

*Thwack!*

*Thwack!*

*Thwack!*

The little fox's wrath was relentless, bringing down the hammerstone harder with each blow. But the stubborn thing refused to come apart. He had tried throwing it against trees and then rocks, before resorting to gnawing it with his tiny fangs and prying at it with his claws. He'd even hacked at it with his flint knife, but that only succeeded in snapping the blade from its wooden handle.

The stupid thing was as tough as dried boar jerky, and no less vicious too. His fingers were already battered with scrapes and scratches from misplaced strikes, and he hadn't even been at it for very long. At least, it didn't seem like long, since the sun was still high in the sky.

At least it was warm, and his paws weren't numb. The glorious sun shone down upon the forest, its rays pouring through the prickly pine needles and down into the gentle river, where they danced and shimmered, scattering through the clear waters in streaks of every colour.

For just a moment, kneeled on the rocks beside the river's edge, young Kuveli forgot about the unending frustration of his task. The heavy reindeer bone resting on his patchwork hide skirt may as well have vanished, lost as he was in the serenity of the wild forest around him.

But it couldn't last, and before long a series of vigorous cusses shattered the silence, followed by more...

*Thwack!*

*Thwack!*

*Thwack!*

Yet slowly, but surely, his arms tired and his stubbornness wavered.

*Thwack...*

*Thwack...*

Again and again and again.

But the reindeer bone refused to do any more than flake here and there, and that drove him mad. How did the adults make it look so easy? His tribe made so much use of the stuff, from bone knives, spearheads and spear-throwers, to buttons and all kinds of intricate ivory decorations.

If he couldn't crack one measly femur open, then how could he ever have a place in his own tribe? How would they see him, if not too weak to hunt, too

feeble to make tools and too stupid to pour his heart into a carving for his brother.

That's all he had wanted. Just to make Sakara something special for his name day. Was it really so much to ask?

The fox breathed a ragged sigh, stuffing his face into the scruff of his arm and sobbing, defeated. He should just throw the useless thing in the river and let the spirits have it! Then go make a stupid heather wreath or horsehair bracelet. Again.

"Little bud!" Called a familiar voice, warm and inviting, followed by the patter of pawpads over the grass and bare rocks.

Kuveli turned to his brother - ten Riding Seasons his senior and about double his height - clambering down the bank towards him. He wore a huge grin, his icy-blue eyes bright, wearing only a knee-length leather loincloth and necklace of cloudy amber. His body was covered in sooty pawprints - part of his name day celebration - a gift from every tribe member to thank him for being not only a friend, but family, for twenty-three long Riding Seasons.

"I knew I'd find you out here, whenever you're trying to hide something," Sakara chuckled as he stooped to join his little brother, ruffling his headfur.

Kuveli said nothing for a moment, his gaze falling back to the bone in his lap. It was good to see his brother, his presence brought a warm blanket, but it couldn't change the fact he had failed.

He was a failure.

"I bet you're trying to hide something important,"

"It's stupid is what it is!" Kuveli snapped, jumping to his footpaws and snatching the bone from his lap. It was too late, he was done with it and wanted it gone.

Leaning back, his arm trembling with anger, ready to throw the bone into the river as far as he could, he felt a gentle pressure grasp his arm.

Glancing over, he saw his brother staring back at him with a concerned frown, yet his eyes remained soft. There was no hint of anger nor a sense of disappointment, just concern and the desire to listen.

"Kuu," his elder said softly, bringing both their arms down. "Take a breath, tell me what's wrong."

The little fox sucked in his breath, puffing his chest before he blew out a long, slow huff. Cracking open the bone had been so hard, he hadn't even really thought about what to do with it. A spear-thrower? An animal charm?

“I was gonna make something for you, but it’s too hard,” Kuveli whined pitifully, folding his arms and pouting.

Yet his brother’s calm demeanour did not waver, as he reached over, he picked the bone out of Kuveli’s lap while squeezing his shoulder gently. He turned it around in his paw, looking over it, each dent and chip the smaller fox had managed to put in it. He bore a thoughtful expression and distant eyes as if he solved a problem in his head.

“You can’t smash your way through every problem, especially not the ones you’re going to face when you become a healer,” Sakara began slowly, considering each word. “You need to stop solving things with these, and start solving them with this,” he continued, first gripping one of his lanky arms and then tapping a finger on his head.

“But I tried headbutting it!” The little fox shouted with exaggerated frustration, throwing his paws to the sky as if to complain to the spirits, but a sly grin gave away his sarcasm.

