

**Things Are
Different
Here**

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D. Moonfire

Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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Chapter 1

Bullies

There is a distinction between the clan as the spirit itself and the clan as the members affiliated with the spirit. While many times, they are in agreement, there are times when they are not.

—*Clans of the Desert*

Tsubàyo yanked on the brush from the knot in his horse's mane. The pull took all of his strength and he could hear hairs ripping and snapping.

«Ouch,» came the mental complaint. It sung in the back of his head, the masculine thoughts of the horse he was grooming intruding directly into his thoughts.

He started to reach up but then stopped. Taking a deep breath, he pressed his other hand against the sun-warmed side of Ryachuikùò's neck. «I didn't mean to pull so hard. Forgive me?»

His horse let out a sigh of his own before he leaned into Tsubàyo. A wave of raw emotions, love and trust and affection, blossomed across Tsubàyo's mind and he couldn't help but bask in the comfort his mount gave him.

Tsubàyo's hands shook as he resumed brushing, this time with more care for his horse's comfort and less on his

thoughts. The steady strokes of the brush against the short hairs were comforting. It was far different than picking sand out of his toes like most of his teenage years.

There were fifteen other Pabinkúe milling around in front of the table. Their conversations rose and fell as they talked about having dinner together or something interesting they had seen while on patrol. None of them included Tsubàyo as they spoke, but they never did. Instead, he just got the occasional glare or pointed look.

Ducking his head, he focused on brushing his horse and waiting for his turn with the stable master, Pabinkue Maporéku. She always took her time as she spoke to each rider as they handed over their horse. It was a nightly ritual but, at the moment, Tsubàyo just wanted to go home, have some dinner, and then crash for the night. He was tired of his fellow Pabinkúe and their words behind his back.

«I could use one of those carrots though.» Ryachuikùò pictured a stack of carrots in a basket by the front entrance of the stable. The deep purple stalks were treats for all the horses with a rich taste that Ryachuikùò loved.

Tsubàyo chuckled. “For your suffering, old man?”

Ryachuikùò’s brown eyes stared at him. «No, because I want it. But if pulling my mane would get me one, then... I’m in agony.»

With a grin, Tsubàyo set down the brush and headed over to the basket. He circled around instead of going through the knots of conversation. At the basket, he grabbed two of the large carrots.

“Those are for real riders,” said Ukagòì as he yanked the carrots out of Tsubàyo’s hand and back into the basket. “Not daylight-loving bastards like you.”

Tsubàyo glared at the lighter-skinned man. He was a clan warrior, with far more fighting capabilities than Tsubàyo. “I am one of you, Great Pabinkue Ukagòì. I have been for

many months.” It had been five months since he had come to the Seven Villages, not that any of them would acknowledge it. Weeks of being being snubbed and insulted. Only a few spoke to him with scorn.

Ukagòì stroked his black beard and chuckled. Even though he was about the same age as Tsubàyo, he had more chest and facial hair. He had a necklace with one silver and two copper claws dangling among the beads; it represented the three battles that he had been in since becoming one of the clan warriors.

The side of Tsubàyo’s face itched. He reached up and scratched the heavily scarred tissue. It always throbbed when he was angry or annoyed.

“You aren’t one of us,” spat Ukagòì. “You may ride our horses and wear our colors, but you’ll never be one of us, killer.”

The throb grew stronger. He tensed. “Great Pabinkue Mikáryo didn’t think so.”

Ukagòì laughed. “Mikáryo is a joke. Everyone knows the real reason she won’t stay near the villages is because no one likes her. That and her perversions.”

Tsubàyo ground his teeth together. As much as he disliked Mikáryo when she had handed him over to be beaten by the Shimusògo, he had grown to appreciate her forward nature and friendliness. She was one of the few people in the clan who welcomed him.

The other warrior in the group strolled up. It was Ukagòì’s sister, Zumafín. She had the same sneer on her face.

Ukagòì shoved Tsubàyo’s hand away from the carrots. “I’m never going to forget you killed one of ours to get in here. A pathetic little sun-lover that got kicked out of his own clan.”

Zumafín came around to stand behind Tsubàyo.

Pinned by the two warriors, little warning bells ran off. The last time he was surrounded by warriors, the Shimu-sògo had beaten him until he couldn't breathe and pissed blood for a week. He turned his head to watch one and then the other. A prickle of fear rose up as he dropped his hand to the knife at his belt.

Ukagòì glanced down and then smiled. "Go for it, Ugly. I'll even give you one shot before I break your legs and snap your wrists."

Ryachuikùò's thoughts blossomed inside Tsubàyo. Their visions blurred together until Tsubàyo was seeing the fight from two angles, his own eyes and his mount's. The horse's desire to protect rose up as he shifted from one side to the other. The difference in vision, the wider angle from the horse, was only faintly disorienting but he quickly adapted to it.

Zumafín pulled her own weapon out slightly. The scrape of metal on leather was a whisper of noise but stopped. From Ryachuikùò's sight, Tsubàyo could see she only drew it out an inch or so. It was a threat, nothing more.

Another horse reached out to him. The warmth that of the equine thoughts calmed him even more. A third set of senses overlaid themselves on his and he could see the approaching fight from an additional vantage point. Moments later, more horses joined in until he could sense the entire stable yard as if it was nothing more than a tiny model. He saw everyone from all angles. He could hear their breath across twelve horses' senses. His skin felt the heat of bodies in the wind, mapping each one out relative to the herd.

A rush of power rolled through him. He shivered at the sensation of the herd in his mind. They comforted him even as they waited for an order. The warriors may be faster, stronger, and more powerful than Tsubàyo but even they couldn't take on all their horses at the same time.

The only two mounts that weren't in his mind were Uka-gòì and Zumafín's. He could sense their horses hesitating, unsure if they would remain close to the mind of the warriors or split off to join the rest of the herd in Tsubàyo's thoughts.

A sharp clapping broke the standoff.

Pabinkue Maporéku stepped out of the door clapping her hands. "What in the light-blinded idiocy are you all doing out here!?"

Tsubàyo flinched and mental cut off the horses from his thoughts. The individual personalities faded away reluctantly, peeling away until only Ryachuikùò remained connected to him.

Ukagòì gestured at Tsubàyo. "Just telling this useless pile of horse shit that he doesn't belong. He spent all day riding up river to chase a rumor instead of saying on patrol."

Tsubàyo snapped back. "You told me too!"

"I did no such thing," Ukagòì said with a smirk. "I said there was a family up there but not anymore."

Enraged, Tsubàyo almost drew his knife. He had to force his hand away to point at Ukagòì. "You said no one had heard from them in days! Someone should check on them!"

"Of course not, they died years ago."

Zumafín snickered. "I heard that. Didn't the rest of you?"

There was uncomfortable shuffling and silence, then a few of the other riders nodded.

Tsubàyo glared at Ukagòì. "Chobìre shit in your skull."

Ukagòì laughed. "You even swear like a sun-lover! Pabinkúe is a night spirit, Ugly! We follow Chobìre, not that damn sun spirit you worship."

"I don't worship him!"

"You should, because you aren't Pabinkúe!"

