bleeding in her bed.

As grief rose up, he closed his eyes and tightened his groin in hopes of being able to sleep away the memories and his obligations.

“Brudder! Sochu!”

With a groan, Desòchu lifted his head and glared at the entrance of his room. His brother stood in the entrance, an unavoidable reminder that he wouldn't have time to grieve or question his father's sudden disappearance.

“I wet.”

Desòchu shoved his face into his blankets and took a deep breath. It took a moment to build up the desire to move but he didn't have the time to sleep in like he did

when he was younger. Planting his hands on his mattress, he levered himself up and crawled out of bed.

Rutejimo reached out for him, holding his diaper in one hand and his sleeping clothes with another.

Ignoring his younger brother, Desòchu walked past him and into the living room.

The toddler ran after and then ahead of him. His naked butt was still moist from his diaper. He turned around and brandished his diaper. “Sochu! Sochu—!”

Desòchu looked away and toward his father’s room. His mood darkened instantly and he felt himself scowling.

“Soc—?”

He held up a hand.

Rutejimo quieted. Desòchu glanced down to see his brother staring at him with wide green eyes.

“Just... give me a second. Then I’ll take you out.”

“I pee.” Rutejimo held up his hand and waved his diaper. Droplets of urine splashed everywhere. Some of the splatters soaked into the couch.

Cringing, Desòchu started to grab for the diaper but then the pointlessness of the situation slammed into him. It didn’t matter what he did, it would be the same thing tomorrow and the day after.

He closed his fingers inches above his brother’s hand and pulled it back.

“Broder?”

Desòchu gestured to the ground. “Drop it, I’ll deal with it.”

“Sochu play?”

Feeling listless, Desòchu headed over to the eating area and pulled out a bottle of juice. There were only a few left. He reminded himself to tell his father to pick up more of them when he got another bottle of his own from the common store.

Then he remembered that his father was gone. Disappeared in the middle of the night and no one would ever mention his name again. His hand tightened on the bottle as tears began to gather in his eyes.

“Bro?”

Desòchu handed the bottle to his brother to distract him. When Rutejìmo toddled off giggling happily, Desòchu turned and headed for the front door. He had to step over the dirty diaper but he had no energy or desire to do anything about it. He needed air.

Outside, the valley was waking up with the sunrise. He didn't know how, but all the adults seemed to start moving almost the exact moment where the sun rose above the horizon.

Ignoring the pressure in his bladder, he sat down on the edge of the path with his feet dangling over. It was an uncomfortable position with the sharp rocks digging into his legs, but he knew he couldn't move too far from the cave in case Rutejìmo needed him.

Down below, he watched people gather at the cooking area. Everyone had their duties. The cooking fires had been burning for an hour and meals for a hundred mouths were almost prepared. Even his friends were up as they staggered back and forth underneath watchful eyes. It was obvious that they were all hung over and working with too little sleep.

The teenagers from the other clans were among the local teenagers. As they moved around underneath the canvas shelters, Desòchu could see them stealing kisses and touches with each other and Gemènyo. However, for all the affection they had, it was obvious they would be gone soon. Their bags were already stacked up out of the way on the side closest to the exit.

Even though he skipped out on the festivities the night before, Desòchu felt like he had missed something. It could have been him enjoying the tender kisses of fleeting affection. He could have woken up in the arms of some lover instead of tears and grief.

He turned and looked at the exit of the valley. He wished he was going with the other teenagers. A fleeting fantasy of running away rose up but was quickly crushed. He couldn't leave, he would never be allowed to leave with his brother holding him down.

“Brudder?”

Desòchu looked over his shoulder. Rutejìmo stood in the door, holding the now unadorned blanket aside with his arm. With a start, Desòchu crawled to his feet and looked at the entrance of his home.

A pile of trinkets laid on one side, almost all of them made of white porcelain and paper. Much of it was trimmed with gold. From a quick look, it appeared to be mostly small figurines of birds, books of poetry, and tiny vases. He frowned, white and gold were not the colors of the Shimusògo: yellow, orange, and red. Nor were they the colors of the new clan that had arrived; the Tateshyúso used light blues and greens as their colors.

The pile reminded him of the trinkets they had left with his mother's death. It was the only sign that anyone remembered either of his parent's lives. By night, it would be gone along with the last memory of his father.

Desòchu clenched his hand into a fist. His teeth ground together as he stared at the blanket. They had swapped it out in the middle of the night, a quiet betrayal of his father's life.

“Bro? What wrong?”

With a snarl, Desòchu stormed into the cave, shoving the blanket aside and ripping it out of his brother's hand.

Rutejìmo fell over with a thud.

Before his wail filled the cave, Desòchu was already heading to his room. He stopped halfway when he realized he desperately had to pee.

His brother cried out again.

Pushing away the discomfort, Desòchu continued to storm into his room. “Rot in hell, you shit-filled excuse for a brother!”

D. Moonfire

The Cliffs

Desòchu sat on the cliff with his feet hanging over the edge. The hundred-foot drop didn't bother him, but he still kept one hand firmly planted on the solid rock and the other on the sharp edge of cut stone. He remembered when the stone-cutting clan came to shape the hills surrounding the valley into steep-edged cliffs to protect the clan. They had carved the guard spot above the valley entrance.

Even though he knew his father must be dead, it didn't stop him from scanning the horizon for distinct sign of a clan runner: the plume of dust and sand that rose up behind the rapidly running courier.

"Are you safe up here, Sòchu?" asked Somiryòki. Desòchu glanced over his shoulder at the warrior. Somiryòki wore only a white shirt and orange trousers. The bright colors made his dark skin look like coal in the sunlight. Like Desòchu and the rest of the clan, his feet were callused from years of running across the sand, rock, and gravel.

Listlessly, Desòchu stood up and bowed deeply. "Yes, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki."

He was careful to use a deferential tone with the clan. They were all watching him since Hikòru disappeared. No

one said anything, but he noticed the warriors were always nearby when he was out of the cave.

It was the same with his grandmother, Tejíko had showed up every night after Desòchu decided to eat in the cave alone. He wasn't surprised when he started snapping at her, as if he was taking his father's antagonistic attitude.

That was also why he spent the morning cleaning dishes for a hundred people after he got into a screaming fight with her.

Somiryòki grunted and then gestured to the path at the rear of the guard spot. It led down to the ground and the rest of the clan valley. "Great Shimusogo Kiramíro will be up in about a half hour. Call if anyone approaches."

Sentry duty was a simple task, for the most part. The carved out spot gave a clear view of the surrounding desert. All he had to do was look for someone or something approaching and then call out to the warriors.

Desòchu wanted to ask about his father. He stood up but a look in Somiryòki's eyes stopped him. With a sigh, he bowed. "I will, Great Shimusogo Somiryòki."

The older warrior gave a short bow in return and then stepped away. His body blurred and he disappeared, kicking up a blast of wind that howled around Desòchu and pulled him from the edge of the cliff. Sand sucked after the warrior, coursing down the stairs and out of sight. The hiss of it settling into place echoed against the walls.

Finally alone, Desòchu considered sitting back on the edge of the cliff but quickly changed his mind. He paced along the smoothly-cut stone and let his mind dwell on his father's disappearance.

He stopped to pick up a rock. He threw it off the cliff and watched it sail a few rods before plummeting out of sight. He grabbed more and pulled back to throw them but then stopped. The rocks rolled in his palm before he clamped

his hand around it. The sharp edge dug into his palm and he concentrated on the discomfort.

“Sochu?” came a young boy’s voice.

Desòchu stiffened at the sound of his brother. He turned away from the younger boy, not willing to look at him. “Go away.”

“Sochu? Why you up?” Like young children, Rutejìmo didn’t understand how or where to place the inflections. It made his sentences muddled and difficult to understand. Just one more reason his brother needed to stay away from him.

Tiny feet scuffed on the sandy rock as Rutejìmo approached. “Sochu? Where Papa? Miss Papa.”

“Go away!” Desòchu shoved blindly at his brother. He missed. Turning around, he aimed more carefully and shoved him back, clipping his brother with his palm.

Rutejìmo stumbled back. He had been carrying his blanket and his stubby feet caught on it. He managed to regain his feet and shuffled closer. “Want Papa.”

Anger bubbled up. Desòchu shoved at Rutejìmo, this time catching him in the chest and shoving him back. It wasn’t different than the thousand times his father did the same thing to Rutejìmo in the family cave.

Rutejìmo thumped against the ground. He sniffed loudly and then began to cry. “I sad!”

Desòchu twisted his face in a scowl and then spun around, snarling at his brother. “Go away and drown in sands!”

Behind his brother, he could see the vast expanses of the desert rippling with heat. It seemed to cling to his brother’s outline and gave him a wavering appearance like a mirage.

An intense wave of anger exploded inside him. He stepped toward him. “If it wasn’t for you, he wouldn’t have been drinking. If it wasn’t for you, he would still be here! She would still be here!”

Somiryòki's warning rose up, that he couldn't talk about the dead. Desòchu ground down and crushed down his fear. It didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered anymore.

Rutejìmo backed away, but his foot caught on his blanket. He stumbled back, tears rolling down his face. There was a dark mark on his right cheek where Desòchu had slapped him that morning.

Desòchu glared down at his brother, seeing not the tears or hearing the whimpers, but seeing his dead mother instead. All the cheer and joy was gone when his brother showed up. Everything was ruined by her pregnancy.

He growled, "Go away!"

Rutejìmo tugged his blanket from around his leg, pulling the bright orange fabric to his chest. After a second of his lower lip trembling, he looked back up at Desòchu. "Sochu? Where is—"

"Shut up! Shut up forever!" Desòchu stepped forward and shoved his brother hard. Then he realized he had just pushed his sibling toward the edge of the cliff.

The young boy stumbled back, dropping his blanket as he let out a cry.

Desòchu swiped at him, trying to catch him but his fingers missing. "No!"

Rutejìmo planted his feet only inches away from the edge and flailed his hands frantically. His body twisted before he regained his balance. He froze, looking around with wide eyes.

Desòchu let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

Tears welled up in Rutejìmo's eyes.

"C-Come away from the edge, Jìmo." Desòchu reached out carefully. "Come here."

Rutejìmo stepped forward, his toes spreading out before he brought it down on his blanket. He stepped forward just

as something rolled underneath the fabric. With a cry, he fell as his leg collapsed.

Desòchu watched helplessly as Rutejìmo fell back.

“Papa!” screamed Rutejìmo as he flailed out. His tiny hands swung for Desòchu, but Desòchu couldn’t move as he watched his brother tumble back and hit the edge of the cliff. His head caught on the sharp ridge and snapped forward, thudding against his chest before bouncing back. In the briefest of moments, Desòchu could only see the whites of his brother’s eyes before Rutejìmo started to slide head-first off the hundred foot tall cliff.

A sudden wind blasted up the sheer cliff, bringing a sheet of sand that parted visibly around his brother’s head. The force of it stopped Rutejìmo from moving. For a mere second, his body was half on the rock and half dangling over air. Then the wind died down the tiny body continued fall over the edge.

Something slammed into Desòchu’s side and threw him away from the cliff. His eyes focused on a blur of movement as Kiramíro stopped at the cliff and grabbed at the tiny foot disappearing from sight. Despite leaning into a sheet of blowing sand and the wind of her own accelerated movement, she was steady as she caught Rutejìmo and pulled him up. Her entire body burned with golden flames, the magical power of the clan visible against the darkness of the unnatural sandstorm.

When she turned around, she held Rutejìmo tight against her chest. Blood poured from between her fingers and down Rutejìmo’s neck, soaking both of their clothes in a matter of seconds.

