

Excerpt from: Sun Runner

1400 words

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The Mob

Thunder shook the desert. Not from the brilliant sky but from the impact of the Sun Runners' passing, the rhythm of each stride upon the next, of more than two hundred horses at full gallop. The herd wheeled south, and the sands trembled beneath a thousand hooves.

Initzi ran in the center of the great stream of bodies, racing with her dam to the left and her brother, Nikea, just off her right flank. The filly's legs moved effortlessly, stretching into a stride so long that the smaller colt struggled to keep pace. Her hooves pounded hot sand, striking each step as a blow against the desert while her nostrils stretched, pulling warm air into broad lungs.

She could run forever. She could run until her huge heart burst. Even then, her legs might still churn, still strive to cover as much of her world as they could reach. She was Initzi, Sun Runner, daughter of Miraba, and she was the fastest yearling in the Warishi band.

Not that it had earned her more than a bland sort of praise from her dam, a disinterested acknowledgment of skill without the warmth of affection behind it. It was Initzi's sire, Shikanti, who gave her his heart, and not surprisingly, the old stallion had not joined them on this journey.

Initzi skimmed over the dunes at Miraba's side and could not bring herself to wish her sire was there to hold them back. Her dam ran near the band's head, just a half stride off the leaders, and only went that slowly in deference to the colt. Without Nikea tagging along, they could have led the charge.

To all sides, the other horses galloped. They made a wall of silken coats in bright bay, sleek brindle, and soft dun that would have blended into the sands but for the leg striping. Initzi's ears filled with their huffing breath, their hooves' clatter, and the beating of her own heart.

Until the colt squealed.

She twisted her neck in time to see her brother stumble.

Nikea was tired, perhaps. The journey had carried them to the far eastern edge of the desert and back, to the place where a thin river marked the very rim of the Sun Runners' territory. The colt was months old, barely had found his legs before the time for the procession was on them. Fatigue would explain the stumble, certainly, and the way his long legs seemed to fold and buckle.

Initzi's throat seized as her brother went down. The horse behind him leapt over the colt, but those behind *her* had no time to see. They closed in over the small body, blocking him from view. Hooves against sand. The terrified cry of a young stallion that was still more squeak than scream.

She threw her head up and pinned her ears, digging in with her rear legs and spinning a pivot so tight that only her pale tail brushed the horses running alongside her. Leaping back the way they'd come, Initzi ran against the herd, weaving between startled friends and family, and dodging broad chests and wildly pumping legs.

Her own voice seemed weak against the cacophony of the herd, but she lent it to the cause, shouting and whinnying in an effort to divide the flow. Three strides, four, and still the horses ran, the sands trembled, and there was no sign of Nikea.

Then, he was at her feet, small and curled in tightly upon himself. Initzi leaped over the prone colt and planted her four hooves on all sides of him. She stopped, facing the oncoming herd. Initzi lowered her head, snorted, and gave a long, panicked near-mare's whicker.

The mob broke around the yearling, who was large enough to be seen and dodged, loud enough to be heard over their hooves' thunder. They pounded on, curving to the sides and then closing in once they'd passed the obstacle of Initzi and her brother. As they ran by, they splattered her with sand, small pricks against her body, a wash of minor pains.

But Nikea made no sound or movement, even as the onslaught slowed, as the runners thinned and the last of the herd swept them by. He lay still, legs folded beneath him and head tucked at a sharp angle against his small chest.

His barrel, however, lifted and fell. Initzi found relief in that meager signal. He lived, and she let out a long sympathetic exhalation in response.

The thunder dimmed with distance. The desert grew soft and still around them. Initzi lowered her nose and breathed warm air over Nikea's bronze face. A white stripe ran between his eyes to the top of his fuzzy nostrils, and she reached out softly with her tongue and swiped the length of it.

"Yuck," his foal's voice managed to carry a stallion's worth of disgust.

"Can you get up?" Initzi asked. Lying on the sand was not safe, and for all that he no longer nursed at their mother's side, Nikea was small still. She eyed the sky skeptically, as if a raptor might be circling even then. "Are you injured?"

"Sore," Nikea said, groaning, pushing with his front legs and rising enough that Initzi was forced to skitter aside. "I had a cramp."

She watched him struggle, watched the tremble in his limbs, and thought for the hundredth time that their mother had weaned him too soon.

For the race.

A bitter taste rose in her throat. There was more than one dusty hoof print on her brother's furry body, prints she knew had been accidental. Likely, the horses that trod on him had the sense to throw their weight, to make the impacts as slight as possible. Nikea still staggered to all fours, stumbled to the side, and began to fold again.

Initzi rushed to steady him. She levered him back upright with her neck, and the colt leaned against her, breathing hard, most likely trying his hardest not to cry.

It was not fair to cut him off before he was ready, to sever a tie that would have given him strength if allowed to play to its fullest. Initzi saw the panic in Nikea's eyes as he sucked at the searing desert air, and knew he should be home, safe in the *kinfe* and focused only on eating and growing into his potential.

He was too new for the journey he'd just taken, should never have been allowed to join them.

"Try a step," she whispered.

The colt lifted his head. His short, ruffled mane bobbed, and he raised one foreleg, placed it back against the sand again. "I'm not lame," he argued.

"You're still feisty enough."

"Did...?" Nikea took a step without falling, then stopped short and looked into the distance. "They left us?"

"We'll catch up." Initzi eyed the sky again. Clear and blue, with no clouds to hide a soaring predator.

Nikea raised his head high, aimed his ears forward, and tried to trot. He made it three strides before listing to one side. Initzhi had to scramble up beside him to keep the colt from falling again.

“Stay on your feet,” she snapped, looking to the sky again. “It’s better to go slow if it keeps you off the sands.”

“My hock hurts,” Nikea said. “On that side.”

“It’ll be okay,” Initzhi reassured. “Come on.”

They went together, the colt leaning into her every third step, and both of them moving at a maddening crawl. Initzhi tried to examine his hindquarters without being obvious, to see if the limp was from a bruise or a more severe injury. Lameness was unthinkable. Nikea was only a foal. A serious wound might change the whole trajectory of the colt’s life, might consign him to spend his years trapped in the *kinfe*, grazing only on the oily sea grasses. Never racing.

She tried to imagine Nikea like their father, singing the ancient names of heroic horses to the herd and never once feeling the stinging winds against his own face. Never crossing the broad sands at the heart of the band. Or at its head. It was too horrible to bear.

With her mind full of dark worries, she kept her head low, kept her body near her brother’s for support, and only heard the hollow drumming of hooves when it was nearly upon them.