"I am—"

"Quiet!" bellowed Pabinkue Maporéku.

Tsubàyo cringed.

The old woman took a few more steps to put herself between Tsubàyo and Ukagòì. She shoved her fingers into Tsubàyo's chest. "You, walk away."

"Like the—"

"Walk away, Boy!"

Tsubàyo stepped back, his body shaking with anger. "I—"

"Walk!"

He glanced at his horse.

"I will deal with Great Pabinkúe Ryachuikùò," she said referring to the horse respectfully. "But you go home. Right now."

Ukagòì waved his fingers behind Maporéku's back toward Tsubàyo.

Tsubàyo glared at him but he decided to obey. Reaching over, he grabbed three of the purple carrots and then stormed over to Ryachuikùò. «Here, you deserve this unlike the rest of these assholes.»

Ryachuikùò sent a wave of affection and joy as he chomped down on all three. They stuck out of his mouth like quills as he nosily crushed through them. «Yummy.»

Then, with everyone staring at him, Tsubàyo turned and stomped toward home.

"Bye!" Zumafín called out to him.

Tsubàyo hesitated. He ground his hands together but then forced himself to keep walking.

Chapter 2

Getting Even

In absence of a guiding hand, most young adults will revert to their early days even if those days left a sour taste in their mouths.

—*The Abandon Children*

Tsubàyo stomped down the dirt road with a foul mood flooding his thoughts. He replayed the argument at the stable endlessly in his head, working through thousands of “what if” scenarios. None of them were pleasant and each scenario turned more violent and destructive.

Both Ukagòì and Zumafín had been bullying him ever since he had arrived. It was insults that never stopped and being jostled in close quarters. He suspected the handful of sand fleas in his bedding was just another example. Sending him out on a fool’s errand to a ruined household just to mock him was obviously Ukagòì’s ideal of mocking him.

His face twisted in a scowl. It was just like growing up among the Shimusògo. None of the elders ever did anything to stop the fighting then either. They would just turn their heads away as if they couldn’t see the pushing or arguments. The only time Tsubàyo had gotten in trouble was

when the fight disrupted their meals or they broke something.

The fighting never stopped in the valley. He couldn't count the number of times a brawl had been broken up by Yutsupazéso screaming only to have it resume a few hours later in the tunnels near the entrance of the valley. He had suffered with his head smashed into the side of the rock tunnel or tripped over the edge. Even months later, he could feel the faint rasp of scars on his knees and elbows.

Tsubàyo shook his head. Spotting a rock ahead of him, he kicked at it hard and sent it flying into a nearby field. It bounced off a row of plants and then hopped over another before landing in the ditch between the short green leaves that sprouted from the ground.

On the far side of the field, he spotted a farmer leading a horse while kneeling every few rods. While the farmer was too far away to identify, the way they knelt down reminded him of Fimúchi. She was a farmer and a member of the Rojikinòmi clan who lived among the Pabinkúe.

His foul mood began to lighten. Only days after he arrived in the Seven Villages, completely lost and confused, she had shown him compassion that few others did. He smiled at the memory of having dinner with her occasionally or working long hours in the field until well into morning.

Then he remembered how her father, the Pabinkúe leader, had continually tried to keep them away. Kamùji allowed Tsubàyo to join the clan but it was clear that he hated that Tsubàyo had killed another Pabinkúe to do so. Or that he had stolen horses.

Grumbling, he resumed his walk home. Kamùji wasn't much better than Yutsupazéso. He looked the other way when others mocked and bullied Tsubàyo. He wasn't going to protect Tsubàyo any more than his old clan would. No, if

he was going to stop the fighting, he would have to do it under his own terms.

His boots scuffed on the ground as he stopped sharply. Then he smiled grimly. He knew exactly what to do. There was always the equivalent of the tunnels near the entrance, the places where teenagers fought out their own disagreements. If not, he would just head over to Ukagòì's cabin. One way or the other, they would stop this fight.

A plan in mind, he hurried home to the simple wooden cabin that made up his new home. In the months since he had arrived, he had done little to decorate it because nothing felt right. However, there was a small vase of flowers that Fimúchi had given him along with a book of poetry which he had only paged through once. Both were predominately placed on the counter by the eating area.

Slamming the door behind him, he hurried around the cabin: a quick wipe down with a wet rag, a change of clothes that didn't smell of dust and sweat, and then to gather up a brace of fighting knives. Ukagòì may be a warrior, but without his horse he was just as hampered as Tsubàyo.

With every item he gathered in preparation for a fight, he let his mind drift through his plans when he confronted Ukagòì. It had to be short, but he had to win soundly. It was better if he started on the offensive and attack first. Tsubàyo stopped to heft his best fighting knife before shoving it into a sheath and buckling it to his belt.

He looked around for a glove to protect his knuckles. The closest he could find was a pair of work gloves that Fimúchi had given him. They were perfect for punching. But, when he rested his fingers on the leather, he couldn't take them. It didn't seem right.

With a sigh, he turned around looking for anything else needed to beat Ukagòì. A small meal? No, he'll eat later. Best not to have a full stomach.

He hesitated but then remembered how Ukagòì had “jokingly” bumped him dangerously close to a ledge over the river that ran through the Seven Villages. Only a last-minute grab for his horse's mane kept him from plunging into the water.

With a scowl, he stomped toward the door.

Fimúchi stood on the other side, her hand raised to thump on the door.

Tsubàyo froze, a sudden fear as if he had just been caught by Yutsupazéso slammed into him. His hand tightened on his side, pinning the hilt of his knife against his side. Following the fear was a strange twisting in his stomach he felt whenever he was near her.

She was different than the girls he had grown up with. The Shimusògo spent their days running across the desert and scraping food off the bottom of the bowl. Fimúchi had curves in places he couldn't stop staring though he felt guilty for sneaking glimpses of her large breasts or the curve of her hips.

He didn't know what to do or look, so he retreated into staring into her dark green eyes and the tight braids on both sides of her hair. He remembered when she said she was going to grow the top out but hadn't seen her for a few weeks. Her look startled him as much as her appearing at his door. “F-Fimúchi? What are you doing here?”

She smiled and twisted the front of one foot. “I saw you walking home and you looked like you could use some company.”

A flush burned on his cheeks. He gripped the knife tighter to his side. He wasn't sure why, but he didn't want her to know that he was going out to pick a fight. He ges-

tured half-hardheartedly back toward the stables. “No. I mean, I was heading out.”

“Oh,” she smiled brightly. Her eyes trailed down. “Want some company? Where are you...?”

He cringed as her gaze focused on his knife.

There was an uncomfortable silence, punctuated by the song birds that were just beginning to wake up.

“Where you going?” she asked again, but the tone had sharpened into a blade.

“I-I’m...” He pulled the knife off his belt and hid it behind his back.

Her eyes narrowed. She push her fists on her hips. “What do you think you are doing, Tsubàyo?”

He opened his mouth.

“The truth, please.”

Closing his mouth with a snap, he gestured angrily toward the side. “I’m tired of everyone just picking on me! Every single time, they are shoving and mocking and beating on me! They send me off on fool’s errands, get me worried and then laugh when it’s a joke! They throw fleas in my bag, worms in my lunch!”

