

Wyum's Pen

"Qudel, bring out some meal for the chickens," father called on me that night, under the dim, flickering candlelight at the dinner bench.

I was expected to reserve a greater portion of my meal for the animals every night we had dinner. When the harvest wasn't good, we fed the animals rather than ourselves. It was the way our ancestors had gone about things, and the ones before them, and the ones before them. No child quite knew why we were so obliged to honor creatures that seemed inferior to us, but Father, Mother and even Ren-Jacho, my eldest sister, told of spirits that had come upon our desert village before the trail of tears to tell us to treat the animals as ourselves. "These are things you must come to understand," everybody implored me. "The desert winds will look kindly upon your soul once you do."

So I brought my plate around the side of our adobe cottage to the chicken pen. They were quiet that night, as they always were when darkness defeated the stars. I brushed my greasy hands on the loose strap that wrapped around my waist.

"Heyakia," I whispered softly, splitting the bread into small portions as to avoid a violent plucking over the food. "Heyakia, *chickańias*."

My favorite bird emerged first. A long time ago I called him, *Wyum*, meaning Lord of the Blue Sands in my culture's language. He had a long, shimmery stripe of turquoise feathers that ran down his breast like a stream flowing from the mountains. He had large, wild eyes and a little stubble on his chin that kept growing no matter how many days I spent rubbing the hairs off.

His wife, whom my sister called *Sevuelita*, marched from her pen right behind Wyum. Sevuelita had a temper, that bird. She ruffled her feathers much like a mighty eagle when she was famished. When she was feeling brave, she would step right over Wyum to get her meal.

And finally, waddling behind Sevuelita came their fat, ugly chicks. I declined to name any until they morphed into something bearable to look at. As for the time being, they were nothing but strange balls of puffy down with mud-crusting beaks.

“*Wyuuuuuum*,” I crowed, dropping the bread inside of their pen. “Eat your meal!”

Curiously, Wyum took small, awkward steps over to where the bread bits lay in the sand. Following closely behind were the chicks with bulging eyes and expecting mouths. Reliably in tow was Sevuelita, who preferred to eat last.

The chickens were my favorite of animals, for they reminded me of my family. Father was a loud, rambunctious man with a belly that seemed blown up by the winds. He burped a lot because he drank a lot, but when he was sober, and only when he was sober, was he a decent man. Wyum was much like this, because his own stomach, well, let’s just say he was well fed. He was also a very energetic chicken, and I often came to the pen to find him running for the picket fence, trying to escape.

Sevuelita was like my own mother, for she had a very cold attitude and a tight face. She looked after her children just enough but would peck them whenever they showed false manners or acted rash.

Then the children... well, I didn’t see much of me or my sister in those hideous little things. Obviously, I told nothing of my opinions to my family because they thought that all animals were more sacred than man even the dung beetle that rolled its feces across the desert floor. And the conniving kit fox that slayed plump prairie dogs on the savanna.

The ways of my people were very confusing.

Once the chickens had plucked up the last of their meal, I said a prayer of safety over the pen and bode goodnight to Wyum and Sevuelita. When I brought my dish to the washbasin outside, Mother was rubbing oil off of my sister's plate.

"Is Sevuelita well?" she asked, taking my platter.

"Yes, and so is everybody else," I assured her.

"So Wyum isn't attempting escape again?"

"No, Mother," I said wearily. "May I go inside now?"

She nodded in approval and I happily turned to leave. Mother assumed me responsible for Wyum and his chicks, and my sister responsible for Sevuelita. Most of the time, though, that turned into me caring for all of the chickens (reluctantly, at that), because neither of us shared much of a fascination in animals as we were expected to.

When I entered our cottage, I noticed that only one candle burned in Ren-Jacho's room at the end of the hall.

"Renny?" I called.

All that came in response was a sharp *shhhhh* from my sister. I ducked my head into Renny's room and saw her reading through a travel brochure for a city named Portland in America. When she spotted me spying, she shoved the slim paperback under her bedding.

"You don't have to hide those from me," I said. "We're in this together."

"I know, I just feared you were Father," she whispered, motioning for me to sit near her.

"He's really... *unstable* right now."

I knew what she meant. She liked to use that word instead of saying *drunk*.

"By the god Oasia, he must only drink date beer on those fields," she spat bitterly.

“Yup,” I agreed. “Cause he comes home *unstable* almost every evening. But don’t worry, once I become a man and you become a woman... we’ll find a way out of here.”

We scarcely knew how, in those days, but we had a good amount of time before that day came. Once we were elders of the tribe, we could do whatever we wished. Yet for now, we had to hold on and put up with this animal nonsense for a couple years more.

Renny sighed. “Well, you should rest early because Father will be in a harsh mood tomorrow,” she warned.

I nodded. “Goodnight,” I said.

“May Moundi look fondly upon your soul,” Renny hummed, taking up her travel brochure once again.

This was a standard blessing we gave one another at night, when our moon goddess, Moundi, examined our deeds done from the day and decided if our next day would be good or bad.

Well, apparently Moundi saw nothing fondly of my soul that night, because when I awoke to the rooster’s cry, my father was dead.

Immediately, the whole village made haste in covering his body and bringing him into the desert. I hadn’t much time to cry. At least that’s what I told myself, because nobody else in my family did either. I hoped that the reason I kept things together wasn’t because I didn’t miss him, because the village would claim me to have a heart of stone.

We made a procession far into the desert, as we always did when one of our own passed on to the bounty of Oasia, our god of the beautiful afterlife. A priest in gazelle skins lead us over red rocks and beige sands, motioning his way with a magical wand. Mother told me it was magical, so I had to believe her for the time being. We were right behind his sandaled feet, our faces painted with mourning images. My modest waist cloth had been weighed down with glamorous

jewels, and my hair was quickly snipped so it reached nowhere past my neck. It was all so much for one morning, but I made no protests.

We reached the Holy Oasis by sunrise. It was a transition place, the passage between our world and the next. Only the priest with the scepter and the mourning family were allowed inside, so it was my first time. Palm trees towered high, and the sands were cooled by clear waters that trickled from an arched stone. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and it was hard to believe that my father would deserve such paradise in his life after death.

They told me he had died from over-drinking, which didn't surprise anybody. His room had been piled high with bottles of alcohol that were stained with little remaining droplets of date beer and wine. It was a sour death, I believed, and he should be buried in the deep desert after how many times he had hit me and my sister from being so dirty "*unstable*".

Then the priest lay his body, wrapped in a linen cloth, into the stream and I remembered Wyum, the chicken with a beautiful blue stripe and the wild eyes. Wyum, the chicken who had bounded to escape the pen and I realized that Father had tried to escape his own pen. The pen where he'd been trapped drinking and drinking, the pen where I'd always chastised his habits, the pen that had held him his whole life. And then I remembered those nights where he had slung me up onto his legs and told me whimsical tales of mighty dragons and beautiful women and the god Oasia. That's when I knew it... yes, he most definitely deserved this Oasis here, more than anybody else in the world. And when I got home, Wyum was going to be freed.