She focused on Rutejìmo, her green eyes glowing from the reflected light of the flames that wreathed her body.

For a moment, emotions stormed inside Desòchu: fear for himself, rage that tore at him, and to his surprise, terror

seeing blood splashing on the ground at her feet. He gulped and the double image of his mother and Rutejìmo bleeding ripped through his thoughts. It left him confused so he gripped at the only emotion he understood: anger. He stepped forward. “It wasn’t my fault. It was—”

“Go to your grandmother!” Kiramíro’s shrill voice echoed against the rocks.

The memory of the night when Tejíko had kicked Desòchu and Hikòru from his mother’s room came back. “I will not—!”

She opened her mouth and screamed, but it was a screech of a bird that came out instead of a human’s voice. It rose into a high-pitched call, a sound that shook the ground around her and rippled out in waves of force.

Fear echoed in his heart. He had never heard such an inhuman sound coming from someone’s throat before. It was a bird’s call, like the one his grandmother made, but the force of it was far more powerful. It frightened him as it beat against his chest and ripped at his ears.

Desòchu started to turn to run away when wind blasted him from the path leading up to the guard spot. In a moment, his eyes saw nothing but the blur of movement.

When the wind died down, his route was blocked and most of the clan elders were standing around him. They had their weapons out, naked blades and bolas in their hands.

Somiryòki stood in the front, golden flames rising from his body. The heat of the older man’s presence prickled Desòchu’s skin.

Desòchu looked up at Somiryòki and then at the others. They were all looking at Kiramíro and Rutejìmo, but he knew it would only be a matter of moments before they turned to him. Fear tore through him, crumbling as he realized that he had gone too far.

The heat from Somiryòki increased, wavering the air and making it hard to breathe. Slowly, he turned to look over at Desòchu.

Around the two, the others shifted away.

Desòchu opened his mouth to say something just as Somiryòki backhanded him. The impact left stars floating across his vision before he slammed into the wall six feet away. Striking the ground drove the air from his lungs.

Flailing, Desòchu tried to get air in his lungs. He slumped to the ground for a moment then pushed himself up. He managed to put his hands in a defensive position and prepare for a fight.

Somiryòki stormed up to him. His entire body was burning and the intensity of the heat caused the air to ripple around him. He said nothing as he smacked Desòchu's hands aside.

Desòchu tried to bring his hands back but the warrior grabbed the front of his shirt with one hand and yanked their bodies together. Snarly, Desòchu kicked for Somiryòki's balls but hit the rock-hard thigh instead.

He opened his mouth to try speaking, but a second backhand silenced him. He turned back as a scowl etched across his face. From the corner of his vision, he could see the rest of the clan staring at him. There were expressions of anger and annoyance but none of sympathy. Turning his attention to the warrior. "What do you want me to say, old man?"

"Why did you do it?" said Tejíko on the side. Her hair was loose from her ring, the long strands fluttering with the heat and magic gathered around them.

He glared at his grandmother. "Because you won't talk about them. You just pretend they didn't exist, hide their names, and live your moon-damned lives as if they were never born."

Tejiko took a step forward. “That is not—”

“Rot in the moon light, old woman. I’m tired of—”

No other words came out as Somiryòki slapped him hard. Blood splattered across the ground as Desòchu’s head came back in time for a second strike against his other cheek.

Desòchu glared at the warrior as the taste of blood flooded his mouth. His face burned from the impacts. “Drown in sands, old man. I will not ever stop saying Chyo—”

The punch caught him right below the ribs, the impact driving the air from his lungs. He gaped, his mouth open but the air refusing to draw into his chest. With tears in his eyes, he looked around at the others in hopes of seeing any form of sympathy or understanding.

There was none.

On the far side of the crowd, Kiramíro held Rutejìmo tightly. Both of them were covered with blood but she seemed calmer as she patted the bawling baby’s head against her shoulder. She caught him looking at her and her eyes narrowed.

Yutsupazéso limped up to Kiramíro and Rutejìmo. She sighed as she looked at the wound. “He’ll survive,” she said in a wavering voice that somehow cut through the tension.

Somiryòki’s weight ground Desòchu against the the wall. “And the boy?”

The old woman looked at them and then nodded. “Start it now, don’t wait for the others.”

Desòchu looked up at Somiryòki just as the older man’s strike caught the side of his head. Instead of slapping him like before, the warrior had switched to a punch. The hard knuckles and blast of heat slammed Desòchu’s head to the side.

Somiryòki released Desòchu and the younger boy staggered to the side.

Kiramíro appeared next to him and punched him in the gut. The blow picked him off the ground as he folded over it. He almost threw up before his feet struck the ground.

Another punch caught his chin, snapping his head back.

Stunned and dazed, Desòchu tried to block the blows but they came from too many directions, too fast, and too strong. He threw up between the attacks as he tried to find some escape from the brutal assault.

He dropped to his knees.

The blows kept coming.

Blood dripped down his face.

He looked up to see Kiramíro standing over him, the warrior's body burning with flame.

She balled her hand into a burning fist. The heat grew more intense, beating against his face and causing his wounds to burn.

Desòchu spat blood before he glared at her. "At least you'll never say my name."

He never saw her punch, only the flame that sent him into oblivion.

D. Moonfire

Abandoned

Even without his eyes open, Desòchu could feel the ache and burns along his entire body. It felt like he had fallen down a cliff or gone a few rounds of sparring with Somiryòki. Even the joints protested movement as he tried to pull his thoughts out of the clenching darkness of unconsciousness. The last time he felt so much pain was when he had brawled with his friends over in Ryayusuki Valley. He smiled to himself but the smile froze on his face when he couldn't remember visiting the valley recently. Or a brawl. Or drinking himself into unconsciousness. All of those had been put aside to care for his brother.

He remembered Kiramíro punching him and then nothing.

No doubt, once he got up, Yutsupazéso would have an endless list of punishments to inflict on him. He could look forward to hauling garbage and cleaning dishes until his black hair turned white.

Still struggling to wake up, he imagined they had thrown his limp body back into his room.

With a groan, he rolled over and planted his face into his pillow. Instead of a soft cushion, his nose and face dug into

sand. Heat spread across his face in a wave of agony. It was quickly followed by the additional pain of having his bare chest lying across the sun-blasted ground.

With a yelp, Desòchu scrambled to his feet and pawed at his face. The bright light blinded him. Spinning around, he turned and wiped at his face until the heat burned the back of his head and shoulders. It was only a small measure, but the slightly less bright light made it easier to concentrate. He focused on blinking and wiping. When he finally could see, he looked around to see nothing but rock and sand.

There was nothing around him, just dunes of sand and hills of sharp rocks. He didn't recognize the reddish color of the stones nor the mountain ranges in the distance. He turned and looked around for any familiar landmark, or even something besides the rippling dunes.

To the west, where the sun still had a palm-span to reach the horizon, he spotted three spires of rocks rising above the sand. Still in the sunlight, the spires looked like fingers reaching into the sky. They were one of the Wind's Teeth, unusual rock formations of pillars that stood high above the ground. They were useless for most things but they made good landmarks while traveling. From his estimate, the three he was looking at were about a league away.

Desòchu frowned and turned around again slowly as he tried to find another landmark to use. Walking miles across the desert without shelter would be dangerous, no matter how often he had done it when visiting the local valleys. The shifting dunes made it easy to travel in circles.

While he searched for something, he absently rubbed his aching elbow. When his fingers scraped along ragged flesh, he hissed in pain. Surprised, he looked down.

His entire arm looked like it had been dragged across the sands. The fabric of his shirt had been stripped away. Underneath the shredded material, he could see that his raw

skin that had thousands of scratches and tears. Dried blood and sand flies covered his wounds.

“Shit,” he muttered.

Desòchu brushed off the bugs and looked down to see more abrasions along his hips and thighs. Even his bare toes weren't spared from abuse. One of his toes was much darker than the others, almost black.

“Stupid cow,” he muttered while he continued to inspect his injuries.

His aches and pains made more sense. It looked and felt like he had been dragged miles across the sand. His neck hurt from where the collar of his shirt would have dug into the flesh.

“What in the sands?” he rasped. His throat ached and his lips were cracked. He groaned and looked around. “What did that rancid goat do? Drag me across the desert?”

Turning around again, he scanned the horizon while gingerly holding a scratch along his shoulder. He moved to rubbing his throat and glanced around for Kiramíro who he knew had to be laughing at him. When he didn't see the older man standing there mocking him, he slowly searched for the sight of anyone.

After a few minutes of turning around in the blazing sun, he had to acknowledge his situation. “Nowhere to get out of the damned sun.”

He had been taught the basics of desert survival. At least he had heard the stories over the campfire. The safest would be to hide from the sun and travel at dusk. It would be cooler, at least until everything got bitterly cold from a lack of sunlight. However, the clan always traveled during the day and in the overwhelming heat of sunlight.

Desòchu wiped the sweat from his brow. Why would anyone travel in his heat? He had done the hour-long trip to the surrounding valleys before. The end was always a trudge

for the last few hundred chains but, in that situation, he had a goal. There was no obvious destination now.

The clan ran for hours in the sun but they never explained why they didn't pass out from exhaustion or need to drink gallons of water. He snorted, it was probably related to their speed magic. However, he didn't have those abilities.

He groaned and shook his head. He had two choices, burrow like an insect or start walking. Neither sounded enjoyable. Shielding his eyes, he measured the sun's height with his palm; there was probably only an hour or so of sunlight before everything got dark. After that, it would be almost impossible to find the rocks.

"No reason to wait here," he decided.

He began to walk toward the rocks. Less than a few steps later, he was cursing Kiramíro's name and the rest of the clan that left him alone in the desert.

Desòchu's anger got him over three dunes. By then, the sweat had dripped over his cuts and scratches. The throbbing agony in his abused joints made it impossible to keep muttering while walking.

He stopped. While he wiped the gathered flies from his raw wounds, he thought about how he had gotten there. It wasn't his fault that Rutejìmo had almost fallen. He had done his duty, more than anyone else in the valley. Every night, every day. No one else helped him take care of the babe.

He spun around. "He wasn't hurt!"

His voice didn't echo across the sands.

"So I made a mistake! No one died!"

A faint breeze brought searing heat to buffet against his chest.

"Don't leave me out here! I won't make the same mistake, I promise!"

He half slid, half stomped along the far edge of the dune. His bare feet scraped against a gravel scree. He winced and limped over it. He had to move quickly to avoid the searing rock from cooking the bottom of his abused soles. "This is too much, you wrinkled goat! Goats! All of you!:

He took a deep breath to keep yelling. "Why didn't anyone take him!? Why didn't you help!? I asked and I asked! None of you had time! None of you were willing to help! Why can't you see that!?"

Desòchu cocked his head hoping to hear someone running toward him. When he didn't, he crawled up the other side of the dune to peer around again. He desperately looked for the plume that the Shimusògo left when they ran at high speed. If he was lucky, they would have heard his apology and were coming back.

Nothing.

"Shit," he muttered, wiping sudden tears from his eyes. Even abandoned, he ended up saying the wrong thing. Turning back toward the three spires, he resumed his path to the only shelter he had seen.

"Moon-damned old cows. May all of them rot in the sun and let the vultures pluck out their eyes. They can't even believe I made a mistake. After everything I have done for that bastard..."

D. Moonfire

Persistence

Desòchu struggled to crawl up the side of yet another dune. This one had fragments of sharp rocks that dug into his palms and feet but, after countless others, he ignored the trickling blood and aching joints to haul himself to the top.