He stepped back but couldn’t stop speaking. Anger flushed through his body as he balled his hands into fists and shook them. “Every damn time! And no one ever does anything about it! I’m so sick and moon-damned tired of all this crap!”

Panting, he looked at her. When he saw her glare, he turned away from her.

“Do you think beating up someone is the answer?”

As much as Tsubàyo wanted to say yes, he knew that wasn’t the answer. He hesitated but then shook his head. Somehow, talking to her was worse than Yutsupazéso and he didn’t think that was possible.

Fimúchi shook her head but then smirked. “Yeah, I don’t believe you at all.”

Tsubàyo hesitated and then gave her a pained smile.

She smiled and then gestured for him to move aside. “Come on, let me in.”

Without waiting for an answer, she strode in and shoved him aside. “If you think I’m going to let you get your ass kicked tonight, you are mistaken. You have decided to have dinner with me and I’m looking forward to you using that —” She pointed at his knife. “—to cut up the vegetables.”

He gaped in surprise as she crossed the cabin and headed straight for the kitchen area. She bent over and he found himself staring at her ass. She yanked open one of the lower cabinets and pulled out a few pans. When she stood up, he looked away sharply.

“Stop staring and come over here. What do you have in the ice box?” When he looked back at her, she was peering inside. Clicking her tongue, she shook her head. “You don’t have a lot of food in here. When did you go to the market last?”

Tsubàyo frowned. “I... It’s been a while.” About a week or so, actually.

“Is my father paying you at least?”

Tsubàyo nodded. Then, he rushed over to where he had been keeping the monthly payments. When he got his first pouch of pyābi, he was so excited that he bought too many sweets and drinks. A few days later, after starving for the night, he found that he had to buy more substantial food but he didn’t always remember until he was hungry long after the markets had closed.

Fimúchi sighed and shook his head. “You got lost, didn’t you? That shouldn’t have happened.”

She leaned against him, her breast pressing against his arm. Then she pushed away. “Come on, you need a proper meal.”

He glanced at the door.

“I’m not letting you leave, Great Pabinkue Tsubayo. Not to get into a fight,” she said affectionately. “Besides, I think you should invite some guests tonight.”

Tsubayo sighed and then looked up in surprise. “What?”

She started counting chairs in his room including two padded stools near the door. When she glanced at him, there was a strange look in her eyes. “I really think you should meet some people. Do you think you could handle say... four more? You have six places to sit in here if we use the corner of the bed.”

“Why?”

Fimuchi walked over to him and pick up his hand, holding it tight both of hers. “Because right now, you are lost. Things are different here and we don’t let people stay alone like this for long. You need to know who to ask for help as much as they need to know they can help. I have some... friends who might be willing. They have been curious about you.”

She squeezed. “If you are up to it, they really want to hear your stories too.”

He cringed. “They don’t want to hear any of that. I did... something terrible to get here.”

“Really?” she asked with sad smile. “Didn’t you tell me the same thing? I seem to recall enjoying your company for hours in the field. Or did you forget that.”

He glanced to the side. When he took a deep breath, he caught her scent: of fresh earth and wildflowers. “No, I liked that.”

“Good because I’m not the only one. I think you’ll do better if you let others know where you came from. Please?”

They'll bring dinner and you don't have to say anything you don't want to."

His heart was pounding in his chest, slamming against his ribs as he felt the warmth of her body and her smile. He thought about his fantasies of attacking Ukagòì. As much as he hated it, they were fantasies. Ukagòì was a warrior, someone with the powers of defend his clan against intruders. No matter what skills Tsubàyò had, going one-on-one was a foolish idea.

Fimúchi smiled brightly. "Thank you. Do you know Great Pabinkue Tabyái?"

Tsubàyò shook his head. "Sorry."

"Wait... her mare is named... um... Atokáchi?"

He smiled. That name he knew. Most of the horses in the clan reached out for his mind when they were passing. They left their names behind. "I know Great Pabinkue Atokáchi. She is..." He frowned and reached out with his mind, spread out his thoughts as he felt the surrounding equine minds in his own. After a few seconds, he focused on Atokáchi who was being brushed by an older woman. "Found her. She's over in in the White Cloud stables."

Fimúchi patted his hand. "I'm impressed. That is a few leagues away. Tell her to tell Tabyái to bring her sister and her kin. Maybe for some conversation but definitely to bring food." Then she stopped and held up her finger. "Tell her to bring her favorite nut bread, the kind we were talking about it."

There was something in the way she said it. Tsubàyò gave her a quizzical look.

Fimúchi's eyes flashed and then she looked guilty for a moment. "Only ask if you want to have company. I really think you need someone with you tonight."

He started to open his mouth. The anger had dissipated and he realized he was craving her attention. He nodded slowly. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Willing to tell your stories?”

“I suppose.”

Fimúchi winked at him. “Then send the message and let’s get ready for company. I’m going to hurry over to your neighbors and see if I can borrow something to start.”

Tsubàyo stared at her in shock as she left the cabin. He felt strange, dizzy and hot at the same time. It was the same thing he felt whenever she was nearby and he wasn’t sure why.

Then he reached out and relayed the messages.

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Chapter 3

Sweeping In

The blood of the desert does not come out and say what is wrong. They guide the thoughts toward it, until there is only one logical conclusion that must be taken.

—Mudagre Afokanimó

The smell of roasting peppers and tubers filled his cabin. It was probably the first time a full meal had been prepared since he arrived and he felt guilty for doing little to help it. Fimúchi had gathered up a startling supply of vegetables, fresh cuts of beef, and even two unfamiliar bottles of wine.

“Just slice those thinly,” said Fimúchi as she rubbed spices into the side of the meat. The iron oven had a full load of charcoal inside it and the air wavered behind her. Even from the other side of the cooking area, he could feel the heat radiating from opening.

He turned back and focused on his task. He didn’t know the recipe or how thing it should be, so it took care to cut each one almost paper-thin. He got into the rhythm and finished one purple carrot and move to the next.

Someone knocked at his door. He set aside his knife before he looked up at the entrance and then to Fimúchi.

She looked over her shoulder. “It’s probably my m... friend. Answer the door? It’s your house after all.”

“You seem to have moved in.”

She smiled sweetly and said, “Just for dinner.”

His heart beat faster. With a flush on his cheeks, he wiped his hands on his trousers and answered the door.

Outside was an older woman carrying a large canvas bag with one hand and balancing a ceramic pot that steamed. “Here, hold this,” she said with a smile and then handed over the bag. “The pot is hot and you don’t have a pad.”

Tsubàyo took it and was surprised how heavy it was. He stepped back as he looked over the newcomer. The smile on the side of her cheek when she smiled reminded him of Fimúchi and they had similar sorrel skin color. The only difference was that the older woman’s hair was jet black and she wore dark blues and greens of Pabinkúe instead of the yellows and browns of Rojikinòmi.

He glanced at Fimúchi who was bent over her cooking.

She glanced at him and then back again. There was a furtive look in her eyes but a slight smile on her lips.

