

A desert landscape with sand dunes and mountains under a sunset sky. The foreground shows a path of footprints leading through the dunes. The background features a range of mountains under a warm, orange and red sky.

The Tale of **Monty**

A SHORT STORY FROM THE WORLD OF NAN'KADUR

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The Tale of Monty



Monty had yet to learn his name was Monty, but he would win the race, that was certain. He'd been surprised at the other petra's speed and was now playing catch-up, which, after more competitions than he could count, was the first time he'd felt challenged. Despite his captivity, he loved the races, for nothing in his new life felt as close to the wild, as close to his pack racing across the dunes.

He missed his family.

The days between runs were unnecessarily brutal and—as far as he was concerned—wholly unnatural. Everything about the humans was constrained, trapped between walls of mistrust, wrapped in angry chains as tight as jaws. He wondered why they chose to live in such a state.

The petra saw him gaining on her right flank. Like a javelin, she stretched her neck and tail out straight while her two powerful legs pumped furiously.

Sometimes Monty wished he could laugh like a human, it looked enjoyable, and he often felt it was appropriate. Instead, he shook his neck and whipped his tail feathers, then sprinted all the faster.

Even at a young age, Monty had been the fastest in his pack, and frankly, the smartest—though he didn't revel in that so much as speed. There was only so much one could do with a sharp mind, after all. But neither speed nor acuity had saved him from capture nor managed an escape—though he'd tried enough times to have scars from the barbed whips of his masters.

As he and his rival sped around a bend in the track, the crowd roared. He roared back at them, a thing few petras can do, and they cried in zeal. He'd learned a while ago that the more humans cheered, the better his feed. Tonight he'd gorge, for the people were overcome with a fever he hadn't seen since his earliest races. Maybe they enjoyed seeing him challenged. He couldn't know for certain; humans were strange creatures.

The curving track turned straight and Monty chose his victory. He leaned into his run, his neck and tail straight as a bolt, and shot past his adversary. She

screed in defiance, but it was not enough as he raced by her, giving one good shake of his neck to make a point.

He was the fastest, and that was that.

Following the race, a big man with a thick neck, nose, and beard brought a slab of pagoran steak to his pen. The first time Monty had met his new master was after he was tied down and beaten by the first—this one showed no kindness either, but he did stop the beatings. Humans could do cruel things.

"You done good." He tossed the meat just within range of Monty's chains.

Pagoran steak from a human was magnificent. Not only was it cut free from the frustrating shell, it was also more delicious than any he'd had in the wild, and so he gorged as he knew he would.

"I told you he was a good bet", the man was saying. "In one year, this angry bastard ran up the ranks, and tonight, *tonight* my friend, he is the Grand Champion of the Riderless!"

"You're a lucky one. I'll give you that." Another man was in the room, this one smaller, darker, with no hair on his face and shining, eager eyes.

"Luck? Ha! I know how to pick 'em. I can see if they got fire in them or not, and this one was burnin'!"

"Whatever you say. In any case, I'm here with an offer."

"He ain't for sale. Not no more." The big man folded his arms.

"Everything is for sale, friend. This one's ready for a rider, you know this. You can't keep a beast like this in riderless games—it's time for him to graduate."

"Then sponsor me, and I'll take him to the rider games myself."

"That's not happening."

"Yeah, well, I told you he ain't for sale."

"Three hundred fifty thousand pynts."

The big man was quiet after that, until slowly, a smile crept onto his face. "Make it four hundred and you got a deal."

"I'll have it brought to you this evening, along with a handler to take the creature." The smaller man bowed and left the stables, giving one last eager glance at Monty.

Monty didn't know what was said, but he didn't like the look of the new man, and so he flicked his tail feathers in the air—he'd have said 'asshole' if he could.



The first day with his new master was no different than the previous, save for more space and more food, but early the next morning, Monty was brought to a giant arena, and things changed. At the center was a rock formation, like a mountain range, around which ran a narrow racetrack. All about stood other petras, each with their own three humans and each staked to the ground with thick chains.

They quickly bound Monty in the same manner. A slender man with cruel eyes approached, carrying a strange object in his arms. Monty wanted to growl and sink his teeth into him, but only pain and punishment could come from that choice, and so he held firm. It felt a strange thing to restrain himself against something so soft and weak—in the wild, the human would already be in his stomach.

Monty heard a commotion to his right and twisted his neck to see a stout petra several yards away. It squirmed as its human put a strange thing on top of its back.

"Hold firm, you dry-shit bastard! You're getting this saddle one way or another."

Two other men yanked the chain around the petra's neck painfully tight while a third thrashed it with a cane. The petra whimpered in defeat and hung its armored head as the saddle was strapped firm.

Then, to Monty's dismay and alarm, the human *mounted* the petra.

Beyond them were others suffering the same fate, each resisting until their saddles were snug, and then a defeated, docile nature took hold. At that moment, Monty knew—under no circumstances would he be saddled. He'd rather be beaten to death than live broken under the will of a weak creature.

"Ears here, savage," said the man standing before Monty with a voice not bold enough to hide his nerves. "I'm going to put this on you, and you're going to let me."

Monty didn't know the words, but he knew the intent, and so he taught the rider his first lesson about riding Monty—don't. With one swipe of his mighty tail, he swept the man's legs out from under him, dropping him hard on his boney rump.

Despite the thrashing he received for it, the same fate—in one way or another—befell each of the men who attempted to saddle him until the sunset, and they sent him back to his stall.