Panting, he wiped the dried salt from his brow. “What is wrong with my moon-damned clan? How can they possibly think running in this heat is somehow better?”

He knew others in the clan said that Tachìra, the sun spirit, protected them against the heat but when pressed for more, they never continued. They would just clear their throats and change the topic.

Bending over, he took a couple deep breaths before straightening. He looked for the Wind’s Teeth first. He had gotten disoriented more than once in the last few hours.

The three pillars were much closer but still too far away. They mocked him by appearing to only be slightly larger than when he last looked.

Next to the spires, the sun had become a burning sphere of red light. Half-hidden by the horizon, it cast brilliant heat and light across everything. The sand around his feet looked like fresh blood from the setting sun. He shuddered

at the memory of his mother's death before pushing it back.

"Sun-damned sand and the idiotic goats that run along them," he muttered. He scanned the horizon for any sign of another person. When he spotted nothing, he shook his head in disappointment. There was no one: no plume of a fast clan, no rippling of slower travelers, not even darkness hinting at an oasis or structure.

He turned and regarded his destination. The sun would be gone in about fifteen minutes. With a clear sky, that meant he only had a half hour, an hour at most, before he would be walking blindly. The rocks were about a hour and half walking. The only way to make the rocks would be to jog.

"Damn Kiramíro and the cactus up her ass," he snarled.

Gathering his flagging strength, he walked quickly for a few steps before moving into a jog. Despite not having speed powers of the clan, all the teenagers were forced to run around the valley. It came back quickly: the familiar tugging of sand on his feet, the burning air in his lungs, and the dizziness he got when he ran at his limit. It reminded him of home and back when he had a simple and happy life.

Grinding his teeth, he ran along the ridge of the dune. It was hotter in the sun but it also meant less effort to racing down into a valley or struggling up the other side.

It felt like seconds later before he struggled to breathe and struggling to remain on his feet. Hours of walking had sapped his strength. His injuries ached in joints, stiffening them. Every time he lifted his foot, it felt like a weight had been tied to his ankle. He breathed deeper, drawing the sun-seared air into his lungs.

Desòchu needed to go faster. He groaned and pushed himself, trying to find some measure to strength get him to

the rocks. He didn't know if there would be a clan elder waiting for him or even the possibility of food, all he needed was to reach the shade and get out of the damned sun.

His vision blurred.

He wiped his forehead and kept running. He reached the end of the easy part and raced down the side, half sliding and half crawling until he reached the bottom. He could only risk running out of sight of the spires for a few minutes before he had to scale the next dune.

"Shit!" he screamed. His voice sounded ragged and pained.

Coming up on the next ridge, he oriented himself toward the spires again and kept running. He prayed that the next one would be easier but when he had to delve back into the space between dunes, he struggled to move his legs enough to clear the sucking sand that gripped his feet.

"Shit on all of you!" he screamed and tore up the side. The tales of danger about rushing blindly in the desert rose up, the whispered tales over the fires never ended well. He didn't care anymore. He charged forward. He just had to make it, then he could collapse.

Eyes blurred with his exhaustion, he struggled to keep going. He wanted to drop down and give up, to let the vultures pluck his corpse apart.

That would leave his brother without a family.

His brother.

Desòchu's rage rose up again, the frustration and hatred giving him strength as he powered his way up the incline and down the other side. He growled and snarled with every step, reminding himself that it wasn't his fault his brother almost died. If the bastard hadn't entered his life, Desòchu would still have his parents. His mother's corpse wouldn't seared into his memory. His father would still be at home, coming home with a smile and small trinkets.

The words became difficult. He couldn't talk, he could barely breathe.

He had to, he had to scream.

With an inarticulate howl, he reached for one more surge of strength, one more shred of willpower.

There was nothing.

His legs collapsed underneath him. The burn of his run matched the agony in his chest. His face smacked against the hot sands and he could only sob past the grains that stuck to his bloody lips and dry mouth.

With a supreme effort, he rolled over. "Shit on all of you!" he wheezed with all his might.

His eyes burned, if he had tears left, they would be dotting the dust across his face. He wiped it anyways, smearing the salt across his vision.

Above him, the sky drew darker.

"Shit on you," he gasped.

Desòchu knew he couldn't stay. It would get cold soon. He had to keep moving. With a groan, he rolled over and forced himself to his knees.

"I hope you drown in sands, you addled cows."

Panting, he looked around. The three spires stood just out of reach, beyond his limit. He would never make them, not unless he could somehow get the powers of his clan in the next few minutes.

He glanced over his shoulder.

The moon, Chobìre, shone brightly along the horizon. The reddish disc peeked over the edge, reflecting the last light of the sun.

Desòchu shuddered. Nothing good came from the night, not the clans or the creatures that haunted the desert at night. He remembered when Somiryòki had introduced him to the Fijimòsu but he didn't believe it. Why would the warrior keep it a secret?

However, the moon might give him enough light to reach the spires. Hopefully, he levered himself to his feet and inched up to the ridge next to him. Shielding his eyes, he scanned the horizon for one last hint of humanity.

He spotted a dark edge of something. It wasn't in the same direction as the three spires but the moonlight sparkled on something near the darkness. He glanced at the Wind's Teeth, they appeared to be about the twice the distance away as the unknown object.

Desòchu worked his raw lips for a moment as he considered his options: the rock spires or explore the closer unknown.

His chest began to beat faster and his vision blurred. The urge to race to the pillars rose up.

He took a step toward the rocks but then stopped. He had no more energy, no more will to run. He couldn't see any light or any hint that he would be able to find the rocks in the moonlight. For all he knew, he would stumble and break his leg.

Slowly, he turned to the darkness. It was closer. If it ended up being nothing, he would have lost a half hour of walking. If it had water, shelter, or even a place to hide and sleep, it would be better.

He shook his head to clear the dizziness and limped toward the unknown.

D. Moonfire

The Chasm

An hour later whatever caught Desòchu attention didn't look any more promising than the Wind's Teeth. It appeared to be some sort of gorge that ripped along the desert. The edges were unnaturally dark with the transition from slightly reddish sand to chunks of black gravel.

However, he couldn't walk away. Something drew him closer, like a whisper in the back of his head that refused to get loud enough to understand. It called to him, urging him to keep walking even as the sun dipped below the horizon and shadows stretched across the sands.

His bare feet ached and burned. He was going through a patch of fine sand that clung to everything. It caught the scratches and cuts along his body, irritating them as they nestled into the drying wounds.

Desòchu slowed down and turned to look at the Wind's Teeth again. They were further away and even less of an option but he wondered if the chasm before him was more dangerous than the spires. At least he knew that the spires probably had a supply cache for travelers somewhere near the base of the pillars of rocks; or at least, that is what the stories around the fires told him.

A whisper caught his attention. He turned back toward the ragged cut across the desert. He had to know what it was. There wasn't enough light to jog so he trudged forward, moving steadily through the fine sands that made every step a struggle.

He panted and grumbled. With a thousand little irritations and the growing anxiety that he was heading nowhere, his mind returned to the familiar thoughts of anger toward the clan and his brother.

Grumbling under his breath, he was lost in the memories of the many times Yutsupazéso refused to give him a break from Rutejimo that he almost walked off the edge of rocks and plunged into the gorge. Only a cool breeze and a prickle of danger stopped him from taking the last step.

A surge of adrenaline rushed through him and he stumbled back. His aching feet caught a sharp rock and he fell back, landing on the sand with a thump.

With his heart slamming into his ribs, he couldn't move for a moment. Sweat prickled along his brow but the rapidly cooling air made it felt like ice.

"Shit in my skull," he finally said, his throat sore from ranting earlier.

Desòchu waited until his body calmed down before he scrambled to his hands and knees. With a frown, he crawled over to the edge of the cliff and peered down.

To his surprise, the bottom of the chasm wasn't dark. There were splotches of green and blue everywhere. At first, he thought they were painted on but the longer he looked, the more they appeared to be rippling.

"W-What?" he rasped through his dry lips. He stared down, blinking as he tried to focus on the shifting colors. It didn't appear to be water but it was difficult to see. He couldn't spot a clear edge to where the dark walls of the chasm ended and the colors began. Instead, it appeared

that the colors were also along the bottom edges of the cliff, making it impossible to tell how far of a drop it would take to reach the bottom.

Desòchu felt the urge to crawl in.

He drew back. What was he thinking? Crawling down into an unknown chasm because it had lights? He looked around at the rapidly darkening desert around him. Night was approaching and he didn't have many options.

A whisper tickled his hearing. He spun around but there was no one. He glanced at the chasm, it almost sounded like it was down below.

Desòchu shook his head and stepped away. No, he couldn't go down there. He scrambled up to the top of a nearby ridge and peered around, trying to find the Wind's Teeth to head there.

Despite the crescent moon, the three spires of rocks weren't visible in the dark. No matter what direction he headed, he would be risking his life by traveling blindly.

"Damn, damn all of those goats."

He leaned over and peered down and tried to guess how far it would be to crawl down. After a few minutes, he started to get up and then realized that the sides of the cliff were easier to see, but only if he swayed his body to see the difference in angles.

After what felt like an eternity, he guessed that it was about sixteen or seventeen feet to the bottom of the cliff. The only difficulty was finding a safer spot to crawl down than just plunging off the edge.

The urge to crawl in grew stronger. He felt the pull on his heart, a beckoning that scared him. He couldn't resist, but he felt like he should be trying harder.

Gulping, Desòchu took a step away and then considered his options. Not seeing an obvious way down, he turned to his right and followed the edge carefully.

Every step made him feel like he was about to plummet into the chasm but it was better than the pitch darkness around him. He carefully scanned the depths, looking for a spot that he could climb down. A ladder would be nice, if he had his choice.

His opportunity came about an hour later when the side of the chasm had collapsed creating a scree that led to the bottom. The greens and blues were partially obscured by the gravel but he could see where the glowing colors had started to crawl over the mound.

Carefully, he worked his way down. Compared to the fine sands and gravel, the sharp rocks were uncomfortable against the soles of his feet and his bare hands. Thankfully, years of walking around the valley had toughened the calluses on his feet and the effort to reach the chasm floor was only a discomfort.

At the bottom, the source of the glow became obvious: small glowing plants. There were no petals or stems, just tiny sprouts less than inch tall. Each one glowed faintly but with the plants growing on every surface, there were so many that it was bright. The air was moist and icy. He breathed in the delicate scents; the sweet sharpness was unlike anything he had smelled before.

Desòchu gave a hesitant step. The ground was soft and damp, not quite wet. It also wasn't sand but something else, something more pliable than rock or sand or gravel.

Warning stories told over the campfires told him that he should be worried about stagnant water but he couldn't see anything pooled. He half expected a stream, like one that came out of the water tuns in the valley, but he couldn't find any.

Fear prickling along his skin, he started his way down the gorge back in the direction of the Wind's Teeth. He wasn't sure what he would see, but he was hoping for some-

thing to parch his thirst or at least something to use as shelter for the night.

He didn't get more than a three chains—only a couple hundred feet—before a crunch behind him startled him.

Desòchu spun around, his eyes wide and his heart pounding.

The ground thudded underneath him, the vibrations shaking through his legs.

He reached out and planted his hand on the cliff wall, his palm crushing the glowing plants underneath.

Another crunch followed by a thud. Something in the chasm seemed to be moving toward him. Like seeing the edges from above, it was difficult to identify the edges of movement.

He glanced over his shoulder and then back.

It was still moving. Greens and blues wavered back and forth, revealing a skull-like head with black holes for eyes.