It only took him only a second to realize Tabyái was related to Fimúchi. Probably her mother judging from their broad noses and the way they held their heads. He hesitated in case he was wrong but then decided it couldn’t get any worse. He bowed deeply to Tabyái. “Good morning, Great Pabinkue Tabyái.”

Then, he called out to Fimúchi. “Your mother is here.”

Fimúchi’s hand stopped stirring.

Tabyái laughed and she patted his hand. “Oh, you’re a bright one.”

He thought about his plans to attack Ukagòì. “Maybe not the smartest though.”

“No, but you’re young. Everyone young is stupid. Come on. And don’t use ‘great’ anymore, just call me Byái.”

“Mother,” Fimúchi said in an exasperated tone that sounded as if there were many conversations behind it.

“Yes, Múchi?”

Fimúchi tensed for a moment and then sighed. Shaking her head, she returned to her cooking.

Tabyái looked around. “Haven’t decorated much, have you? I would... you should have at least a painting or drapes.”

He shook his head.

“What is Búpi doing?” she muttered and then carried the pot over to the counter. She pulled a ceramic plate from a large pocket in her dress with one hand. Setting it down, she then slid the pot onto it. “Here’s the stew. Give me a second.”

She closed her eyes and her face grew slack.

In the back of his mind, he felt the ripple of her telepathically reaching out for her horse. It felt like fingers up and down his spine. While he caught glimpses of images and emotions, he couldn’t overhear. Curiosity rose and he felt along the telepathic connection to see that she was talking to her more, Atokáchi. He withdrew before intruding any further.

A few droplets of sweat prickled on her brow.

Then she let out a gasp. “That was a bit far.”

After discretely wiping her brow, she turned and looked at Tsubayo. Her eyes scanned him from toes to head.

He shivered from the appraising look. Then he started to turn away as her eyes focused on the scars that covered the side of his face.

Tabyái’s hands snapped out to catch him in place.

He tensed, his hand sliding toward his belt.

“I will beat you,” she said smoothly without looking down.

With a blush, he lowered his hands.

“What are your favorite colors?”

Confused by the question, he answered automatically. “Blues and yellows.”

A smile quirked the corner of her lips. “What’s your favorite place in the Seven Villages?”

“Today, when I was sent on a wild errand up to an abandon house, there were all these trees with folded papers hanging from them. The ground was covered with this glowing moss or mushrooms and I thought it... was... nice?”

Tabyái released him and looked him over. “Anywhere else?”

“The Sakobi River, right at the covered bridge down the road from here. You know where the three roads meet? Why?”

She stepped back and held up her fist. Her eyes unfocused and he felt her reaching out for her horse again. The connection faltered. She frowned and pushed harder. After a second, her connection reached her mount and she sent another set of images before it slipped away.

When she looked around again, she caught him staring.

He looked away.

She slapped her hips and let out a happy grunt. “What can I do? Anything you need done? Your bed is a mess, let me get that, Bàyó.”

Tsubàyó turned and watched her helplessly. It was quickly obvious that she was going to clean regardless of what he did. Confused and disjointed, he headed back to the cutting board.

“Mama is like that,” whispered Fimúchi. “I hope she didn’t upset you.”

He frowned and shook his head. He expected to be yelled at or beaten, not have someone clean up his messy bed or the clothes tossed in a corner. “No... it’s just...”

Tsubàyo didn't know how to say he was surprised not upset. He glanced at the blade he was going to use to attack someone for a moment and then over to the work gloves that still rested on the corner of the counter. With a shrug, he resumed cutting food for his unexpected visitors.

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Chapter 4

Surprise Guests

Society has a way of accepting the wayward clan who appear unexpectedly. They are given home, food, and shelter. Someone steps forward to guide them into the culture of their new clan and buffer them from the politics until it is no longer overwhelming.

—Kosobyó Janóki, *The Unexpected Clan*

A half hour later, Tsubàyó checked on the heavy dish inside of the oven. The thinly sliced vegetables and beef bubbled and sizzled and the smell caused his stomach to rumble with anticipation. He used a wooden spoon to check between some of the slices. “Not pink anymore.”

Fimúchi leaned next to him, her body warm and the smell of her flowery perfume teasing him. “Good. Just give it about ten minutes or so and it should be ready. It smells good.”

The flush of heat rose. He stood up and tapped the tray on the side of the pot of stew on top and then rested it across the opening. Inside, the contents were bubbling slowly as tubers rose and fell into the rich depths.

“Where is Réku and Dáchi?” Tabyái asked as she came out of Tsubàyo’s bedroom. She wiped her hands on her waist and then headed straight for the door.

Tsubàyo stepped away from Fimúchi. “Are they on horse?”

“Probably not this early in the morning. Why?”

“I could have probably found them if they were.”

Tabyái stopped and stared at him. “Where were you when you sent a message to Káchi? Atokáchi?”

“Here, why?”

“Really.”

Tsubàyo wasn’t comfortable with her last word. He looked around. He spotted movement through the window and leaned to the side to see three women coming up carrying canvas bags. He didn’t recognize two of them but when he saw Maporéku, the old stable master who took care of his horse, his blood ran cold. While she greeted him with insults for some time, she had softened her attitude over the last few months. Now, she was indifferent toward his presence as long as he took care of Ryachuikùo.

The feeling of dread rose as they turned toward his house. “I... I think they are here.”

Tabyái smacked the happily. “Finally!” she said cheerfully and pushed herself up. Coming up to the door, she flung it open as the three women came up the two steps to the porch. “Réku! Dáchi! Come on in!”

Tsubàyo’s chest hurt as he watched the dour stable master come in. She was in her sixties with a wrinkled face and hazy eyes. She leaned to the side for a moment and then gestured for him.

Steeling himself for another berating, he stepped forward.

She looked him over a few times, and then she sighed. “This should have happened months ago.”

Before he could respond, she held out the bag and gave what could have been called a smile if he squinted. “Welcome home and to the Seven Villages.”

Tsubàyo’s jaw dropped.

“Come on,” she said as her smile widened. “It isn’t snakes.”

“Réku,” said Tabyái in a low voice. “We’re celebrating his new home. Be nice.”

Maporéku looked back and then she rolled her eyes. She smiled, this time with more honesty and then gave a short bow. “Welcome, you should have been greeted with more respect months ago and I apologize for my part.”

“I... I...” Tsubàyo found it hard to form the words.

“Open the bag at the table,” she said before she stepped aside. The smile remained on her face.

Tsubàyo carried the bag over to the table and sat down. All five of the women gathered around, taking chairs as they stared at him. His hands trembled as he looked inside. It was a bundle of light blue fabric with yellow flower patterns. On one edge, he saw “Pabinkúe” and “Rojikinòmi” embroidered in subtle colors.

“Careful, there is something inside.”

He pulled the bundle out. There was a picture inside, an oil painting of the mushroom forest. He could smell the paint as he stared at it.

Tsubàyo didn’t know how to respond. No one had ever given him something like the painting before. He stared at it as his mind seemed to go blank.