His back burned from the barbs, but he had not been broken.

The men attempted to saddle him for hours every day, but no matter the punishment, he wouldn't allow the evil thing near him. The eager man who'd first brought him was continuously furious, which Monty found hilarious, and again he wished he could laugh like a human.

"I've had enough!" the man shouted, shoving past the latest failed rider. He pointed a skinny finger at Monty. "You're going to regret wasting my money, you rock-eating bastard."

That night everything changed. He was placed in a pen that became a cage on wheels and rolled out to the streets. He was taken by lantern far from the stable to a new building. This one was dark and massive, with some monster carved in stone above two great doors. They opened with a groan, and a woman appeared. She was dressed in flowing blue robes with black hair that hung to her back in loose curls. She had a different air about her, something calmer, stronger. She approached his cage with graceful steps and a warm smile.

"He's a pretty one, isn't he," she said.

He watched her curiously while she circled the cage. "Doesn't seem so wild to me."

"No offense, but you haven't seen him outside this cage," said the man leading the entourage. "He's as fierce as there's ever been."

"We will see. If he's not, he'll die. If he is, well, he'll die anyway, but at least he'll have some glory before he goes. Come bring him to the holdings."



Monty's new pen was the smallest he'd been in yet with hardly enough room to sleep. There was a gate of thick bars on one side and a tall iron door on the other. The woman stood a few feet back with her arms folded. She bore that same smile, but something in the back of Monty's mind gave warning.

"I've never seen a petra quite like you," she said to him. "Those cold blue eyes nearly glow against that sand-pale hide. Your head plate is sharp. And your tail feathers! Long, elegant, iridescent as a blue opal. Too bad for your back, though."

Scars like that don't go away. Those men don't know how to treat a creature like you." She took in a long deep breath. "Not that I'm any better. It's a shame you couldn't find a rider. As much as I love making money, it's not easy seeing a specimen like you in a place like this."

She sounded kind, but...

After she left, he couldn't sleep. The pen was so confined it made his heart race. He stamped his feet and squawked in irritation. Several stalls away, another petra croaked back. Weak, sad.

Soon the morning light shined through the barred window of the iron door and a quiet man approached with food. This was no pagoran steak, it was the gristle and offal of an unknown, unfortunate beast—but it was food.

Hours went by. He squawked at his fellow prisoner and received one bitter reply. She was injured, and she was tired. He felt pity for her, and with that came a sort of bond.

After a time, the sound of a crowd began to filter through the door's window. Monty had learned that noise well. A racetrack was on the other side. He felt a surprising sense of relief. After all the abuse he'd suffered, he was back to what he knew best—racing other petras. He stood and turned to face the door, eager for it to open, desperate to be free.

Four large men entered the stable carrying long poles.

"She's up first," said the leader. "I think this'll be her last go."

"Too bad," said another. "She had a good run."

There was the sound of heavy chains and the murmur of the crowd grew suddenly louder.

She screeched, and Monty's heart ached for her. She was terrified. But why? Even in captivity, a race was a *race*.

"Get on!" shouted the man. She screeched again. "Alright, boys, push!"

Monty heard her struggling, growling, croaking in anger, then suddenly the door slammed closed with her on the other side. He didn't know what was happening, but he knew it wasn't right, so he screeched as loud as he could.

As the men left, Monty could hear the crowd roar, burying the other petra's shrieks. For several minutes he listened to the sound rise and fall as they were entertained until it at last crescendoed into prolonged applause.

The men returned.

"Didn't think she'd last so long," said one.

"She was a fighter, that was for sure."

"Think this one'll do any better?"

The same men came to stand before Monty's cage.

"I heard he's a mean bastard. He been here two years and they still can't saddle him."

"We'll see."

Again came the clinking sound of chains as the door to the arena was raised. The men stood with their poles ready, eager to shove him from his pen. He wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

With his head high and his tail feather fanned wide, he walked through the doorway by his own will.

The crowd went wild at the sight of him and he wondered if they remembered his races.

But oddly, there was no track. The arena was nothing more than a wide circle with several doors of varying sizes spaced equally apart, above which rose tiers of people. He had seen audiences larger, but these were in a sort of fervor unlike he'd heard before. They barked and howled like wild things, taunting and jeering.

A loud voice cried, "The Grand Champion himself is here! The beast who could not be ridden! The savage from the wilderness of Titan! Will he be enough? We shall see!"

A trumpet sounded, and the crowd erupted.

Across the arena, one of the larger doors was opened, and from it burst a sea-spider.

Monty slapped his tail against the ground and snorted. These assholes wanted him to fight! He'd faced spiders in the wild, but always with his pack mates at his side. They were dangerous creatures. But Monty was damn tired of being the abused. He needed something for his anger to feast upon.

He'd give them their fight.

The sea-spider was larger than most and fierce with hunger, but it had yet to face a petra like Monty. He raced forward and the spider reared up, its two front legs raised for a strike. But, like most creatures, it underestimated Monty's speed. He slammed into the spider's body full-on, using his momentum to lift and toss the beast to its side.

The seaspider scrambled to right itself, but it was too slow. Monty tore into its abdomen and it squealed and hissed, its legs thrashing wildly, then convulsed and died in a pool of black blood and gore.

Monty raised his head high and roared.

The crowd was ferocious, howling in ecstasy as the announcer declared him the victor.