He whispered swears underneath his breath. Turning on his heels, he sprinted down the chasm. As he ran, he crushed the glowing plants underneath his feet and the wet sucking noises of his steps echoed against the walls.

Underneath him, the ground continued to shake in steady, thudding waves.

He didn't slow until the sounds faded and the thuds in the grounds were just quivers. Panting, he scanned the cliff walls for any place to hide. The sheer walls didn't offer any.

Desòchu had to turn and fight. He started to scan the ground for a weapon to use. To his surprise, he spotted both a hand-sized rock and a hollow niche in the wall at the same time. Swearing under his breath, he snatched up the rock and got a firm grip on the moist surface. The glowing plants smeared across his skin, the glow turning his flesh black in contrast.

He shoved himself into the crack in the cliff. It was tight, narrower than his shoulders, but he was able to cram himself in with the rock in his hand ready to strike out.

The sound of thudding grew louder.

Desòchu tightened his grip on the rock, holding it so a sharp edge was exposed like a blade. In his mind, he prepared himself to slash out. He didn't know if it was a creature or man, but he wanted to make sure he would win the fight.

A few dislodged pebbles fell on his head.

He held himself still, his breath coming sharply. He realized he was making too much noise and tried to breathe through his nose but it was still painfully loud in his tight confines.

Wanting to silence himself, he tried to bring his other hand up to cover his mouth and hands but it was trapped in the rock.

Rocks crunched and rolled. The earth shuddered underneath him.

Then a snort.

Desòchu's fear subsided slightly. It was just a creature. He could handle that, it would be scared. He forced himself to take slow, deep breaths despite the pounding in his ears. His fingers ached from holding the rock.

The shaking grew louder and overwhelming.

He began to worry. Was it slowing down? Had it already passed? He shivering with anticipation as he fought the urge to look.

The sound of cracking noise startled him. And then a hot blast of air rushed past him.

He clamped down on his lips and held his breath.

Large horns swayed as they passed him, then a massive head of some sort of steer. It looked like one of the oxen the Fijimòsu had used to deliver wood and supplies to the val-

ley. The green and blue plants had clung to the creature's hair, painting it with the same colors as the chasm. The only part that was black was the eyes. The empty space was dark as night.

Then the ox stopped.

Even though Desòchu couldn't see it looking at him, he could feel the gaze of the creature as it regarded him.

He clamped his jaw tight and lashed out. The rock caught the side of the ox right behind the eye. It felt like hitting the cliff wall. He slashed at it again as he shoved himself out of the niche.

His shoulder slammed against the bulk of the creature. He scrambled back, shoving his way past while slashing out with the rock to beat it away.

The ox swung its head, ramming its horns into the side of the cliff. Stone crunched and cracked as it tore out the side of the sheer wall.

Shards of rocks peppered Desòchu's back before a sharp pain scored across his back. He let out a cry of pain and beat the creature harder with the sharp rock until he could throw himself free.

The ox howled, either in pain or anger. It slammed hard against the walls and the ground shuddered.

Clutching his back where hot blood was already soaking his shirt, Desòchu raced back the way he came. He had to escape before the creature gored him.

It was only moments before the ground bucked underneath him. The steady beat had gotten faster, thudding rapidly on the ground as the sense of something approaching loomed over him.

It was the ox and it was charging after him.

Desòchu snarled himself as he raced along the valley. Greens and blues rushed past him in a blur. He tightened his grip on the rock in fear that he would lose it.

The ox's thundering hooves beat faster. The ground shook more violently and he found it difficult to retain his balance.

To his relief, he came up to the scree. With a bellow, he surged up it.

Sharp rocks tore at his feet and the gravel shifted out from underneath him. He slid back. "Shit!" he swore as he was flipped over and dragged down by gravity. The rocks ripped at his back and legs.

The ox was roaring as it charged. He could see the painted fur as it covered the distance.

Desòchu set his jaw and held back his hand. He would only have one chance to kill the creature.

The sharp horns dipped low. They dug into the ground, narrowly avoiding piercing Desòchu's body before they scooped him up.

He let out a cry filled with shock and anger. With the force of the creature's charge holding him down, he managed to slam the rock into its skull with all his might, hammering into it the rock-like head in desperation to kill the beast.

Blood splattered across his face but he didn't dare stop.

The ox shuddered as it swayed to the side. The horns tore into the side of the cliff as it stumbled over the scree.

Desòchu's body was crushed against the rocks for a moment and he felt something snapping in his chest. He had broken a rib. His yelling was halted instantly in a flash of pain but he bore down and continued to hammer into the steer, smashing at fur and bone until his body was coated in blood.

The creature staggered forward, finally slowing as it shook its head.

He gripped the horns tightly and began to strike with more precision, channeling hours of rage and anger into

more effective blows against the creature's nose and eyes. The pain in his chest only intensified but he couldn't stop, wouldn't stop.

The ox yanked its head up and threw him into the air.

Desòchu tried to get one more blow but missed. Then he was sailing with nothing but dim light spinning in all directions.

He swore loudly, his voice echoing against the cliff walls.

The scree tore into his body as he landed on it. The impact slammed against his chest, driving the air out of his lungs. As he scrambled to his feet, he tried to inhale by his body wasn't responding. He opened his mouth to draw in air even as he held up his bloody rock to strike another blow.

The ox was still recovering, shaking its head back and forth. Blood splattered to the ground underneath it, the thick liquid snuffing out the glow in ragged lines and puddles.

Despite the blood rolling down his back and the agony of his injuries, Desòchu considered racing forward and killing the dazed beast. He hefted his rock and prepared to charge.

The ox stopped.

Desòchu held his breath. As he did, his injuries began to intrude on his thoughts. He could feel the sharp pain in his chest, the cuts along his body, and the burn in his lungs but he refused to let them stop him. He snarled at the creature.

Slowly, the steer turned its head to face him. Blood ran down the side of its face, blotting out the light that had been painted across its hairs. A low grumble rose up from the broad chest, a sound that rumbled against the walls.

He reconsidered attacking.

The creature pawed the ground, kicking up divots of glowing plants and earth. It turned around to face him, each step shuddering the ground.

Desòchu looked up the scree and then back. If the ox charged, he didn't have many options to avoid being gored besides climbing up the rock. However, if he was on his hands and knees, he would be vulnerable.

A choice had to be made. He flicked his thumb at the ox. "Rot in sands!"

The ox charged.

Surprised, Desòchu threw the rock at the ox and scrambled for the scree. His fingers dug into the sharp rocks as he raced up the side.

The ground shuddered as the ox slammed into the gravel underneath his feet. The horns ripped out the ground and he slipped down, his bare feet smacking against the bloody skull.

Desòchu howled and kicked off the ox's head. He threw himself as high as he could and dug his way up, kicking rocks and gravel behind him as he raced for the top. Every movement was agony but he couldn't give up. He dug his fingers into the rocks until he felt his fingers bleed and hauled himself higher.

The ox reared back and slammed down again, the blow destroying the lower part of the scree.

With the sharp rocks pouring into the valley, Desòchu made a desperate lunge to catch the edge of the cliff. His fingers caught the edge just as he lost his footing. Fingernails cracked as he hauled himself up on the cliff.

The entire cliff shuddered as the creature below slammed into it.

He almost lost his grip but he managed to hold on long enough to hook one leg over the edge and pull himself up.

"Shit. Damn all this crap!" he gasped as he crawled to his knees.

The ground continued to shudder as the ox slammed into the cliff. Roars rose up, echoing against the walls.

“Rot in hell!” Desòchu screamed back before shoving himself up to his feet and stalking away. He didn’t care about the dark anymore. He just had to keep moving.

The pain in his ribs grew harder to ignore. He pressed a sweaty palm against his injury.

He only made it a few steps before a wave of dizziness struck him. He swayed for a moment, his breathing growing ragged as the pain grew more intense. His limbs felt weak and he started to collapse.

Desòchu screamed out wordlessly, trying to find some way of forcing himself to move forward. He caught his thigh and caught himself from falling. Gripping his chest tightly, he straightened himself.

Underneath his palm, he felt a sudden heat underneath his palm. Then, a sickening grind of bones as his rib twisted underneath his hand.

He froze, his eyes wide, as he felt the bones scraping against each other as the heat grew more intense. Then, with a crunch, the broken rib settled into place.

In a rush, Desòchu felt stronger than every before. He was part of the rock itself. Around him, the world seemed to grow brighter and he found the strength to take another step.

He morbidly dug his fingers into his ribs, but the pain had faded away into a dull ache. The cuts and scrapes remained, but his deeper injuries appear to have been nothing more than a memory.

Straightening, he shook his head to clear it. He gave one last look at the chasm behind him. The call to return was still there but it had muted drastically after his fight with the ox.

“Just a waste of time,” he muttered.

D. Moonfire

Planning Ahead

With a groan, Desòchu slumped to the ground. His torn palm dug into the fine sand, cushioning the blow but also scraping his open wounds. He panted for a moment and small clouds of his breath wreathed around him. Then, he rolled over and sat up.

“Damn them all to the moon,” he gasped.

His body throbbed from his fresh injuries. Gingerly, he reached back and prodded them. Fortunately, they felt long but shallow, scratches that dug a little deep instead of piercing organs or cutting into arteries. Some of them were already tacky, no longer dripping blood but still tender to the touch.

He remembered his broken ribs and the strange way the pain faded away. He poked at the injury but there was only a few bruises to indicate that he had ever been drastically injured.

After a few minutes of inspection, he was happy to see that he wasn't going to bleed to death in the night. Sand flies, on the other hand, were going to be a problem in the morning.

His stomach rumbled.

He forced himself to close his mouth and breath slowly through his nose. The thin streamers of mist warned him how cold it was. As hot as the day got, the desert was even colder with only the shredded remains of his clothes to protect him.

With a groan, he pushed himself back to his feet and looked around. The crescent moon made it almost impossible to see anything with detail, but he focused on anything that would make it easier to survive the night: rocky outcropping, a cactus he could harvest for moisture, or even a forgotten pile of wood with a handy fire starter.

With a snort, he turned around slowly. His stomach rumbled but it was nothing compared to throb of his injuries and the dryness in the back of his throat.

Right at the edge of his vision, he thought he saw a small group of cactus sticking out next to a small pile of rocks. It was a risky chance, but so was freezing to death in the night.

Without any reason to stall, he headed toward the cactus. "Tomorrow, I'm going to head back into that chasm and find some food and water. If those goats are going to shove me out here, I'll survive despite them," he grumbled.

Vultures

Desòchu woke up to a sharp pain in his chest. It thumped between the gap of his ribs, the sharp edge of something feeling like a knife blade as it jabbed into the sensitive spot repeatedly.

His eyes snapped open. He only had a chance to see black wings fluttering above him before he panicked. With a gasp, he sat up but his head thumped against the rock-like skull of some bird as it perched on his arm.

“W-What? Get! Get away!” He flailed helplessly, his hand thumping against feathers and wings as he tried to clear his senses. His mind struggled as he beat helplessly. “Get! Off!”

A wing smacked against his face before the vulture hopped off with a loud screech.

He froze, staring at the bald-headed bird in shock. It had a deep red head with black wings. With its head ducked low, it looked hunched.

The vulture bobbed its head and spread out its wings, screeching loudly.

Desòchu punched it. “Get off!”

The bird’s head snapped to the side and then it came back, screeching louder. It beat its wings violently and

pecked at him, the razor-sharp beak slashing at his bare chest.

Snarling, Desòchu fought back with his fists. He punched the bird with both hands, slamming into them as he felt the anger rising up. After everything that he had gone through, a bird was going to best him?