“The fabric are drapes for your windows. Tabyái said they were your favorite colors. I hope they work, but it doesn’t look like you have a lot of things here that would cause problems.”

“He doesn’t have much of anything,” said one the younger of the two other women. She had a scowl on her face as she looked around his bare cabin.

“W-Why?”

The women said nothing.

“I mean, why are you doing this? Why this?” He held up the painting.

Tabyái reached out and rested her hand on his. Her skin was warm. “Because we should have done this the week you came into the Villages. You are new to Pabinkúe and we don’t shun those chosen by the Herd. No matter how you came to us, what had happened, that shouldn’t have stopped us from at least treating you with the respect you deserve.”

Maporéku reached out and rested her hand on top of Tabyái.

Tsubàyo stared at them.

Tabyái pulled her hand back. “Now, open Hedáchi’s.”

Hedáchi was the older of the other two women. She wore Pabinkúe colors with a button-down shirt and a dark blue skirt. Her bag had a horse head embroidered on it and the clan’s name along the straps. “Here you go, plus the bag is yours. It is good for shopping for food.”

He pulled the bag over and peered inside. There was a quilt inside. The panels he saw were all blocked designs that looked like horses in various positions.

“There is another painting too. I got it at the same place as Maporéku.”

The painting was older, with just a hint of dust on the edge. It was a summer scene of the covered bridge he had mentioned earlier.

His throat felt tight. “T-Thank you.”

He saw a flash of emotion in Hedáchi's eyes but it disappeared when she smiled. "I'm sure you'll love it. It will help make this place feel like your old home."

Tsubàyo

She turned to the last woman. "Eramína?"

There was reluctance when Eramína pushed over her bag. He didn't know why, but it looked like she was struggling with the anger that most of the clan had shown him. However, the cuff of her shirt had Rojikinòmi embroidered on it. "It isn't much, but... welcome to the Seven Villages."

Her gift was a stack of plates and bowls along with eating utensils. They were all a pale yellow and sturdy.

"Thank you," he said, struggling with the emotions that were rising up. He wiped his face and set them down.

"Now, let's eat," Tabyái announced.

Along with the dish in the oven and the stew, the women had brought over a nutty bread, a crock of cream, and a pie that smelled of berries. All of them passed the food around and soon they were eating.

It was very good food.

As soon as she finished the stew, Fimúchi cleared her throat. "I'm curious. Could you tell us about your old clan?"

He scowled. He didn't want to bring up the anger of the Shimusògo again. It would just remind him of how the other Pabinkúe treated him. It was only a few hours ago he was wanting to ambush Ukagòì just thinking about how the Pabinkúe weren't much better than his former clan. He looked around at the others. Well, maybe not all of the Pabinkúe. He wasn't sure why Eramína came when she obviously detested him.

Fimúchi rested her hand on his. "Please?"

He looked up to see that the others were staring at him. All of them except for Eramína looked interested. Between her expression and his own reluctance, the idea of bringing

up his past didn't sit well. He pushed his plate away. "I don't think you really want to hear that."

Fimúchi spoke softly. "Please? I think they need to hear it as much as you need to be heard."

He looked at her. "Why?"

"Because you've been hurting so much. I saw it before, but I didn't realize how much until this evening." Her eyes shimmered as she looked toward the counter where his work knife rested on the gloves she had given him. "I didn't know what to do without help."

Tabyái pushed her own plate away from her. "She's been worried about you for a while now. And Réku mentioned that you've been having trouble with some of the other riders."

The thought of Ukagòì and Zumafín brought a sour taste to the back of his throat. He scowled.

Fimúchi patted his hand. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you but I couldn't be sure you wanted help. You've been... distant lately and I thought it was because you didn't want me around."

Tsubàyo shook his head. "No!"

Then he realized he had yelled that. Blushing, he shook his head again and rested his hand on hers. "No, you've been wonderful. I would—"

There was a snicker.

He glanced over with a sinking sensation. Tabyái and Maporéku were smirking. Hedáchi had her hand over her mouth and was obviously trying not to smile.

Tsubàyo yanked his hand back and shoved them under the table.

Tabyái cleared her throat. "What we were trying to say was that we want to know where you came from. We know how you arrived, but your story before then is a blank."

He cringed. “You don’t want to know that. I... killed someone.”

Both Hedáchi and Eramína inhaled sharply.

Tsubàyo clenched his hands under the table. “I know her name was Great Pabinkue Adatái, but I don’t know anything else about her.”

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room.

“Can you tell us about what happened with Táí... Adatái?” Hedáchi’s voice was tense but pleading.

His eyes burned. “Why?”

“Because we want to know how she died. Please? It’s really important to us,” pleaded Hedáchi.

He looked at her. The curiosity had gotten more intense. All of the women were staring at him and he felt like he was about to be gutted. Slowly, he shook his head. “I-I can’t.”

Eramína sighed.

Hedáchi reached up to take her hand and squeeze it. Then she turned back to Tsubàyo. “Just start at the beginning? Tell us about you being a kid? Were you a stubborn brat or a flower?”

For the briefest of moments, he thought about Pidòhu. The slender boy was so weak and easy to bully. He wasted so many hours beating on him only to have the Pabinkúe do the same thing to him.

He took a long, deep breath. “No... I was the shit in this case. Got into a lot of fights, got beaten up, did my share. Actually, probably did more than my share of beating than being beaten.”

When no one interrupted him, he decided to keep talking. “There were these two weak-boned boys in the valley: Rutejìmo and Pidòhu. They were... pathetic...” He sighed. “Or at least I thought they were. Right up to the point the clan abandoned us in the middle of the desert.”

There were a few gasps of surprise.

Somehow, that encouraged him. “We woke up in the morning to find that all the adults had ran away in the night. It was just the five of us: Rutejimo who whined the entire time, Pidòhu who didn’t really do anything, ...”

He had arrived in the Seven Villages five months ago after a month of traveling with Mikáryo. Somehow, it felt like yesterday as he lost himself in the story.

Memories

It would be less painful to cut one's throat than to press for the details of a mother's child's death. — *A Song of Tears and Blood*

“... I was so angry at Jìmo after that. It felt like pulling teeth with every single action. Every command. He didn't want to be there. He should have stayed with Mípu and Dòhu. He... probably would have been happier with them.”

Tsubàyò's throat was raw but he had to keep going. He took a sip from the wine and let the unfamiliar tang tickle his tongue before he swallowed it. The other bottle was empty and there was only a few inches left in the bottom of everyone's mugs.

He thought about those last fateful moments. Fimúchi's hand in his helped keep his courage as he realized he was about to described how he killed someone they probably knew.

Tsubàyò took a deep breath. “I was wandering in the dark, circling around the light from the fires. I don't know why but I kept seeing those dark horses in the corner of my vision. I could hear them... I didn't know at the time, but it

was as if they were all calling to me. Just so many voices speaking as one.”

He glanced up to see all of the Pabinkúe at the table were glassy-eyed as if remembering it themselves. Now, he knew it was the voice of Pabinkúe herself calling to him. It hurt to keep going but he had been speaking for hours and couldn't stop. “I just wanted one horse. I was going to ride it and get away from the Shimusògo and everyone else. Just one horse and I was going to ride until the sun rose.”