When the door to his cell opened, he saw a pagoran steak lying on the ground. It was about damn time. He rushed inside, and the door closed behind him.

The fights continued week after week as he faced all manner of creatures, from a flightless xavian that nearly killed him to a trio of humans. He was weary and bitter, but they were fun to defeat. Between battles, he was fed little and allowed to run in the empty arena only once per day.

The woman came to visit him often, though she rarely spoke, until one day she said, "You've done well, my savage boy. Better than anyone thought. But alas, your time has come, as it comes to us all. I wish the best for you tomorrow. May your death be quick."

She sighed heavily, and he could see some great weight upon her shoulders. Then she left without another word, and he wondered what she had said.

The following day he entered the arena to find the audience wilder than ever. They'd seen several fights throughout the day, and Monty knew his would be the last. He wondered what victim he'd face today. Hopefully not another xavian.

The announcer spoke and there was a loud clang, then the largest door in the arena began to lift. The crowd hushed.

Monty didn't like this.

He heard rumbling and several loud bangs as something inside beat powerfully against the rising door. Then a massive grey beast, unlike anything he'd seen before, emerged from the shadows of its cell, and for the first time in Monty's life, he felt fear.

The monster stood three times taller than he with a massive jaw of wicked teeth, two great forward-facing horns, and a thick spike protruding from its chin. It stood on two short legs and the knuckles of its massive claws. Its hide looked like broken plates and sporadic spikes, followed by a long, forked tail. It roared, and the ground shook.

Monty had a strange reaction to fear. It made him angry. It made him *want* to fight. This had gotten him in trouble many times in the wild, and perhaps it would again as he stalked forward, his head low and tail straight.

The monster galloped toward him and reared up, clapping its claws together before dropping back to the ground, where it leaned forward and roared like a hundred trumpets. The sheer power of it shook Monty's bones.

So he roared back. Perhaps he was not as loud, but he knew he was heard by all, for the crowd cried in wild abandon.

The monster hesitated in the face of Monty's ferocity and stepped backward. It barked and clawed the dirt.

Monty burst forward. The creature roared and swung its might claw. He was ready for it and slid on his belly, then lunged upward and bit into the beast's underbelly. It cried out and bashed Monty aside with its other arm.

The two fell backward. The monster's wound dripped with blood as it rolled to its side. Monty stood, dazed from the blow. He felt a burning on his flank and looked to see three deep gouges. It angered him more.

Monty thumped his tail on the ground and screeched as the monster stood. Again they faced off, but this time it didn't hesitate. It galloped forward and swung its head, narrowly missing Monty's throat with its chin spike. Together they tumbled to the dirt. The monster grappled and squeezed, while Monty squirmed and broke free.

The battle continued. Armored plates or nasty spikes thwarted nearly every attack Monty gave, the only vulnerability being its belly and neck. Meanwhile he had been pummeled, gouged, and beaten. He could feel his fatigue setting in. His legs moving slower, his tail growing weak...

The hulk lunged forward, and for the first time in his life, Monty was too slow.

The monster batted him away with a mighty blow crumpled him across the dust. It barked and smashed down on him with a massive fist. He felt a plate on his neck crack, and his vision grew blurry.

The monster lifted one great claw in the air, then raised its head and howled for the coming victory.

There was the mistake Monty had been hoping for.

Gathering all his strength, his tail thrust him to his feet and he lunged upward. His teeth sunk into the beast's thick neck and he bit down with all his might, feeling the flesh tear.

The monster cried out and stumbled backward, desperately clutching its throat as blood poured down. It crashed to its side, squirmed, and breathed its last breath.

The crowd was silent for three heartbeats. Then they burst into cheers and applause.

Monty howled in victory, then stumbled and fell. He lay there, breathing heavily under the audience acclaim, and waited for his captors. Surely this time they would tend to his wounds. He knew humans could do such things, and he knew he was dying.



Monty woke the next morning in excruciating pain. His back and side burned, and every breath ached. He craned his neck to see his great gashes sewn together with thick thread. The humans had healed him.

Near the gate were a bowl of water and a mound of raw meat. The good kind. He ate and drank it all.

A door out of sight opened, and in walked the woman with another woman just behind. She was tall, with skin as dark as night and muscles chiseled like stone. A sharp blade of thick black hair ran down the center of her head, and her eyes were a brilliant orange. She was unlike any human he'd seen before.

"This is him," said the woman in blue. "Now, what do you want?"

The new woman looked Monty directly in the eye and held his gaze—no other human had done such a thing. She wasn't examining him; she was speaking with nothing but her orange eyes. He stared back, curious at her behavior.

"I want to buy him."

The woman in blue laughed. "You think I would sell a petra like him? After *that* demonstration? People are going to talk about this day for years. Songs will be written about him. There is no price you could pay that would be worth the chips he will bring."

"Everything has a price."

She laughed again. "Perhaps. But even if you could convince me, you'd never be able to afford him."

"Try me."

The woman folded her arms and cocked her head. After a moment, she said, "One million pynts."

"Then I have a wager for you."

"A wager?" The woman raised an eyebrow. "Come now. There are easier, cheaper petras out there. I know you just got your boots, and you're eager for a steed, but this isn't the way. This petra won't let anyone ride him, let alone bond with a sandrunner. Ears here. I know you. You've been in trouble for gambling before. Leave this alone."

"My troubles are my business. And don't forget, I know you too. You like the game of luck as well as I."