The world wavered around him as he punched the bird with one hand while trying to wrap his hand around the creature's neck with the other. His hand seemed to flicker for a moment.

He froze as he stopped in shock.

The vulture screeched again, hopping backwards. Its wings beat twice before it hopped back again. It looked almost smug as it regarded him with dark, beady eyes.

Desòchu held up his fists. "Really want to go another round?"

A screech to his side answered.

Desòchu felt a prickle of nervousness rising up as he peeked to the side.

There were three other vultures standing on the rocks above his head. Two more were on the cactus that he had broken open with his fingers to get moisture the night before. Their claws dug into the top of it and one had a glistening head where it had probed the gaping hole in the side.

Desòchu let out his breath but kept his hands ready to strike. "Shit on me."

Another screech came from his other side. Two vultures hopped on the ground, their wings spread out as they stared at him. He found himself staring at their bobbing heads.

Then the first vulture lunged.

"Shit!" Desòchu scrambled to his feet. Punching a bird was one thing, but an entire flock was beyond even his anger.

The bird pecked at his heels.

He scrambled away, his bare feet working weakly as he still struggled to wake up. Fear pushed away everything but the need to run.

One of the vultures landed on his shoulder and pecked at his head.

He flailed at it, punching it in the chest, and kept running away.

More of the birds took to the air around him. Wings fluttered as they dove down, smacking him with beaks and wings as he raced blindly away from them.

The memory of the chasm stopped him. It would be terrible if he fell off while being chased by birds.

The birds kept attacking him.

“Burn!” he bellowed as he lashed back at them, punching and flailing. If he couldn’t run, he would teach them to pick better meals. His blows grew faster and harder, cutting through the air as he felt strange energy surging through his veins.

Unwittingly, his hands opened up until he was chopping at the birds. The blows seemed to do more, driving into the wings with wisps of heat rising up around them.

A beak cut his face.

He snarled and chopped with all his might.

There was a burst of golden flames. The edge of his hand came down on the bird’s wing, snapping bone and slicing through feathers and muscles. Blood sprayed in every direction as he let out a long, screeching yell.

Instantly, the vultures took off, kicking up sand and rocks as they spiraled up into the air.

Desòchu panted as he watched them circle around him, well out of reach. Adrenaline ebbed inside him, sapping the brief strength he had. He felt strange, dizzy and focused at the same time.

He gulped.

Then he realized his hand tingled. Looking down, he saw blood dripping off the ridge of his palm. The crimson droplets splashed to the sand below, blotting them with startling color.

It was the first time he had killed something.

He felt... hungry.

Trembling, he lifted his hand closer to his face. The hot blood dribbled down his wrist and traced a line down his arm.

The hunger rose up, an overwhelming desire to taste it.

Another dribble ran down parallel to the first.

The surreal sense of being dizzy and focused at the same time came back. Wisps of flames sparkled along his arm, visible only in the way it wavered the air above his limb.

A droplet splashed down and suddenly he was overwhelmed with the memory of his brother after the fall at the cliff edge. There was blood then too, sheet of it staining the ground and soaking Kiramíro's body.

The dizziness turned instantly into nausea and he wrenched away from his arm. He staggered back.

Above him, the vultures screeched shrilly.

He looked up to see them sailing down, spiraling as they swung closer. He could almost feel the anger in the birds' actions as they swooped to attack. The lead one came low to the ground, claws outstretched as it charged.

Desòchu hesitated. Part of him hungered to feel the rush of power that came from the fight. The wisp of flames were alluring, they were like the ones the clan warriors had whenever they were using their powers. However, no Shimusògo warrior had ever sliced through anything with their hands. Their abilities had to do with speed and throwing things, not melee attacks.

The bird swooped in.

The sensation of being dizzy and focused rushed back. Desòchu stepped forward and brought his hand down. His hand blurred as it came down, the ridge of his palm slicing through the air with wisps of flame.

The bird veered at the last minute.

Desòchu lurched forward, his hand coming down to slam into the sands.

An explosion blasted in all directions. The wind beat against his chest, the last of the cool air rushing past.

The rest of the flock slammed into him, beating at his face and shoulders with their wings as they pecked violently.

He flailed to block their blows. He tried to grasp at the sensation of being focused but it was impossible with so many blows. He grunted and reverted to punching at the hard bodies that attacked him.

Claws tore into his chest and back. The screeching deafened him as they slashed and pecked.

Then the rush of flame and focus came back. Flames sparkled along his hand, tracing along the edges of his flesh. His movements grew harder and more powerful, directed even. He let his hand stretch out and he resumed chopping.

His bare hand sliced through the body of a vulture, spraying him with blood as the bird let out a screech of pain. Before the vulture had fallen off him, he attacked another one. His hands cut through wing and neck, tearing into the vultures with brutal efficiency.

Soon, he was standing in a circle of corpses, covered in blood and feathers. The bodies were twitching around his feet, their death throes giving them the impression they were suffering.

Panting, he looked down at his bloody hand. There was just a hint of flames around his fingers. He stared in shock as the flames faded and the sense of focus slipped away.

Desòchu stared at his hand. There was a lot more blood on his hands. He shook as he stared down, watching as the crimson droplets splattered on the ground.

The hunger returned, the desire to taste the blood.

Slowly, he drew his hand up to his mouth.

His gaze focused on the blood sheeting down his hand. His brother had bled like that. Desòchu could remember the puddle of crimson that had formed on the ground.

For a moment, his heart ached.

The desire to taste the blood faded away into nausea. He snapped his hand away, splattering the ground with the vulture's gore. He dropped to his knee and fought the urge to vomit; he couldn't afford to dehydrate himself while exposed to the approaching daylight.

Panting, he caught his breath until the urge to throw up faded. Then he looked at the steaming corpses around him. He had to get away, he needed to escape.

The only thing he could think about was his grandmother's order to his father, "Run it off."

With a groan, he stood up and looked around. The chasm had moisture and shelter. To his despair, he couldn't see it. He frowned and peered around again but the only thing he spotted was the three rocks that made up the Wind's Teeth.

A screech drew his attention up. The only surviving vulture had taken to circling over him.

He gulped and shook his head. Then he flicked his bloody thumb at it. "Drown in sands, you damn bird!"

Turning on his heels, he ran for the only obvious landmark he could find, the Wind's Teeth.

Pushing Limits

Desòchu groaned as he jogged toward the Wind's Teeth. He considered slowing but couldn't, not with the horrific memories of wanting to taste some creature's blood and the image of his brother's blood haunting him. His feet pounded against the sand, kicking out puffs as he raced toward the Wind's Teeth.

The searing heat pounded down on him but he could barely feel it. His stride was surprisingly steady for being out in the open and without food or water for almost a day.

He reached a flattened section of harder sand and rocks. Seeing the Wind's Teeth only a few miles ahead, he bore down and accelerated. He could reach it before noon if he didn't stop.

Pumping his arms, he ran as fast as he could. It didn't matter if he wore himself down to exhaustion. Nothing would matter if he made the shade of the rocks. He was sure about that. He had to reach it, no matter what.

The world grew more focused.

He started to fear the twisting sensations, the idea of tasting blood was nauseating and he couldn't take it. Pu-

shing away, he tried to avoid the sharpening of his senses but it was unavoidable.

Instead of his hands tingling and the unnatural hunger, the dizziness brought a sharpening to his vision. With a sickening lurch, he found himself able to see even the tiniest detail of everything ahead of him. When he found himself able to see the individual needles of a cactus a mile away, he gasped. His eyes grew wider as he looked back and forth. Somehow, he could pick out places where there were safer patches to run across, small rocks sticking out of the dunes, and even notice the cracks in stone spires that made up the Wind's Teeth.

He gulped and clutched at the focused feeling. There was no nausea, no sensation of anything but racing forward with all his might. The fear, exhaustion, and hunger peeled away leaving only the drive to keep running.

Desòchu embraced it. Pumping his arms and legs as fast as he could, he clutched to the focus and sprinted ahead.

The air about a rod in front of him grew hazy. It was small and focused, not much larger than a ball. On either side of the haze, the details were clear. Behind it, a wake formed in the sand as the fine-grained sands solidified into rock.

When his bare feet smacked against the solid surface, it became easier to run. He no longer fought against the shifting ground or struggled to pull his feet free. It felt like running at home but there was no limit to how fast or long he could run.

Euphoria surged through his veins. Desòchu smiled grimly as the Wind's Teeth rapidly grew closer. What would have taken hours only took minutes.

Just as he came over the final ridge and entered a flat section that surrounded the Wind's Teeth, he realized he was running straight toward one of the three rocks.

His focus crumbled.

With a gasp, all the speed faded away. The ground became unstable, no longer able to support his weight. His feet caught on something and he dropped to his knees. The sands and rocks tore at his legs as he dug a deep furrow in the ground.

The black rock of the spire towered over him.

Desòchu held his arms ahead of him to shield himself from the impact. His movement rapidly bled away until he stopped only inches away from the rock.

Panting, he stared up at the tooth. Up close, it was a column of rough stone easily a hundred feet tall. It was about thirty feet across. Wind howled around it, whistling as it blew sand in streamers along both sides of the base.

Desòchu shook as he stood up. A craving to run rose up, like the taste of blood before. He wanted to feel it again, to have it surging through his veins.

He shook as he stepped out of the deep furrow that he had created. Behind him, he could see a plume-like cloud marking his passage.

It looked just like the passing of the Shimusògo clan warriors.

A broad smile crossed his lips. For his entire life, he had seen how the adults had produced the same plumes as they ran back and forth. Now, he knew how they had done it. The urge to run again rose up; it was addictive.

However, survival took precedence. Panting, he inspected his new surroundings. There was no one waiting for him but the thick stones provided shelter from the wind and sun. He also spotted a small pile of wood underneath a strip of canvas and some survival supplies.

At the sight of a small water skin, he breathed a sigh of relief. Dropping next to it, he opened it and took a small swig.

The stale water was the sweetest thing he had ever had.

With a sigh, he slumped and let out a choked sob of relief. He was going to survive.

One Word Too Many

Only a fool names the desert in a fit of rage for she has no humor or forgiveness.

—Chitosane Achyòga

Desòchu sat with his back against one of the Wind's Teeth and one arm possessively around the small chest of supplies he had found at the base of the Wind's Teeth. Most landmarks had supply caches for travelers who needed it, he knew he would have to come back as soon as he could to replenish the supplies.

A small fire, only a log's worth, crackled merrily in front of him. He never realized how much he counted on the warmth until he had to sleep alone in the desert. The air grew cold quickly and he was surprised he survived the bite of darkness. He rested on of his arms and held his hand near the flames as if the fire would disappear in an instant.

He wasn't tired. He should have been, he had run for leagues but somehow his legs didn't burn from the effort and sweat didn't dry on his skin. It was a startling contrast to only weeks before when he was forced to run around the valley. Every step had been a struggle, yanking his bare feet

from the burning sand or finding some way to wipe the sweat from his brow from the baking heat.

Desòchu didn't know what had changed but he suspected something had happened when his focus sharpened while running. It was the only thing different. He tried to bring back the feeling, to summon it with the force of his will.

It remained quiet but he could feel it. It was a fire in his chest, a tingling along his arms and legs. He couldn't quite describe it, but he felt the euphoria deep inside him. All he had to do was summon it.

He frowned and concentrated on the sensation.

It slipped away.

Desòchu let out an exasperated growl and then tried again. He closed his eyes tightly and concentrated on his body, trying to feel past his skin, to push to a formless depth inside him. He could almost see it in the back of his head, a shifting golden flame.