The first clear voice in his head had been Ryachuikùo. The stallion was Adatái's. Usually one of the Pabinkúe bonded with one horse until they died. He still didn't know why the stallion had accepted him but he still remembered the first words that had blossomed in his consciousness: «I've been waiting for you.»

“H-He said he was waiting for me.”

Eramína let out a sob.

He froze and looked at her.

She shook her head and then leaned into her mother's shoulder.

Hedáchi hugged her tightly and stroked her dark curls. “Please, don't stop.” There were tears on her cheeks.

Tsubàyo gulped. He looked helplessly at Fimúchi who nodded in encouragement. “I-It was so easy. I just reached up and Ryachuikùo walked right up to me. It was so dark around me, but somehow I could see him clearly. When I crawled up and sat down on his back, it was... it was...” He didn't know how to describe it.

“Like you belonged there?” whispered Maporéku.

“Yeah,” he answered in a low voice. “Everything felt so right in that moment, like I was touching all the horses at once. I could see the entire herd at the same time, twenty-three sets of eyes looking into the darkness. Even Mikáryo's Datobàpo's was there for just a moment.”

His heart ached for that feeling again. Reflexively, he reached out Ryachuikùo. It didn't matter how far his horse was, the comfort of his thoughts in Tsubàyo's mind helped.

«Go on,» projected the equine.

“Please? Don't stop?” whispered Eramína again.

Tsubàyo nodded slowly. “I was about to ride away when Adatái grabbed my wrist. She had her knife out and tried to attack me. The blade cut my thigh, but the cloth caught it. I... kicked her as hard as I could.”

The words froze in his throat. He stared at table as he remembered how she fell back. Even in the dark, he could see every detail as she cracked the back of her head on the rock she had used to reach him. Her body, wrapped in the black armored cloth the Pabinkúe used, crunched loudly and then slid down unnaturally. The blood smear on the rock almost glowed in the light.

In his mind, the memory brought a pang of sadness from his connection. «I miss Adatái,» said Ryachuikùo in his mind. «She was my best friend since I was a foal.»

«Why did you accept me then?»

«It was time.»

“Bàyo?” asked Tabyái. “C-Can you...” She choked on her own tears. “... please?”

He had to wipe tears from his own eyes. “I wasn't thinking when I did it. I just wanted to get away. She had jumped on a rock to get to me. When she fell back, it hit the back of her head. There was a crack.”

Eramína let out a cry and dropped her head on the table, holding her arms over her head. Hedáchi, sobbing herself, draped herself over her daughter.

Tsubàyo stared directly at her. “I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was doing. I just... she died there. I-I saw the blood. And then she wasn't moving.”

Everything hurt as he forced the words out. “I was so scared and I just kicked Ryachuikùo to move. He did and then we were running away.”

Eramína looked up, her brown cheeks shimmering. “Why? Why did he abandon her?”

“It was time,” said both Tsubàyo and Hedáchi at the same time.

Hedáchi’s eyes widened as she stared at him. He saw that Maporéku and Tabyái were also staring.

He gestured toward the stables even though they were a league away. “Rya-Ryachuikùo told me. He said it was time. I-I don’t know why? I really don’t. Why did he let me? Why did he leave her?”

Hedáchi squeezed her daughter as she spoke to Tsubàyo. “Adatái had lost herself. She struggled to wake up in the evening for months. None of us were able to help her because she didn’t... or couldn’t help herself. The trip with Mikáryo wasn’t her idea at first, but then she hoped that seeing the rest of the desert would give her something to strive for.”

Eramína lifted her head. “Ryachuikùo abandoned her.”

Hedáchi hugged her. “No, love. They said goodbye. I have no doubt that she knew what was happening. Great Pabinkue Tsubàyo gave her a proper ending, a warrior’s death.”

«She did.» Ryachuikùo’s mind was sad but steady. «That trip was the end for her and we both knew it before we left. It wasn’t anything we would tell Great Pabinkue Mikáryo or anyone else, but the decision had been made before you touched my mind.»

He let out a choked sob. «Why didn’t you tell me earlier?»

«You weren’t ready.»

Tsubàyo couldn’t form words, either with his thoughts or his throat.

Ryachuikùo sent a wave of affection.

No one said anything for a long moment.

Tsubàyò felt uncomfortable. He tensed, waiting for the screaming or the crying. One of them was going to attack him, he knew it. He wouldn't stop them though. He deserved it.

Hedáchi broke the silence by standing up, pulling her daughter to her feet. "T-Thank you for the dinner and the company. I think we should go now."

Everyone else stood up with them. Tsubàyò didn't know what to say.

Hedáchi looked at him.

He held his breath.

"Thank you, Great Pabinkue Tsubàyò. A mother always wants to know how she lost her daughter."

He froze in shock. His blood ran icy as he started to shake.

Hedáchi and Eramína left without another word.

Maporéku sighed and headed after them. "Come on, Tabyái, we should get going ourselves."

Tabyái nodded. "I need to clean up."

Maporéku held out her hand. "Let Múchi and Bàyò do that. We need to go now."

Then she looked at Tsubàyò. "I'll see you tomorrow at the stables."

"Y-Yes, Great Pabinkue Maporéku."

They watched the other women left. Then he and Fimúchi cleaned up the mess in silence. He cleaned the dishes while she transferred the rest of the food into smaller containers for the cold box.

He didn't know what to say so he said nothing. Everything felt wrong and he was waiting for Fimúchi to start yelling at him. A small part of him was still wondering why no one screamed at him already.

When they finished, she moved to the door and turned around.

Tsubàyo stopped in front of her. He cleared his throat. “Why didn’t anyone yell at me?”

Her eyes were dark and there were tears on her cheeks. “Thank you. I know this was hard.” She reached out to take his hands in hers. “I also hope you realize that things are different here. We aren’t the Shimusògo. This isn’t the valley you grew up. No one is going to beat you like Yutsupazéso.”

She reached forward and kissed his cheek. “May I come over to dinner tomorrow?”

He realized he wanted to see her again. “Please?”

Fimúchi smiled and kissed him again, this time on his lips. “I’ll be here at sunrise then.”

Tsubàyo could only stare as she walked away in the afternoon’s light.

The Morning After

Even in moments of intense disagreement, the clan's unity binds tighter than anger.

—Woger Desaol-Kran, *Societal Norms Among the Desert Barbarians*

After a night of confession, Tsubàyo felt horrible as he staggered down the road toward the stables. The last of the daylight was fading and he desperately needed the little rush of pleasure that came with the moon rose above the horizon. It would be an hour before that happened.

With a groan, he reached out to Ryachuikùo with his mind. «Evening.»

The horse sent a wave of joy and affection.

«I take it you slept well?»

«Like a foal in a warm bed of hay.»

Tsubàyo chuckled dryly. He looked ahead to see that the Pabinkúe riders were already gathering to get the day's details and collect their horses. It was the morning ritual and one he never liked, but he dreaded meeting Maporéku after the previous night's dinner.

Then he saw Ukagòì laughing in a knot of riders.