His older brother snorted, then let out a hearty laugh as he reached over and yanked Kuveli into a tight hug, the smaller fox chuckling in kind as he pressed his cheek to his brother’s chest.

“Exactly,” Sakara snorted and patted the kit on the shoulder, then held up the bone again. “Let me show you how, using that brain of yours. I know it’s in there, I see it. So does our shaman, and my Conor. But now you need to see it as well.”

As he spoke, Sakara’s eyes seemed to glow brighter as he met his little brother’s gaze. And although Kuveli knew he spoke honestly, the little fox just couldn’t accept it. He was still a failure, he’d still let his brother down, even if he didn’t show it on the surface.

“What’s the point?” Kuveli huffed, rising and walking to the edge of the water, fists balled. “I’d never finish it for your name day, and it’s not even a surprise now!”

After a moment his brother joined him, but did not embrace him as before. Instead, he simply knelt down by his side, and looked down at his soot-covered body. Eventually, he showed one arm to Kuveli, and gestured to each paw print as he began to explain.

“Kuu, I am twenty and three Riding Seasons today, I will still be twenty and three tomorrow, and even still by the next Foaling Season. It’s not the surprise that matters, nor is it blood, sweat and tears. What matters is that you poured your heart into it.”

Kuveli remained silent, just stood and watched the waters flow by as the light continued to dance across it. His brother always put on a kind face, even when face to face with the people he despised, but when he smiled and comforted him, it was always genuine. They were each other's only blood after all, their only family left in the whole world, and Sakara worked so hard to make sure they never lost each other.

For Kuveli to give up now, how could his brother ever know how much he appreciated it. Even despite his coddling and over-protectiveness at times, the kit could never have asked for a better brother.

The young fox sighed and turned to face his brother, who looked back at him with a gentle smile. Even after being as stubborn as he was today, and though it was his own name day, Sakara still cared. Silently, Kuveli took Sakara's paw and they both began the walk back to camp.

As they walked, the older fox began to explain how they would conquer this unbreakable bone: Together. It filled Kuveli with a renewed excitement, and the dour mood that had hung over him like a storm cloud began to fade. It was always more fun solving problems together, be it just carving a bone or escaping a cave bear as they had many Riding Seasons past.

Before long they were back in camp, and Sakara watched as Kuveli almost ran back to their Lavvu shelter, diving inside and shouting for him to hurry up. They settled by the fire together, on a comfy reindeer skin, and Sakara unrolled a leather pack with all his tools.

When he was younger, Kuveli had never been able to tell the difference between them. They all just seemed like grey pieces of stone to him, and whichever one was heaviest or had the sharpest edge would do. Now, he could pick out every one, from flint scrapers to bone needles and chisels, big hammerstones and axe heads, and spare knife blades. Each one was a fine piece of craftsmanship uniquely suited to its purpose, and any purpose his brother could expect day after day.

Under Sakara's supervision, young Kuveli laid the leather sheet across his knee, but before he could take the bone his brother had a trick to show him. He took a stick from the fire, blowing out the flame. But its end was still red hot, and the older fox began to press it to the bone, circling it, leaving a black line around the edge.

Then, he instructed Kuveli to lean the bone against one of the stones on the edge of the firepit, and hit it with the hammerstone. Kuveli was sceptical,

he had tried so much already, and would singing the bone make that much of a difference?

To his surprise, it did, and with one firm strike of the hammerstone the stubborn femur cracked. It broke clean, following the burn marks exactly.

“Horseshit!” Kuveli exclaimed in disbelief, glaring at his brother like he had just been tricked by a master of deception.

“That’s what I mean about using this,” Sakara chuckled and tapped the flat edge of a flint blade to his head.

They worked all day, until the sun had set and the moon hung over the forest. Slowly, stroke by stroke, Kuveli carved away at the bone. They came away easily with the right tools, just like cutting bark from a birch tree.

Even when his brother had left him to it, and curled up beneath the awning that hung over their sleeping spot, Kuveli continued to work away at it. He chiselled out imperfections, made cuts to add detail, and shaped the old bone into something that filled him with pride.

By dawn, when Sakara awoke to embers in the fire, his sleepy eyes shot wide awake at the sight of something new hanging from the awning. A tiny bone charm in the shape of a wild fox, with eyes, a mouth, and even flowing fur on its belly and tail carved into it.

Sakara looked back to the sleeping spot, where Kuveli lay bundled up in a pile of furs fast asleep, and whispered a loving “thank you.”