The energy was there. He could feel it.

Like scratching a healing wound, he kept clawing at the sensation trying to draw it out. Time seemed to spill away as his efforts were met with failure after failure. It felt like trying to cup water with his hand, no matter how many times he managed to somehow grasp it, an errant thought was all it took to have to slip away.

"Damn it!" he swore. He pounded the sand with his fist.

Taking a deep breath, he screwed his face tightly and reached out for the energy. He needed to feel it, to experience that rush as it flooded his veins. His body shook with his effort.

The energy refuse to rise.

He pounded the sand again and again. "Damn, damn, damn!"

His fingers caught on a leather pouch. Without thinking, he scrambled to his feet. “Shit on you!” he bellowed before throwing it away.

Desòchu only had a glimpse of his still-steaming dinner spilling out of the pouch before it disappeared into darkness.

He froze, his breath coming in hard gasps. His eyes focused on the world around him, a barely lit sand. He didn't remember finishing cooking the rations. He dug back in his memories until he found a vague recollection of pulling it out of the fire.

Balling his hand into a fist, he shook with frustration. Why was everything going wrong? What did he do?

He looked down at the cache of supplies he had found. There were only four more pouches of food, enough for dinner but then he didn't know how long he was going to be out there. His family, his clan, had abandoned him to the desert to die.

He turned back to the night. Tears of frustrated rage burned in his eyes. His stomach hurt and he was hungry. His injuries seemed to throb all at once, grinding down his senses.

Taking a deep breath, he screamed into the darkness. “Shit on you, Mifúno!”

He didn't care about the desert anymore. Let her take him, it was just tales the clan used to keep him quiet.

“Shit on your sand-damned skull! It wasn't my fault!”

A breeze kicked up. The sand rippled along the ground around him.

He kicked at it. “Only fools are scared to call you by name. Only idiots are wrong. You just the sands, just the rocks, you are nothing!” He stepped forward and continued yelling even as his throat began to hurt. “You took everything from me! My mother! My father!”

Tear ran down his cheeks. “Why didn’t you take Jìmo!? Why didn’t you take the one thing I didn’t need! Why not him! Why are you so—”

A blast of sand slammed into his face.

He sputtered and stumbled back, smacking against the rocky pillar.

The light flared with the wind, burning brightly as the sun for only a moment.

When it grew dark, he gasped and looked down.

The fire was dying. Not from running out of fuel but because the log was crumbling into black ash. As he watched, the embers were snuffed out as the wind blew away his only source of warmth and light. In a heartbeat, there wasn’t even a sign that a fire had been there.

“W-What? No!” He dropped to his knees and grabbed at the logs. It didn’t matter if he burned himself, he couldn’t handle the dark.

Desòchu managed to catch one of the twigs but it crumbled in his palm. Only a ripple of cold was left behind. The sensation feel suffocating as it rippled along his skin.

A high-pitched hiss drew his attention to the supply cache. To his horror, it began to dissolve into black ash also.

“No, no! I didn’t mean it!” He reached for it.

All his supplies, food and water for days, blew away into the darkness.

“No!”

Then he felt the presence of the desert. A darkness that rose above, looming like some beast. He looked up and realized he couldn’t see the stars or moon anymore. Everything was black, pitch and empty. Not even a glimmer of light surrounded him as he felt the hands of something terrible reaching out for him. He held up his hands but the terror continued to approach until it felt like he was seconds from having the light snuffed out of his spirit.

With a sob, he lost control of his bladder.

Mifúno griped his heart with claws that somehow ignored his skin. He sobbed as each beat became a struggle, a thud that clawed at his insides. The pressure increased as he dropped his hand and knees, bending over as he clutched his chest. “P-Please... I’m sorry.”

The invisible claws of death dug deeper. It felt like she was about to tear out his heart. He grabbed his chest with one hand with all his might. Blood dripped from his mouth but he didn’t remember biting his tongue. Every orifice of his body burned as if he had eaten too many spices or had eaten bad food.

He opened his mouth to draw in his last breath.

It filled his lungs and he exhaled.

Then he took another deep breath.

The pain in his chest lessened, drawing away but leaving the memory to scar his heart. He slumped forward and sobbed. No words came out of his mouth, he couldn’t even think of the words.

Panting, he shook as he lifted his head and looked around.

The moon and stars had returned, painting the ground in a pale blue glow. By it, he could see that the fire and supplies were still gone. He hoped they would have been returned. After a few seconds of looking, he realized it was a small cost to still be able to breathe.

Desòchu’s body ached as he got to his feet. He felt empty, hollow. As if something had been extinguished inside him. He reached up for his chest, his fingers pressing against his cool skin. He remembered the flame inside his thoughts, the energy and rush that he craved to feel again.

The energy inside him was gone, snuffed out by the desert.

He froze, his thoughts blowing away like black ash.

Desperate, he concentrated on himself to find any hint of power.

When he found none, he out a long, strangled cry. His knees buckled and he dropped to the ground. His momentum drove him to sit on the backs of his feet, upright but with nothing left to move again. He lost himself as he focused on the empty void in his heart. With each attempt to find magic again, his fingers clawed at his chest.

The desert had touched him. Just like his grandmother said it would, just like the others did. Mifúno had taken more than his mother and father away, it had taken his hope.

He sobbed again, tears burning at his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Mifúno wouldn't forgive him. She was a cruel mother, a desert that destroyed families.

Desòchu let out a long, shuddering sigh. He should be happy he was still alive but there was only relief in his thoughts. The rest of his mind still struggled with how close he had gotten to death.

Chapter 22

Judgment

As I stand before the impossible, I am judged more harshly by a gaze that sees more than mortal man.

—*Tears Across the Rocks* (Act 3, Scene 7)

HHeavy footsteps broke him of his sorrow. He looked up in hope that it was Kiramíro or another warrior but there were no golden flame that pushed back the darkness. He gulped at his dry throat and tried to stir his thoughts from his brush with death.

The ground shook as something drew closer. He could almost feel the steady beat of something large coming toward him.

Working his dry lips, he looked around for a weapon but there was nothing to wield. He had lost everything when the desert made her presence known. Only three pillars of rock that he couldn't move and himself. He swept his sight across the darkness, peering through the dim moonlight to spy the intruder.

Stars shifted in front of him. He almost missed it but then saw it again. Inhaling sharply, he scrambled back as the heavy head of a massive ox stepped into view.

At the sight of glowing lichen covering its fur and one eye sealed shut, Desòchu was sure it was the same creature from the chasm. Blood splattered to ground and painted the sands in black. Every footstep, the creature bore closer.

He could feel its attention. It was intense, as if he was already pinned by its horns. Its one good eye focused on him, a single point of blue fire. The creature's body swayed to the side before it took another step closer. The glowing plants on its fur brighten into a halo of greens and blues, the light shimmering on the surrounding rocks as it passed.

Desòchu crawled back. On the ground, the ox looked massive. It would only take the creature a moment to gore him and he was afraid. His fingers clawed at the sand as he scrambled back.

A stone pillar slammed into his back.

His head smacked into it and he saw stars. He shook his head to clear it. When he looked up, the ox was only yards away from him.

Desòchu gasped and pressed himself against the stone. His muscles protested as he pushed himself up. The sharp edges of the pillar dug into his back and scraped his skin. By the time he got to his feet, the ox was only a foot away.

The creature exhaled hard, blowing cool air against Desòchu's injuries. The stench of plants and foul breath rose around him, choking him.

He shook as he stared down at the creature. It was too large, too powerful. He almost feel the muscles that were poised to crush him against the rock.

His vision blurred.

Desòchu frowned as the world brightened with his blurred vision. He wasn't sure if it was the glowing ox in front of him or something else, but he could feel a euphoria rising up in his stomach.

At the first realization that he was feeling magic again, he let out a gasp of relief. He didn't realize he craved it. But the joy froze at the different sensation. It was cooler, like a breeze, and not a fire as before.

He started to look around for the source of light but his eyes caught on the ox's. They drew him into the pools of light.

Then he was in two bodies: his own and the ox's. Strength, mass, and weight surrounded him. It was a comforting blanket that pushed down but gave also a sense of stability. There was no anger, no frustration, only a steady calm.

He inhaled and both bodies drew in a breath.

The light continued to blossom around him, greens and blues spreading out across the desert. It painted the desert in swirls of power and energy. He felt more than saw the world around him being traced out in the back of his mind. The pillar behind him was an anchor, a heaviness that refused to budge even as the winds howled past it.

It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

Sharing senses with the ox was nothing like he had imagined before. It was peaceful and calm. His thoughts started to drift away like he was about to sleep but he could still feel his senses. He could almost imagine himself stepping on the edge of a cliff. He was, in a way, poised to lunge into a darkness that he knew would comfort him. All he had to do was let go.

Desòchu's fingers relaxed from the stone pillar.

All he had to do was step into the dark.

Step away from the sun.

Let go of his anger.

He froze.

His senses snapped out of the ox and slammed back into his body. He felt lighter. A breeze tickled against him as he

stared at the creature only a foot away. It could crush his body in an instant but he knew it wouldn't. Despite his previous attack, he knew beyond a doubt that the ox would never attack him.

It was spirit, but one of the moon. He remembered the Fijimòsu and their heavy oxen. This was the same beast.

He started to reach out. His dark fingers got close to the glowing ox's muzzle and his senses began to split again. He drew back with a hiss.

No, this wasn't the same beast. This was Fijimòsu, the spirit of the clan itself. He was less than a foot from an actual clan spirit.

The ox's head lifted and he stared at it.

This was a creature of the night, whose power came from Chobìre and the moon.

His stomach tightened in discomfort.

The ox swayed to the side.

Desòchu thought about all the horror stories that he heard. The night clans were intent on destroying the desert. He had heard it so many times. There was no way Fijimòsu could be promising him relief from anger or even a sense of peace. It had to be a trick, that was the only way.

The ox sighed.

A shiver rippled through Desòchu. He couldn't let go of his anger, he had to embrace it. He concentrated on his hand and reached out, past the cool energies that flooded through him and sought for the fire that he had felt before. There was a chance, he just needed to draw it out. His lips slowly tightened as his heart began to beat faster.

He needed to lash out. He knew how, the attack with the vultures had shown him a way. All he had to do was stretch out his hand and imagine it was a knife.

Slowly, he did and the cool euphoria became a hot rush of power. Energy sparkled along his senses as the flames

came back. He almost sobbed with relief as he stared at the ox.

Fijimòsu stepped back, shaking his large head. A sense of sadness rose up but then withdrew as the creature turned around.

The world grew darker, the bright paintings across the dunes faded as the inky void collapsed around him. His world grew more focused, just two creatures in a pool of light.

For a moment, Desòchu considered lashing out. He could do it, it would be so easy to strike the bull spirit and drink his blood. His stomach growled as he thought about shoving his hands into wet organs.

Guilt and shame flooded through him. With a choked sob, he dropped to knees before he vomited across the sand. The very idea of feasting on organs sickened him and he couldn't stop as he threw up the contents of stomach and then heaved painfully as he tried to erase the memory of his own desires.

When he finally could look up again, the tingling of his knife hand was gone and so was Fijimòsu.

D. Moonfire

The Fires Within

Magic in the desert doesn't happen because someone knows mystical words or waves their hands in some special way, it happens when a person's actions and intent matches their clan spirit's.

—*Exhaustive Study of Magical Manifestation* (23rd ed.)