"No wager is worth this risk. You know my employer well, and you know he doesn't allow for debts to linger."

"Let me worry about that. Will you hear my offer?"

The woman sighed and shrugged. "Go ahead, tell me."

"You say he is un-rideable, which is why he isn't racing at the Grand Stadium."

"Yes. And?"

"Allow me two months with him. If I can win the wooden trophy after that, then I get to keep him free and clear."

"Ha! And if you fail?"

"I will pay you your million pynts, and you get to keep him."

The woman laughed. "You are so foolish! Not even the best tamers could break him."

"That's where they went wrong. He doesn't need to be broken; he needs to be freed."

"What are you, twenty years old?"

"Twenty-three."

"Ears here, daughter, don't throw your life away—"

"Will you take the damn deal or not, *'mother'?*"

The woman stepped back with her hands on her hips and examined Roan from head to toe. At last she laughed and said, "Fine. I'll accept your offer. You have until the Games of Fey. But when you fail, remember I told you this was a bad idea. I don't want you blaming me when the boss comes for your head."

The muscular woman shrugged then came to Monty's cage and put her hands on the bars.

"Don't worry, friend. Things are going to change for you. My name is Roan."



The following day, Roan returned Monty to the finer stables at the arena with the riders. Oddly, she entered his spacious pen *with* him and closed the gate behind. Something about her was different, that was certain, but if she thought she was going to ride him, she'd be sorely disappointed.

"We've got a week to heal up," she said, rolling a mat out on the sand.

For days he rested with all the water and food he could need—and not just meat this time but strange things that were sweet and juicy, which Roan called 'fruit'. All the while, she stayed with him, even sleeping through the night. She seemed irritated by humans the way he was, as if she preferred his company to theirs. Soon he became accustomed to her scent and even began to miss it when she was gone too long. A memory of his mother flitted across his mind.

"Tomorrow, we're going out for a light run. We need to get your muscles moving. It isn't right for a petra to be cooped up like this."

The next morning, Monty woke to Roan arguing with a man.

"I don't give a dried shit for the rules. My job is to ride this guy, and yours is to let me. Now hand over the chain. No one else touches him."

Reluctantly the man held out a thick chain with a collar at one end. Roan snatched it from his hands then said to Monty, "Ears here, pal. This will be good for you. We're going on a run, yeah?"

Something about how she said the word 'run' was intriguing, as if there was an excitement behind it. He wondered what it meant as he allowed her to connect the collar around his neck. Together they left the stables.

They entered the bright light of the arena, and three large men approached.

"We'll take him to the rings for you."

"You won't put a hand on him. That's what's what."

The man frowned. "He ain't allowed untethered. Not that one."

Roan dropped Monty's chain and stepped forward. "He's going with me. That or I'll make a child out of you."

"Be careful what you say, woman. I don't care if you're a sandrunner or not. And I ain't afraid to pummel a girl."

Roan stepped forward and punched the man square in the nose, followed by a kick to the chest, knocking him flat on his back.

"Bitch!" The other men came upon her.

Monty had only seen a few human fights, each drawn out and sloppy. But this woman, she was like the wind over sand moving between the men and making short work of them. In a few moments, all three lay on the ground complaining about their groin, their face, whatever she had used to subdue them.

She was the best human he'd met.

"Now let me be, you dry shit beetle fuckers." She kicked one for good measure, then turned to Monty while people gawked. "Come on, friend, let's get this off you." She came to his side and unhooked the collar from his neck. The riders nearby backed away.

After so long in a cell, he was overwhelmed with the need to run, but he felt a gentle hand on his neck and hesitated.

"Hold on a bit. Just walk with me, then I'll let you loose. For a while."

To the clear surprise of the onlookers, Monty complied, following Roan to the edge of the track.

"Ok, friend, go ahead and run."

The only word he heard was 'run,' and though he still didn't know what it meant, he could tell by the gleam in her eye that he was free, at least for a time. He shook his neck then walked through the fence and onto the track. With one quick look back at her, he charged forward.

Monty ran for hours—at times racing the riders, at times slowing to a jog and squawking at Roan as he passed by. The sky was turning when fatigue finally set in. All the while, the woman had stayed and watched—his own private audience.

When he at last came to her, she patted him firmly on the neck and said kind sounding words. He liked the way men avoided her as they returned to the stables. It reminded him of his mother. But no matter what this woman wanted, he would not be ridden by anyone.

For many days he raced the track alone while she watched, until one day she came with a thick blanket. She stroked his neck the way he liked, then laid the cloth on his back. He immediately tensed. Was she trying to fool him into accepting a saddle? He wouldn't do it.

"I'm not going to saddle you, friend. But if I'm to ride you, I need something for your hard-ass back." She then placed a heavy pack on the blanket and strapped it around his chest and rump. "It's not nearly as heavy as me, but it's a start."

Whatever that meant.

"Now go run."

There was the word, and suddenly he didn't care about the thing on his back. It was time to run. He quickly found the straightway was fine with the added weight, but it challenged him around corners.

He would make her take it off when he returned.

She didn't take it off.

Instead, she gave him a surprise strip of meat and told him to run again. That was the first time someone fed him for doing something specific, and it felt good. He *wanted* to do it again.

After several more circuits, she added another pack, weighing him down further. His legs were growing tired, but the challenge excited him.