Tsubàyo's stomach twisted in discomfort. He considered turning around and heading back home. He didn't. He had a duty. He was a Pabinkúe now and now he realized there were others who would stand next to him. Steeling himself, he forced himself to keep walking.

Ukagòì's voice carried over the din. "Oh look what rolled in horse shit. I thought I could smell something coming."

As the laughter rose up, Tsubàyo tried not to think about his sour stomach. He ducked his head and circled around to keep away from the abusive warrior.

He didn't get far before Zumafín step in front of him. He looked up at the slender warrior. She had her hands rested on her hips as she peered at him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Tsubàyo was tired of the two warriors. Every day was a trial, every time they found some way of making his life. He thought about his knife in his sheath and his fantasy from the night before.

Her eyes narrowed.

He kept his hand away from his sheath. "Just doing my job. Nothing more. Please just let me do that."

"Well, not over here. This is my spot now." She stepped back and leaned against the tree trunk where he used to stay most mornings. With a smirk, she crossed her arms over her chest.

Tsubàyo stepped back.

He thumped against Ukagòì's chest. The warrior had walked up behind him while Zumafín was speaking.

Ukagòì shoved him forward, laughing as he did. A few of the other riders also joined in.

Tsubàyo A familiar anger rose up. He wanted to lash out at either one of them. It didn't matter if he would lose. He didn't even care if they broke his bones. He had to do something to stop it.

“Got a problem, killer?”

Tsubàyo balled his hand into a fist. The leather of his work gloves creaked for a moment. Then he thought about Fimúchi’s look. He shook his head. “Pabinkúe accepted me, Great Pabinkue Ukagòì.”

It took effort to keep his voice as calm as possible.

“You’re still a murderer. There is no place here for you, no matter who you claim accepts you.” Ukagòì poked him with two fingers into Tsubàyo’s sternum. It hurt from the impact that staggered Tsubàyo back.

“Why won’t you get the hint?” asked Zumafín. “No one wants you here.”

For the briefest of moments, Tsubàyo almost said something about Adatái’s depression and how she died but he dismissed it instantly. It wasn’t his story to tell and he would take a thousand hits from his bullies than ruin the moments he had last night.

Raising his head, Tsubàyo looked directly into his eyes. “I am not proud of what I had done. I will never be proud of that night, but you don’t have to keep reminding me. Pabinkúe has accepted me and that is the only thing I can accept.”

He remembered how the clan spirit had spoke to him, the sound of a thousand horses in his mind speaking in almost perfect unison.

Ukagòì gaped for a moment and then his face twisted into a scowl. “Just because you—”

“Boys!” snapped Maporéku from the side.

All three of them looked at her as she strode through the crowd, the others parting around her to avoid her wrath. She stomped up to them, leading both Tsubàyo’s and Ukagòì’s horses.

Ryachuikùo radiated a wave of affection and joy to greet him. «Good evening, Great Pabinkue Tsubàyo.»

Feeling his horse's affection gave more weight to his words. The clan had accepted him, just not everyone inside it.

Edochyòbi, Ukagòì's horse, gave a passing of greeting before withdrawing his thoughts.

She jammed the reins into both of their hands. "You two need to stop fighting. Right now."

Ukagòì snorted. "It isn't a fight against a pathetic pile of horse shit like this. He doesn't have the guts or the ability."

Tsubàyo watched Maporéku carefully, unsure of her response. He could imagine she was finally going to yell at him, now that she was away from Tabyái and Fimúchi.

Her jaw tightened.

He tensed himself as he waited for the screaming.

Maporéku turned sharply on Ukagòì. "Then I guess you shouldn't be harassing him, should you?"

Ukagòì's smile froze. "W-What?"

"You are more powerful than him? Yes? A warrior of Pabinkúe blessed with the powers fight? You have dedicated your live, body, and spirit to this clan."

Ukagòì's lips pressed into a thin line. He shook his head. "Not for him."

The old woman jammed her fingers into his chest. It was the same two finger jab that he had used on Tsubàyo. Despite her being much smaller, Ukagòì staggered back a step.

"We are all Pabinkúe," she stated firmly. "Accept that or move to another stable."

Ukagòì looked frightened for a moment but quickly regained his composure. His face twisted in a scowl. "I'm not going to leave for a murderer like him. He'll be the one that leaves before I do."

Tsubàyo tensed, uncomfortable in the situation. Looking around, he could see some of the other bystanders were

also twisting and shifting as they watched the older stable master speaking to the warrior.

She crossed her arms over her chest.

The air around Ukagòì's body began to waver. Unlike most of the clan, he could use his magic without the moon above the horizon. The pale blue energies danced his dark skin, lighting up the shadows of his face with flickering light.

Maporéku shook her head.

He shook his head. "I won't leave. You can't make me."

"I'm the stable master. My word is law when it comes to the horses who remain here. I am the charge of the comfort and care for your companions while you sleep." Her voice was steady and brimming with confidence. It was terrifying but also comforting that she appeared to be standing up for him.

Tsubàyo cringed, thankful it wasn't him even though he dreaded when she finally turned on him.

"When I say you are no longer welcome in my house, you will find a new place to house Great Pabinkue Edochyòbi."

Zumafín came around to stand behind him.

Ukagòì snarled. "I will take this to directly to Kamùji."

Tsubàyo inwardly groaned. Fimúchi's father made it clear he didn't like Tsubàyo for the same reasons Ukagòì didn't. There was no love between the two men and he suspected it would only get worse.

"And I will take it to Pabinkúe, you insolent foal."

An uncomfortable silence descended over the yard.

Ryachuikùo stepped up to Tsubàyo and bumped him gently. «Are you willing to stand for yourself?»

Tsubàyo didn't look to the side. He thought about how the five women responded to his story, the tears but also how they didn't lash out. He wasn't sure Maporéku wouldn't

attack him in minutes, but for a moment, he felt welcome. «Yes. What can I do? What should I do?»

«Great Pabinkue Maporéku asks if you want to stop the bullying.»

Tsubàyo inhaled sharply. She did? «Yes!>.

«She suggests you call the herd to stand behind you. It is one way of showing that Pabinkúe is listening.» Ryachui-kùò's voice started to blur and grow hazy, as if there was another voice speaking at the same time as his.

Tsubàyo had heard the multiple voices of the horses before, but only when they spoke for the clan spirit. He wondered if he was hearing Maporéku speaking through Ryachuikùò.

Encouraged, he reached out for the surrounding equines. «Stand by me, please?»

A chorus of agreements rose up in his mind. In the corner of his vision, he saw one horse after the other sink into the ground. They disappeared into the shadows of the riders standing in the sun or the darkness of each other.

Their minds appeared behind him. He felt it as a cool wave of comfort as their senses melded with his own. They were staring at the stand off from different angles, each one adding detail to the scene.

“You can't speak for the clan, old woman. Only Kamùji can and he isn't here.”

The words caught Tsubàyo's attention. He cast out his senses looking for Kamùji's horse, Zukejùfa. To his surprise, the clan leader was only a few chains distance from them. His mind meshed with the leader's horse instantly and Zukejùfa sent a wave of kinship back.