Desòchu groaned as he staggered away from the Wind's Teeth. His stomach rumbled with hunger and his lips were cracked. The small amount of liquid he managed to get from the hole in the sand wasn't even remotely enough to sate the ache in his muscles or the pain in the back of his head. It was hard to get his vision to focus on the dunes that surrounded the black pillars. He couldn't help but worry about his fate.

He had heard many stories about exposure in the desert. They were told as impromptu lessons of how to find cache supplies or find water under the sand. Everyone had made a point of describing the looks of horror on the faces they found, the bones that stuck out from where the vultures had picked them clean, and even the bloody gouges in rock and stone. It was one of the many things imprinted in his memory.

Now that he was experiencing them, he decided the tales didn't even come close to his misery.

He shivered at the morning cold and looked to the east. The sun had not risen yet, but the entire horizon appeared to be burning. There were only minutes before sunrise and he needed to find a new place for shelter. His feet slid on the dunes that surrounded the Wind's Teeth and he had to drop to his hands and feet to crawl up to the ridge before standing again.

The rolling desert spread out in all directions. It was a ruddy tint, brown with a hint of red. Ripples of sand danced in the breezes.

It would have been beautiful if he wasn't hungry, thirsty, and alone.

Desòchu groaned again and pressed his hand over his eyes to peer around. He desperately searched for smoke or bright lights first. Both would indicate an oasis or some sort of permanent shelter. Most of the safe places of the desert were claimed by other clans.

When he didn't see anything, he started his search again for other hints of safety or at least landmarks to follow. He had to travel across the desert and he needed something to orient himself if he was going to walk during the day.

It would have been easier if he could have traveled at night. With hindsight, he wondered if he should have not threatened Fijimòsu. Seeing the desert lit up as clear as day would have made walking in the cool air far more pleasant than traveling under the unforgiving sun.

As if on cue, the sun breached the horizon.

To his surprise, he felt a quivering deep in his gut, a rush of euphoria that rippled through his body as suddenly everything seemed possible in that moment. It faded quickly into the same fires that he tried to draw the night before.

He held out his hand and stretched out until the edge of his palm was a straight line. A tingling rippled along his skin and he concentrated on it, drawing it up.

The magic responded.

With a smile, he let the power flood through his body. It sang to him as it spread along his body before concentrating on his hand. Golden flames rippled along his palm before he ignited into fire.

“Oh, shit,” he said with a smile.

When he closed his hands, the fire disappeared. He opened it again and let it stretch into the knife shape. The fires returned along with the rush of power and energy. Tears of joy burned in his eyes as he looked around, curious to see how much the magic could cut through. Seeing nothing easy to break, he focused on the ground. An idea came to him. He raised his hand and dropped to his knee, slashing into the sand at his feet.

The ground exploded in all directions as he carved a deep furrow into the sand. The grains hissed violently as they melted together, hardening the sides. The stench of scorched ground rose around him.

Desòchu attacked the ground again. Muted thumps filled the air as he cut and dug into the ground. He felt each strike deep inside, the rise of power right before the impact and the snap of energy when the sands blew apart.

After a few minutes of destroying the sands, he stood up with his hand still burning. With his other hand, he wiped the grains from his face and started to look around but then felt a tugging of his attention. He let the foreign sensations guide his eyes as he scanned the horizon.

In the distance, he spotted some vultures circling around something. He froze as one dove down and then came back up. They had obviously found their meal.

Taking in a shuddering breath, he was surprised when the smell of rotted meat rose up. There was no way he could smell it, but his stomach rumbled with hunger despite the gamy, sweet smell. He frowned at his hunger, why would he want spoiled meat? Why did he want to taste blood on his tongue?

He shook his hand and let the fires die off.

The draw toward the vultures remained. He wanted to explore it, to head over there.

He wanted food.

Desòchu thought back to the night before, when he encountered the night spirit. The vultures must be another spirit calling to him like the ox did. Whatever was underneath the birds would be his calling.

Growing sicker at the thought of rotted meat and blood, he searched for another destination. When he didn't find one, he searched again until the sun began to prickle his skin. Finally, he admitted there was only one obvious destination.

Shaking his head, he began to walk down the dunes toward the vultures. He would check it out. If the vultures were his spirit, then maybe his nightmare would end.

He made it only a few chains before the slowness began to bother him. He remembered how running felt as good as the burning hand. He stopped to try pulling up the sensation again but it wouldn't come. The Shimusògo only used their powers while running. He rolled his eyes and jogged toward the vultures.

As soon as he started moving, he felt the power rising. It was different than the vulture spirits but no less exhilarating as he quickly found a rhythm.

The world blurred for a moment and then everything came into sharp detail.

He gasped and ran faster, racing down with no heed to falling or tumbling.

The ground grew harder underneath his feet, solidifying into solid rock the moment before his bare feet smacked against it. When he drew up for the next step, there was nothing tugging him back.

Desòchu grinned and pushed himself to run faster.

A shimmering shape appeared in front of him. It was small, barely the size of a loaf of bread but looked just out of reach.

He stretched his hand out.

The blur moved faster but the edges grew more distinct.

He ran after it, accelerating. His fingers spread out to catch it. With a lunge, he snatched at the shape.

The haze sharpened into the shape of a small bird, a dépa. He knew it immediately. It was the same bird as the mural in their family cave: Shimusògo. The brown-speckled bird raced ahead of him.

He chased after it as the power rushed through him.

The ground grew harder, solidifying as the bird raced past it and crumbling behind him. The dunes seemed to flatten and the valleys filled in as he passed. All the pain and aches of his journey faded away.

Before he knew it, he was running faster than he had ever moved before. The world was a blur rushing past him as he crossed the dunes in seconds. Wind blew across his face, tugging at his clothes as he covered a chain in a second.

Desòchu embraced the energy flowing through him. The more he let it flow over him, the faster he went. He stopped reaching out for the bird and just raced after it. All he had to do was beat it.

Somehow, he knew he never would.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 24

Answers

No words can ever describe the pain a warrior feels with the blood of her clan on her hands.

—Demyokiso Achīgo

What appeared to be an unreachable distance at the Wind's Teeth ended up only being a short run for Desòchu and Shimusògo. He came up on a field of broken rocks and sharp gravel. His bare feet skimmed over the surface and he didn't feel even a cut against the thick calluses that had formed over the years.

The vultures were circled around some corpse on the ground. Even from a distance, he could pick out flies swarming over the body and a bony hand with only a few shreds of flesh still clinging to it.

He frowned and slowed down.

Between one step and another, Shimusògo disappeared. All the magic and power fled away and Desòchu found himself running too fast without any ability to control himself.

"Shit!" he screamed as he pitched forward, slamming his shoulder into the hard rocks as the edges tore at his skin and the aches of his day returned in a rush.

Stinging, he scrambled to his feet.

One of the vultures turned to look at him. It had a broken wing and eyes that were pools of darkness. He shivered at the sight. It looked like the bird was something more than just a mere animal. It had to be another clan spirit, but one that he hadn't heard of before.

The vulture spirit turned back and tugged at the bony arm. With a snap, it pulled clear and a strip of red and yellow cloth dropped from the rotted mass.

Desòchu did a second take when he reorganized the Shimusògo clan colors. He stumbled forward, a frown etched on his face as he watched the birds as warily as the body.

The vulture spirit hopped back slightly and left space between the large avians.

Desòchu hesitated.

The spirit clamped down with its beak. The bones in the arm snapped and fell to the side. Then with a flutter of massive black wings, the spirit hopped back again.

Desòchu inched forward. His eyes slowly moved from the vulture to the body.

The corpse had been picked over for days. A gleaming skull crawled with flies and blood stained the rocks around it. However, he recognized the shreds of the outfit that still clung to the jutting ribs and hips. It was his father's clothes.

A sick feeling swam over him.

Desòchu gulped and looked down, his hands balling into fists as he searched for some confirmation. It was underneath the corpse, the blanket that used to cover the cave entrance with their names on it. He had passed it many times in the years and someone had taken it away when his father disappeared. Now, it was stained with blood and organs. The vultures had shredded it as they feasted on his father's corpse.

A blast of wind peppered him from behind. He heard the crunch of gravel as a plume of dust and sand rolled over him. He didn't need to look behind him to know that it was one of the Shimusògo warriors.

Desòchu ground his teeth together. "Was it you?"

"Yes," said Somiryòki in a low voice. "Someone had to do it."

"Why?" His voice was low.

"Why do you think?"

Energy rippled around Desòchu's hand. He looked up to see the vulture spirit watching him. Slowly, he drew his attention to his hand where golden flames were forming around his palm. He let it stretch into a straight line and the fires grew brighter.

Ahead of him, the vulture screeched as if to encourage him to attack the man behind him.

Somiryòki sighed. "I wouldn't do that, Boy."

"Why not?"

"Because you won't like what happens next." The old man spoke with an easy confidence.

Desòchu turned around slowly. He focused his gaze on the frowning warrior a hundred feet away. "I bet I could surprise you."

Somiryòki ran his hand through his short black hair. Then he dropped his hand to his fighting bolas at his hip. "No," he finally said. "You're young and stupid. You think you know the answers but you have so much more—"

Desòchu couldn't take it anymore. He lifted his burning hand and charged with a bellow.

The warrior raised an eyebrow. Then the sand exploded as he rocketed to the side, racing in a wide circle.

Desòchu hadn't even gotten more than a yard.

Somiryòki stopped to his left. There was still a chain between them.

Raising his hand, he felt the energy gather. With a scream of rage, he brought it down with all his might.

The ground exploded in a line of fire that tore through rocks and stone. Bursts of golden flames raced toward Somiryòki, scoring and melting the stone.

Somiryòki swore as he ducked to the side. When he stood up, he was smoking but had a grin on his face. “You’re picking up Adoraséi’s powers quickly.”

Desòchus straightened and looked at the vulture spirit.

“Mercenary clan from up north. Adoraséi wander the deserts looking for fights to rob both sides. You might like them, they embrace anger and turn their back on their family.”

Desòchu spun back at Somiryòki. “I did not turn my back on my family! You did.”

“What about Rutejìmo?”

He shook his head. “He took my family!”

“He’s a baby. He can’t take anything away.”

“I lost my mother to him!”

Somiryòki shook his head. “He’s a baby,” he repeated. “What happened to your mother was a tragedy and if you would just listen to your heart, you would—”

With a bellow of range, Desòchu slashed down again. Before the first line of burning fire reached the warrior, he did it again and again, sending waves of energy ripping through the stone. Molten rock flew in all directions.

Somiryòki tried to dodge, but Desòchu anticipated his opponent and spread out his attacks to catch him anyways. The impact shuddered the air as the warrior was thrown back.

When he stood up, his smile was grim. “It’s rude to interrupt, Boy.”

“Drown in sands, Old Man!”

Somiryòki snatched his fighting bola from his waist. Golden flames raced along his body as his power built.

Desòchu slashed at the ground, punching it hard to send another wave of force.

Somiryòki spun on his feet and a column of flames exploded from his form. The bola turned brilliant for only the shortest moment before it launched at him as a spinning disc of flame.

“Shit!” yelled Desòchu as he jerked back. He lost his balance and staggered to the side.

There was a crack of air as it passed only inches away.

Unable to resist, Desòchu spun around to follow the bola as it raced past him.

Somiryòki was already standing behind him. A cloud of dust and sand settled around him from where he had raced around the battle in a heartbeat.

The burning bola rocketed toward the warrior. To Desòchu’s surprise, Somiryòki started to spin again. A column flame burst around him in time for the warrior to reach out and grab the flaming ring. Then the flames grew hotter for a moment.

When Somiryòki threw the bola again, it screamed with white hot energy. The very air rippled with power but it was moving too fast to focus or dodge.