His third time around, Roan stepped out onto the track right in front of him. He veered to his right to avoid her—a courtesy he wouldn't give to anyone else. He leaned into the turn, but the height of the added weight sent him off balance, and he nearly stumbled. He growled in anger at the error and righted himself with righteous determination. *That* would not happen again.

A few more times around, each with her standing in a different position, she waved for him to stop.

"You're moving too wide around the corners. I need you on the outside, *then* cut in sharp." She made strange movements with her hands. "Don't worry. You'll understand me better one day. For now, I want you to run under this flag when I put it out."

She unfurled a bright green cloth and held it out to her side. She said more words then nodded her head toward the flag.

"Run through it," she said at last. Why not tell him that in the first place? He ran past her, carefully choosing not to run on the side of the flag, as requested, then returned with his head cocked in curiosity.

"That's the opposite of what I meant, but as long as we're on the same terms, this will work. Now go run!"

Immediately he raced off, rushing past other petras and their riders—he was clearly having more fun. As he came down the straightway and back toward

Roan, he saw her waving the flag toward the inside of the track, so he ran past her other side. It was a strange thing to do, but she seemed pleased, and so he continued. She did the same thing at different sections of the track until she had him running a very specific route.

His legs were burning with fatigue when she at last brought him to a halt. She unbound the heavy packs and let them crash to the ground. His sudden lightness made him feel as if floating, and he was relieved of the burden.

"Go ahead now. I'll leave you alone. One last run, this one just for you."

He cocked his head.

"Hai!"

The sharp sound shot through him, and he leapt to action. This run was like none other. Yes, he was tired, but the lightness of his feet was exhilarating, and as he ran her path, he could feel the speed of it. How could a human know so well the fastest route? He wondered what else she knew.

That night Monty slept better than he had in a long time. As always, Roan slept at his side, her scent filling his mind with dreams of dunes and family.

For more than a week, Roan ran him with increasing weight. Though his legs often ached, he could feel himself growing stronger—and he liked it. No longer was he punished, nor did she leave his side for more than a few hours at a time.

A day came when the skinny man who'd bought him from the big man entered the stable, arguing with Roan. Her voice was loud and upset, which made Monty upset as well.

"What's to stop you from running away with him?" he asked.

"What's to stop me *now*?" Roan replied, leaning forward. "Ears here, I don't need a bounty on my head, and I don't need to lose favor with the guild. But if you don't let me get this boy out into the sand, he'll never let me ride him."

"That's not my problem."

"What do you want then? What can I do to make this happen?"

The man examined her like a petra with a crooked and hungry smile.

"Ask me that and I'll break your nose right here," she growled.

"That's hardly a way to negotiate."

"What do you need done, huh? Give me a job that makes this worthwhile."

"Perhaps. But I'll need more than that. I need collateral to ensure you won't run away."

Roan hesitated. "I'll give you my boots. Can't be a sandrunner without, and the Guild would revoke my badge if you told them I bartered with the things. Most don't like having a female on the roster anyway. Especially one better than them. Now, tell me the job."



Roan was gone for three days. When she came back, she had a bruised eye and a nasty gash across her shoulder that had been sewn up.

"What are you looking at?" she asked Monty, sitting beside him with a groan. "You should see the other guys."

He'd come to recognize when she was playful, so he nudged her with his plated snout. She shoved him back.

"You're going to like tomorrow, Friend."

In the morning, Roan strapped a pack over her shoulders with the blanket rolled on top. To his dismay, she then attached a collar and chain to his neck. "Sorry, we have to do it this way for now."

They exited the stables onto the streets. He'd never been outside an arena without being in a cage, and the feeling of freedom, despite the chain, was life-giving. Yet even out here, the human world was confined, as if they were punishing themselves, forcing people through tight and tall buildings like sand between stones. He didn't understand their love for crowds. A few packmates were fine, but too many made everyone nasty.

"God, I hate crowds," Roan muttered.

He noticed she wasn't happy, so he glared at the people she glared at, and he loved how they stepped away as if his stare was a physical force. They pushed through the streets for quite some time before coming to a tall wall with a broad and open gate. Men with weapons sat lazily nearby. Roan exchanged nods with one, and they passed through the wall.

More buildings. He snorted. Then they turned onto a wide street, and far in the distance, he could see a dune! His heart raced and he thumped his tail as they walked, but when they came to the end of the street and the shores of the sand sea, Roan stopped. She removed her pack and placed a hand on his neck. "Ears here, when I let loose this chain, nothing is stopping you from taking off."

Monty stared at the dunes. He'd lost interest in whatever she was saying.

She smacked him on the nose. He glared at her.

"Listen when I'm talking to you. Now, we can be out here all the time together—Nan knows I want that more than anything—but first, you got to let me ride you."

He recognized the word ride and stepped sideways. She ignored him, retrieved the blanket, and quickly tossed it across his back. Was she really going to try this? *Now?* She came up alongside him and wrapped one arm around the base of his neck. The closeness didn't feel bad.

"Let's just walk a bit." She unclipped his collar and the chain fell to the dust.

Her arm squeezing him tight, they left the town side-by-side and stepped out onto the hot sand. His chest beat furiously as his wide feet sunk in. He tensed, ready to run.

She stroked his neck with her other hand. "Let's get to the top of that dune together."

He liked the word 'together.' He always heard it before doing something fun.

At an agonizingly slow pace, they crested the first dune, and his heart began to sprint. He stamped his feet. *Why wouldn't she let him go?* Of course, he *could* go, but the thought of leaving her felt...wrong.