“I don't need the clan leader. The spirit is here. If you won't acknowledge my authority, you will accept Pabinkúe's!” Maporéku jabbed her hand into Ukagò's chest again.

He grabbed her wrist. “You don’t have that right. You cannot speak for her. He’s a murderer and he doesn’t deserve to be here.”

Tsubàyo felt a surge of anger. He reached for the connection with Zukejùfa. «Will you stand with me?»

The answer came as the horse appeared next to him, crawling out of the darkness of his own shadow. The heavy body shuddered the ground as the leader’s horse stood tall with Ryachuikùo and Tsubàyo between the two.

Tsubàyo let out a sigh of relief, then he noticed a boot against Zukejùfa’s side. Fear flooded his veins as he looked up into Kamùji’s nonplussed expression. He cringed.

Kamùji shook his head once in disapproval but then looked toward Maporéku and Ukagòì.

The pleasure of using magic rolled through Tsubàyo’s senses. He reached out for more of the horses surrounding the stables. He asked for them to stand next to him, to prove his right to be in the clan.

They accepted.

Then he felt Edochyòbi and Gadòbi accept his thoughts. He had rarely connected to Ukagòì and Zumafín’s horses but the connection grew strong. He decided to risk everything. «Stand by me?»

There were already a hundred horses quietly standing behind Tsubàyo. He could feel their presence in his mind and their thoughts in his head. They had accepted him, the spirit had accepted him.

Edochyòbi’s thoughts were dark. «I will only do this once.»

Gadòbi was already dropped into shadows. The massive creature quietly sank into the ground, leaving not even a whisper of sound as he disappeared.

Edochyòbi joined him.

Ukagòì and Zumafín stood alone.

Lost in his own argument Maporéku, Ukagòì twisted her wrist. “Listen, you old woman. I don’t care what you say. I will stay in any stable I want. You are nothing more than a caretaker and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let an old woman tell me what I can or cannot do.”

Next to him, Zumafín seemed to realize her horse had disappeared. She looked around behind her and then around. When her eyes lit on her mount, they widened with surprise. With a shaking hand, she reached up for her brother’s arm and tapped it sharply.

Ukagòì started to shrug her off, but then he froze.

Kamùji cleared his throat.

Sweat prickled on Ukagòì’s brow.

“I believe you were going to bring an argument to me?” said the clan leader in a low, threatening voice.

Maporéku gestured toward Tsubàyo and the horses behind him. “Or Pabinkúe? I believe she’s here too.”

Ukagòì’s eyes scanned across the gathered horses that stood behind Tsubàyo. Different emotions crossed his face. Anger was obvious but Tsubàyo had never seen fear before.

Zumafín stepped back and away from her brother.

The abandoned warrior looked around the yard.

The riders that had joked with him were all silent. They all seemed entranced by the event but there was no question many of them wished they were somewhere else.

Tsubàyo felt the same thing. As much as it seemed like things were going his way, he knew it was only a moment before things turned. But until then, he just wanted it to end as soon as possible.

Ukagòì sighed. “Shit,” he muttered. He turned to Tsubàyo and bowed deeply. “I apologize, Great Pabinkue Tsubàyo. I was out of line.”

Tsubàyo felt no joy seeing his bully cowed. He just wanted it to end.

He looked up to see Maporéku watching him. He cringed and let out a sigh.

She nodded.

«I don't like this,» he sent to Ryachuikùò.

«She says you did well.»

«Why?»

Ryachuikùò bumped him. «I'm not going to be a messenger for you. Hang around, both Great Pabinkue Kamùji and Maporéku both wish to speak with you. You also owe me at least two... no three carrots. Bunches of carrots.» The horse threw back his head. «I'm hungry.»

He groaned.

Maporéku shot a glare at him. She turned back to Ukagòì. “You have a choice, stay or leave this stable. If you stay, I don't want to hear any more crap between you and Great Pabinkue Tsubàyo.”

“I think it would be best if I find a new stable, Great Pabinkue Maporéku.” While there was a sullen anger in his voice, he didn't seem to be seething. Tsubàyo wondered if he would be getting an unexpected visitor in the next few days.

Tsubàyo felt the subtle twinge of the horses wanting to leave. He gave him a wave of thanks. One by one, they headed back to their riders or returned to the stable. The ones that came from further away simply dropped into shadows and disappeared from sight.

While they did, Maporéku and Ukagòì spoke quietly. They finished and Tsubàyo noticed that almost everyone had left the yard except for him, Ukagòì, Maporéku, and Kamùji.

Ukagòì bowed to Tsubàyo again, then to Kamùji. “I apologize. I was out of line and let my anger drive my actions. I... will always have trouble accepting you, but I will keep it to myself from now on.”

Kamùji said, “Good. I know that he came under the worst of circumstances, but Pabinkúe has accepted him and so will we. You did the right thing, Great Pabinkue Uka-gòì.”

Ukagòì looked relieved as he swept up on his horse and then dove forward. The shadows opened up and swallowed the horse.

Tsubàyo was left alone with Kamùji and Maporéku. He looked at both of them. His muscles tensed until his chest ached. “I—”

Kamùji interrupted him by holding up his hand. “Have you spoken to Fatobúpi?”

“I-I don’t know who she is, Great Pabinkue Kamùji.”

With a growl, Kamùji shook his head. “My former wife has brought to my attention that Fatobúpi, who was asked to guide your introduction to the clan, has failed to do her duties. The fact you are not aware of her name, nor had basic necessities, is an insult to Pabinkúe and to me.”

Tsubàyo tensed.

Kamùji bowed. “I apologized myself for my inaction. Great Pabinkue Tabyái has graciously offered to help you become one of us.”

There was the same sullen anger in his voice. He didn’t like Tsubàyo, but he was being honest about his response. The only thing Tsubàyo was bow and accept it. “Thank you, Great Pabinkue Kamùji.”

Kamùji reared his horse and then plunged into a shadow.

Tsubàyo stared at the spot, unsure of his feelings.

“That was the closest he will ever come to admitting he was an asshole.”

He jumped Maporéku’s voice.

“Tsubàyo? I’m sorry also. I had made an assumption about Adatái’s death and treated you with disrespect.” She

rested her hand on his shoulder. “You are welcomed to my stable and if you ever need someone to talk to, please don’t hesitate to ask... Tabyái.”

He jerked. “What?”

She squeezed his shoulder. “I’m not serious. Ask any of us. Any time, morning or night. Even Hedáchi or Eramína. Your story has given them some closure in Adatái’s death. That was something only you could have given and I can’t thank you enough for sharing.”

“I...”

Maporéku held up her hand. “Any time. I’ve heard that you can reach across the entire Seven Villages with your mind so you will have no trouble finding a horse near me. I always have one within my range.”

She released his shoulder to pat it. “You did good, Tsub-àyo. I hope that you feel that you’ve finally come home after all this time. I’m sorry that it has taken so long.”

“T-Thank you.”

With a smile, she turned and walked away. A few steps later, she held up her hand. “Today’s duties are with Great Rojikinomi Fimúchi in the fields. I have no doubt you can find her horses if you try.”

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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