The heavy weight slammed into Desòchu’s chest. Searing heat ripped at his face and chest as he was thrown to the side. He saw the bola spin off in the opposite direction.

Desòchu managed to land heavily on his feet. Bolts of pain shot up his legs, causing agony to flare along his ankles, knees, and hips.

In the corner of his eye, he spotted Somiryòki rush over to catch the bola before it hit the ground. He started to spin again, his entire body bursting into flames again before he launched the bola at Desòchu again. It moved too fast to

see but Desòchu felt the impact as it smashed into his chest again.

Ribs snapped as he flew backwards into the flock of birds. His father's corpse exploded in all directions. Bones with rotted flesh flew high into the air before raining down around him.

With the rocks ripping at Desòchu's face, it took him precious seconds to get his feet underneath him and dig down. He snarled and launched himself toward the bola as it flew toward him again. With his burning hand, he brought it down through the air.

A circular wave of flame and force launched out. It struck the bola and cut through the core.

The heavy weights spun away in flames.

Then Somiryòki was in front of him. With brutal speed, he brought his fist up into an uppercut.

Desòchu jerked to the side and slashed down. His fingertips caught the warrior's arm, slicing open flesh.

Somiryòki spun around and punched Desòchu hard. His fist smashed into Desòchu's jaw and stars exploded across his vision.

The force spun Desòchu around. He tried to plant his feet, but a second punch in the same direction ripped him off his balance. A third one spun him even faster.

Somiryòki final punch came from the opposite direction as the spin. All the force of the warrior impacted with the rapid turning. Desòchu's bones crunched from the impact and he felt sharp pain rip through his organs.

Desòchu collapsed.

Air blasted as Somiryòki raced away. He stopped a chain away and turned around.

Desòchu struggled to his feet. Blood flooded his mouth and he was dizzy. He needed to go faster to defeat the war-

rior, he needed the same speed. He stepped forward and reached for the power of Shimusògo.

The flames in his hand faded away.

He lurched and stopped, looking down in surprise.

“Only one spirit, Boy. This is your choice, Shimusògo or Adoraséi. You can have speed or destruction, but not both.” Somiryòki sounded tired and angry at the same time. The air around his body wavered from the heat rolling from his skin.

Desòchu panted. He glared at the warrior as he struggled with the choice: power or speed. Gulping, he said, “Why would I pick a clan that killed my father?”

Somiryòki shook his head and there was a sadness in his eyes. “Your father was poisoning us. He was corrupting you. It tore us to make this choice. We gave him every opportunity to change his ways but he wouldn’t.”

“Point? So what? He drank too much.”

“We’re a small clan on the edges of society. There are very few people to cover our duties. Everyone pulls their weight. Everyone runs the miles that need to be run. If one doesn’t, what do we do? Should we have a warrior always present to make sure he doesn’t accidentally push his own child over a cliff in a drunken rage?”

“You didn’t have to kill him!” Desòchu focused on the energies of his hand and his palm ignited into flames again.

“Then what?”

Stunned, Desòchu couldn’t answer. The flames faded from his hand.

“Was he a good father to you?”

“He’s—”

“You spent your days away from the cave. Why?”

“Because he was...” Desòchu hesitated. “... he was drinking.”

Somiryòki took a step closer, the heat searing the ground at his feet. “He couldn’t accept your mother’s death and he was poisoning us all with that anger. Do you know what happens if you name the desert?”

The memory of his heart straining to beat rose up. Desòchu nodded.

The flames around his hand faded.

“What do you think happens when a man rages against her in the middle of our home? Do you think the desert is just going to pluck him out and leave the rest untouched?”

Mifúno had destroyed the supplies. He could easily see the cruel touch of the desert dissolving the entire valley into black ash. He ground his teeth as he shook his head. Tears burned his eyes as he struggled with a sudden surge of guilt.

“That is the way of the sands. The sun is our source of power but we all go to the mother sooner or later. But when she is called, everyone must listen. Only a few can hear her voice and you and I will never be one of them.”

Desòchu wiped at the tears. “Then why did my mother have to die?”

Somiryòki sighed. “Why did my best friend get an arrow in the throat? Why did Tejíko’s husband drown in that well? Why did that girl die? It happens. It’s terrible and it rips out your heart. As a warrior, you are going to lose a lot more than just your mother. You are going to spend the rest of your life, Shimusògo or Adoraséi, fighting with all your might until you die.”

The older man shook his head and looked away to the desert. “We don’t die in our beds. We don’t pass away pleasantly in the night. Warriors die by blood and bone. That’s why we protect our clan, so they don’t have to end their lives at the end of some sword or spear. We give our lives to

protect them from the monsters, the people, and the horror.”

Desòchu felt a little hope rise. “W-Warrior? You think I’m one?”

Somiryòki gave him a grim smile. “I’m sorry, but you are going to be a warrior no matter what you do. You have the power and focus. I have no doubt that if you were to choose Shimusògo, you would be my equal...” A sudden, grim smile painted the man’s face. “... someday.”

As much as Desòchu wanted to disagree, he knew Somiryòki was right. He looked to wreckage where his father’s remains had been. Adoraséi stood next one of the bones, eyes watching him warily.

He could still feel the rush of power that came when he used the vulture spirit’s powers. It was intoxicating. But with it came the taste of blood in his mouth and the stench of rotten meat.

Somiryòki sat down next to him.

Desòchu jumped and looked down at him. “Aren’t you worried I’m going to hit you?”

“No, I think I got the point across. It’s up to you now. Shimusògo or Adoraséi?”

Desòchu turned back to the vulture spirit and then back to the warrior. “How can I go back? I almost killed my brother? How... can I face them? How could they ever forgive me?”

Somiryòki patted him on his back. “We just do. That’s part of the Shimusogo Way. If the spirit accepts you and, to be honest, if I think you can finally run in the right direction, they will accept it.”

“Do you? Do you think I could stay?”

The old man smiled. A trickle of blood ran down the side of his face. “I have no doubt that you’ll be a good warrior

for us, honest and strong and true. A bit headstrong though, but we all have minor flaws.”

“And Jìmo?”

“You have to decide. The curse of a warrior is that you can’t have a family anymore. That is because you have the entire clan. Your entire life must be dedicated to Shimu-sògo. You can’t have favorites. You can’t have enemies. Everyone without question is in your charge now. If you can’t do that, then you won’t survive love. That means you have to protect Rutejìmo. If you do that as your brother or just as someone in the clan, we can live with that. If you can’t do either, I’d accept Great Adoraséi instead.”

They sat in silence as Desòchu thought about his choices. He forced himself to think about what he had done to his brother by mimicking his father.

“Why didn’t anyone help me when I needed it?”

Somiryòki sighed. “Because Yutsupazéso’s a goat.”

Desòchu snorted and smirked.

The warrior sighed and shook his head. “There is more to it. There aren’t a lot of us and everyone has to pull their own weight. Did you ever see the adults in the clan sitting around and drinking while you worked?”

“Sometimes.” Desòchu pressed his lips together. “But only after a long day of work.”

“Right. And did you have to make money to pay for supplies, cook every morning for the clan, do the laundry, gather food, or the hundred other chores that we do?”

More guilt filled him. “No.”

Somiryòki sighed. “It’s hard to see those things at first. You were just part of something bigger. You just couldn’t see where you fit.”

“I needed help. I asked for it.”

“You got help, you just chose not to remember it. There were plenty of times when you handed Jìmo to the other te-

enagers for a few hours of sleep or breaks. In fact, I remember holding your brother while you snored off a night of drinking.”

Desòchu dug his foot into the rocks. His body ached as he thought about the times he wasn't suffering. There were many times but somehow he had only focused on the moments of suffering.

“It's easy to lose yourself when you focus on something you hate.”

“I know. It's just... it hurt so much when mama died.”

Somiryòki reached over and rested his hand on Desòchu's shoulder. “We all were feeling that pain. It is only worse when you can't talk about it because the desert might come in and steal your breath.”

Desòchu snorted. “Yes.”

“But, for all your pain and anger, you needed to be broken. Without pain, the spirits and your clan can't really see who you are. Your true nature comes out when you are running for your life. Everyone wears a mask, they only slip it in moments of anger and surprise.”

Somiryòki gestured to the melted stone around them. “This can't happen until you are at your breaking point.”

“The same thing happened to you?”

There was a haunted look in Somiryòki's eyes for a moment. “Yes.”

To the side, Adoraséi let out a screech and launched into the air.

Desòchu looked up at the vulture as it sailed around him a few times before flying off.

“You decided.” It wasn't a question.

Desòchu nodded. “I don't like the idea of drinking blood. I'd rather run.”

“Well, you know what we say. Shimusògo run.” It was the clan’s motto. It finally made sense, everything felt better when he was running.

He got to his feet. “Shimusògo run.”

Finally Home

It is critical after one's soul is laid bare, their flaws raw and exposed, and their humanity bruised, that a new adult is celebrated and not derided. What happened in the desert is left to sands and memories.

—Pamiryoki Chiobina, *Tales of Blood and Sands*

Desòchu and Somiryòki stopped a few chains away from the entrance of Shimusogo Valley. It was right before sundown and he could feel the flames fade as they walked the remaining distance.

There were two people up on the sentry post above the entry. He spotted Kiramíro right before she disappeared in a cloud of dust. The other took longer.

Tejíko stopped in front of them. She held a sleeping Rutejìmo in her arms. Her eyes, the remarkable bright green, searched for his.

Rutejìmo had a bandage on his head and the side of his face was black from bruises that were clearly visible even past his brown skin. He seemed at peace though, as if his injuries were just a dream.

Desòchu looked at his grandmother and his brother. He had hurt both of them so much and he couldn't imagine

how either would ever trust him again. He struggled with the words.

Tejiko's eyes grew wet with tears. She held up his brother.

Desòchu reached out and took him, feeling the delicate weight on his injuries. He pulled Rutejìmo close and held him firmly. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She sniffed and wiped at her tears. "I miss them both."

He nodded and then looked down at Rutejìmo. The little boy cooed for a moment and then nestled his brown face against Desòchu's scraped chest. He thought about the black ash and the tightness in his chest. When he looked up, he smiled but said nothing.

Kiramíro stopped next to him. She had the same questioning look at his grandmother.

Desòchu gestured to Rutejìmo. "Thank you for saving him."

She patted him on the shoulder.

Pain radiated from the touch. He hissed but kept himself still to avoid disturbing his brother.

Yutsupazéso hobbled up. "This doesn't mean you are special," she said.

Desòchu cringed but then smiled. "Yes, Great Shimusogo Yutsupazéso."

Then, she smiled. The first smile that Desòchu had ever seen in his life. He didn't think it was even possible that the old woman could find joy in anything.

"Then let's celebrate our new warrior!" She raised her hands and dozens of clan members that had somehow appeared around him cheered. "Get the drink and start the fires! And get Gemènyo, Hyonèku, and Kiríshi up and cooking. Those lazy kids need to learn how a real man looks."

Stunned, Desòchu stared at her. His mouth opened. He was exhausted, tired, and hungry. Every part of his body

ached and the only thing he wanted to do was crawl into a bed.

Kiramíro patted him on the shoulder again. “I wouldn’t tell her no. She can be scary when someone keeps a bottle away from her. It’s the Shimusogo Way, after all.”

Desòchu started toward the entrance. “Shimusògo run.”

Kiramíro leaned over. “Right now, I think Shimusògo celebrate.”

She gestured to the baby. “Need me to take him?”

“No, I think I can handle him right now.”

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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