"Ears here, friend. It's our time. If we can do this, then we can win your freedom. Now lay down."

Lay down? She'd taught him that word and it seemed a ridiculous thing to do now. Perhaps this was another game. With a snort, he lowered himself to the sand, her comforting arm wrapped around him all the while. Then he felt her legs slide across his back, her body pressed against his, and soon her weight was upon him like the packs she'd made him wear. He had to admit, it felt nice.

"Ok, friend, you can run."

Run? His heart nearly burst from his chest as he rose. He shook his neck with joy, then stamped his foot and raced down the dune into the open sea. He felt the wind against his face and the hot sun warming the plates on his neck.

It was freedom, beautiful freedom.

"Hai! Run! Run!"

She wanted him faster! He'd show her fast. He lowered his neck, straightened his tail, and surged forward. He could feel her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs squeezing him tight. They were together, they were free, and it was glorious.

She was riding him.

He nearly stopped in his tracks when the realization hit him, but the run called, and with her he felt quicker, better. If he had words he would have shouted her name, instead he shook his neck and ran all the faster.

For hours they ran up, down, and around the dunes. For the most part, she let him run anywhere he wanted, but occasionally she would guide him by leaning—just like the weights he carried on the racetrack—and her path was always fun.

Eventually, fatigue took hold, and she brought him to a rest in the valley between two great dunes. She slipped off his back, lay the blanket on the sand, and plopped on top.

"That wasn't so bad now, was it?"

He paced in a circle while his lungs calmed, then laid down beside her. She removed a canister from her pack and drank a long swig of water.

"Open your mouth," she said. She pat him on the nose and repeated herself.

He opened his mouth, and she poured water down his throat. It was fresh, sweet, and cooling.

"Good boy."

They rested for a time before he again felt the need to run. He nudged her with his nose and stamped his feet.

"Ready to head back?"

She returned the pack to her shoulders and the blanket to his back. Without needing a command, he lay down, and a moment later, she was riding him again.

"Let's go. We have a race to win."



The morning brought sore muscles and high spirits, but Monty felt more alive than he had since first being captured, and he loved the woman for it. After a breakfast of fruit, they rose to begin the day.

As they came to the edge of the track, a rider nearby jeered. "Did your 'Holy Run' save the bastard, sandrunner? Ha! You'll never race in the Grand—whoa!" His petra reared up and slapped her tail against the ground, nearly causing him to fall.

"Doesn't look like you will either, rock head."

Then, before stunned onlookers, Roan put the blanket on his back and leapt on top. People gasped, and he shook his neck in laughter.

"That's right, fuck 'em." With a squeeze and a pat on the rump, he took off running.

For days they trained together. She taught him how to use her weight as a counter-balance for tight turns, how to trick his opponents in different ways, even how to use his tail for control when sliding. He loved it all.

Then, one day, she brought a saddle with her.

There was no chance he would let her put that on him. They were doing so well—why would she want to turn him mindless like the others?

But she did put it on him, somehow making him feel ok about the whole ordeal, and when it was strapped tight, he was surprised to feel nothing had changed. He was no less free, his mind no less sharp.

Perhaps the saddles were not the problem. Perhaps it was the brutal men that sat upon them.

At first he was ashamed of the thing, but after one lap with Roan, he knew the value. She didn't slide around as much. She was able to grip the saddle's handles instead of his neck, and racing the corners made him feel like lighting in a dust storm. Day after day they trained, running against other petras or running solo when no useful competition could be found. No longer did the men jeer; instead, they respected his space and nodded at Roan with sober eyes. She reminded him of his mother, the pack leader.

One day he awoke before Roan, which was unusual. He nudged her with his nose, gently, for he'd learned she didn't take well to being raised.

"What is it?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

Monty stamped his feet.

"We're not going to run today, friend." There was his favorite word, but her tone was different. "The Grand Race is in two days. I want you rested and hungry for a run."

Whatever she meant, he could sense they weren't running today, so he snorted again and lay back down. He *was* tired.

For two days they did nothing but lounge and occasionally walk the streets. They ate less than usual and, other than being taught a few more words, it was incredibly dull. One day she woke him with a big smile and an excitement in her eyes he hadn't seen before.

"Today's the day. We're going to beat every damn rider out there and win back your freedom. Do you hear me? We're going on a run!"

Finally, a run! He stamped his feet and slapped his tail on the ground. After all that time doing nothing, he felt a fire in his legs and could barely restrain his excitement.

"Let's get you saddled up."

The new arena she brought him to was massive, like a great square rock rising from the sand. He could hear the audience rumbling with eager anticipation while a large crowd formed outside the gates. Monty noticed people staring at them as they passed by, some pointing or whispering words to each other. He liked how they scrambled to get out of Roan's way while he glared at them for fun.

"Good luck, sandrunner!" called out a man.

"Shut your mouth, Hammond," Roan growled back. The man got an extra-long glare.

"Are you going to make it through the race this time?" hollered someone with an irritating laugh. Roan shook her head and said nothing back, surprisingly.

Once through the mob, they came to a side door with two men carrying spears.

"Got your card?" asked the larger of the two.

Roan withdrew something from her tunic and gave it to the man.

"Looks good, Roan. You may enter. And good—"

"Don't say it," Roan interrupted, then took Monty through the doors into a large chamber.

Moments later, he was standing in a decent-sized stable with one side open to the racetrack. Other petras were there, and still more arriving, each with their own human. All the while, the audience grew denser, and their excitement swelled. A petra striped with red paint, led by a rider in bright yellow, walked out onto the field, and the crowd went wild.

"That fool is a bastard," Roan said. "He's a dirty fucking racer, but he's the best I've seen in a long time."

Even as she spoke, the yellow rider walked toward them, his eyes locked with hers. He smiled in a way that made Monty's tail curl while his petra strode with her head held high. She was taller than Monty with a longer tail and fiery red feathers.

"Roan, so good to see you!" The man put a hand on the railing of the stall and placed a fist over his chest. "Looks like you found a new one. Tamed the untamable, they say. Perhaps this time you can break your record."

Roan folded her arms. "And what record is that?"

"Zero wins and at least ten races, right? Last Grand you came in, what was it, *last*?"

"I was damn near first before she twisted her ankle. Shit happens."

"Maybe you just don't know how to pick them." He examined Monty in a way that made him want to rear back on his tail claw the man with both feet.

"Maybe you want my boot on your neck," Roan said. Whatever that meant, Monty liked the way she said it.

The man merely laughed and led his petra to a nearby stall.

After a long, agonizing wait, the announcer quieted the crowd then bellowed into a large metal thing that made his voice louder.

"Women and men, humans and gadaks, the Grand Race is here!" The crowd roared like twenty umberhulks until he raised his hands. "Allow me to introduce your racers!" He proceeded to announce each petra and their rider. Monty noticed different sections of the arena cheered for different racers, save for a few, including the yellow man, who brought the entire mob to their feet.

But when it came to Roan, the sound changed. Gone were the hoops and hollers Monty was used to hearing in his past races, replaced by low howls and relentless boos.

Roan showed them the back of her hand with three fingers extended. That seemed to make things worse. "Fuck you too!" she called out, though Monty doubted any could hear her.

Without another word, Roan climbed on top of his saddle and squeezed him between her legs.

"Ears here. I want you to break out of this jail like your tail is on fire. If we get out in front of the others, we'll have the advantage around the corners."

Whatever. He was ready to run!

There was a loud whistle, then suddenly the stalls opened and out came the screeching petras—all save Monty.

"What the dust? The gate didn't open!" Roan roared as she slid from his saddle and reached over the railing. "That dry shit beetle fucker latched the gate!"

Monty heard a metal clang then Roan was back on his saddle.

"Run!"

It wasn't a command. It was permission.

Monty burst from the stall like a bolt from a crossbow. The other petras were already approaching the first bend. He was fast on a straight way, but no one could corner like him, especially with his Roan on his back.

After the first bend, he came upon the slowest runners and ran past them with ease. The pack spread thin as the fastest racers pushed ahead—led by that asshole with the red stripes and her yellow rider.

"Hai!" Roan barked.

Somehow the word always made him faster.

He surged forward, passing rider after rider as the crowd cheered for the leaders and howled at Roan with those low tones. It made him angry, and he pushed harder, his feet pounding across the sand like a wild drummer.

As they came to a sharp turn, the rider ahead of them suddenly veered his petra wide, blocking their path. Without a prompt from Roan, Monty moved toward the inside of the track as if to cut through the corner. But when the petra moved to block him, Monty was ready. He pounced to the side with a slap of his tail and flanked the rider.

They raced side by side. Monty took the lead. The rider shouted, and the petra crashed against his side, pushing him toward the wall as they approached a turn too tight to come into from such a sharp angle.

"You going to let that happen?" Roan called out.

There was the permission.

With more strength than the other petra, Monty slammed her back. She stumbled to the center of the track and crashed into another racer, sending both to the ground in a heap of tails and legs.

The crowd cheered and he shook his neck while Roan laughed.

"Three more and we've got that tanga's ass! Hai! Hai!"

Turn after turn Monty slowly gained on the third racer until he at last passed them on a straightway. The second competitor, orange petra with an orange rider, proved much more difficult. They ran three more laps, gaining only inches at a time before Monty's nose could reach the petra's tail feathers. He was tempted to bite them; it would work in the wild, but he had learned early on that breaking human rules was a sure way to be pulled from the track.

Monty was faster, but this rider was *good*. He continually glanced over his shoulder, masterfully blocking any attempt to pass. Another lap went by with no improvement before Roan did an odd thing. As they approached a particularly sharp turn, instead of cutting in at the right moment, she kept Monty wide, allowing the other petra to gain distance.

The rider glanced back and laughed.

Roan smacked Monty on his rump. "Pivot!"

He knew what that meant, they'd practiced it several times, and he suddenly realized what she was doing.

He leapt and turned in the air, then slammed his powerful tail against the ground as he landed to keep him from sliding. He lost speed, but his new angle allowed him to get on the inside track. He raced forward, his neck straight and tail feathers constricted as he cut under the apex of the turn.

The other rider was just ahead, but at their trajectory they'd run wide coming out of the curve. That was Monty's moment. He surged forward, step by step passing the other by. When they came to the next bend, he was a neck's length ahead, and as he turned, he bumped the other with his hip, sending them out wide.

They were ahead now. He could finally focus on the yellow rider and his painted petra.

"Steady on!" Roan called out. "They'll tire soon. I've seen him race before."

Monty wasn't a big fan of the 'steady on' command, but he trusted her judgment, and his lungs were burning from that last corner anyway. He kept his speed consistent, blazing around the bends like the dunes of his first run with Roan. He felt her weight and her guidance as if they were one, and he suddenly yearned to be out in the wild. Free. With her.

After several more laps, the yellow rider began to slow.

"See that? She's getting tired!" Roan called out. "This is why we trained. It's your time! *Hai!*"

Permission granted, he sped up. Though the steady run had allowed some respite from the fatigue of the last racer, his legs still burned. He didn't care. All he wanted was to outrace the asshole ahead of him and have a pagoran steak with Roan.

Soon they were upon the red-striped petra, and though she was growing weary, her rider was better than the last. For two laps he ate tail feathers until

they took a corner too sharp, and Monty was able to reach her right flank. They shoved back and forth on the straightway as the man and Roan shouted at each other.

"You'll never win!" he cried.

"You'll never shut up!" she called back.

"You can't beat me sand-whore! Give up before you hurt another petra!"

"Bite a tangas ass, you dusting dry shit rock head!"

From the corner of his eye, Monty saw the man let go of his handle and reach back.

"You should have listened when you had the chance," the man shouted as they entered a turn. He threw a handful of black spikes ahead of them just as his petra shoved Monty to the side.

But they underestimated Monty. He slapped his tail against the ground and leapt high as Roan crouched down. They sailed over the spikes and landed on the other side, deftly avoiding defeat. Monty heard the crowd turn on the yellow rider, booing as they did for Roan.

Yet, they were once again behind.

"Hai!" Roan called out. "Where are the Gonndamn officiators?"

As they ran past the stables, a man stood near the track waving a large red flag. Monty knew what that meant—one more lap.

He shot forward. He came neck to hip with the painted petra as they veered around corners and hugged the rails of the straightway. At one point, she tried to smash Monty into the wall, but he saw her intent and slowed just enough for her to miss.

She stumbled.

Monty was winning by a neck's length.

Another corner and he pulled further ahead, his tail feathers whipping in her face. As they came to the final stretch, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his tail.

She bit him!

He resisted the urge to stop and tear her apart, but the surprise slowed him enough for her to reach his side.

Neck and neck, they raced forward as the mob roared. Slowly Monty pulled ahead until, at the last moment, he shrieked and leapt across the copper line that marked the end of the race.

The crowd went wild as he slid to a stop.

Roan climbed from his saddle and stormed over to the rider in yellow, who still sat atop his petra.

"You bit his fucking tail!" she called out.

The man shrugged then squealed as Roan reached up, drug him down, and punched him square in the nose. She threw him to the ground, one foot still stuck in the saddle, and slapped him across the face.

The red-striped petra growled and twisted her neck around.

Suddenly Monty was at Roan's side, his growl deeper and his blue eyes fierce. The petra quickly quieted, lowered herself to the ground, and bared her neck in submission.

The crowd had lost control by that point and people were spilling onto the track.

"People! Please, return to your seats for the ceremony!" cried the announcer. But it was too late for the mob to hear.

"We got to go," Roan said.

She walked briskly to the stage where a man held a wooden sculpture of a petra. "Thank you. I'll be taking that now." Before he could react, she snatched the trophy from his hands and led him to the stables.

They found Monty's owner waiting for them inside, his hands on his hips and his face twisted in anger.

"I assume you saw that," Roan said. She raised the trophy. "I assume you see this."

"Yes, yes. A deal's a deal." He spat.

Roan turned to Monty. "You're free now. As soon as the crowd thins, let's get out of this shit hole."

Monty wasn't sure what was happening, but Roan seemed pleased, and so he would be too. The race had been fantastic, after all.

An hour later, they walked through the streets under the early evening sun. Her hand rested on his neck as they approached the dunes, and he felt a change in her as if a weight was placed on her shoulders. Soon they walked from the town onto the shores of the mighty Sandmar, and there, Roan stopped.

"Ok, friend. This is it."

He wasn't sure what that meant, but he didn't like her tone.

"You're free now. Go ahead, run."

He heard his favorite word, but this time he hesitated. Why hadn't she put the saddle on him? He cocked his head.

"You're not an idiot. I know you understand me. Go! Run! You're free!"

Her eyes were wet like riders he'd seen after losing a race. Why would she want him to run without her? He snorted.

Roan turned to leave.

For a moment, he thought about running free, maybe finding his pack and returning to the hunt. His mother was still out there... But he loved Roan. He'd come to realize it. He wanted to be at her side, always. And so he shoved her back with his neck and positioned himself between her and the town.

Suddenly Roan smiled unlike he'd ever seen before. She cupped his cheek in one hand.

"Are you sure?"

He cocked his head.

"You realize bonding with me is for *life*. If you come with me now, you will never leave my side. Nor I you."

He nudged her with his nose then buried his face into her shoulder.

Roan laughed and pushed him back. "Well ok then, let's do this together. But first, you'll need a name. There's only one man in my life who ever meant a damn. He's the one who taught me to bond instead of break. You will do his legacy honor."

Monty shook his neck and slapped his tail. He was no longer alone; he felt it through his bones! *This* was freedom.

She cupped his face and stared into his eyes the way no other human ever could.

"Your name is Monty."



About the Author

Don lives in the Pacific Northwest with his wife and dachshund Milton. Like everyone else up here, he loves backpacking, hiking, skiing, cooking, and eating.

Don is also the CEO of a digital marketing agency called Gravitare, in Vancouver, Washington. His staff is flippin' awesome.

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