

Looking for the Wrong Thing

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Chapter 1

Arrival at the Camp

It's hard to imagine how the violent orgies of the Hidanork moots could have any purpose in life, but it does provide a genetic diversity among the so-called moot children.

—Danisit ho Disrobin

Yubanis patted the flanks of his horse and clicked his tongue.

The glassy-eyed mare leaned into him and sighed dramatically before casually stomping on his foot.

There was a crunch but he knew it was coming and managed not to flinch. He patted her a bit harder. “Come on, pretty lady, off my foot and get over there. I’ll give you a good brushing while you have a snack.”

The horse delicately lifted her foot and headed forward. Her harness creaked and the small wagon she had been hauling rolled over.

Yubanis pulled his aching foot away before she could roll the steel-rimmed wheel over him. He smile and thumped his foot on a rock until he felt the joints settle into place with muted clicks. There was a flash of pain but it quickly

faded into a throbbing. Before the second wheel rolled past him, he couldn't even feel a twinge.

"Yuba, you need to stop letting that old hag do that," said his father as he led the second wagon behind him. "Before you know it, she's going to try that on me."

Yubanis chuckled and patted the mare's neck gently. "It's okay, old lady. You're just tired, aren't you? Dad's been mean and driving you all day long."

"Your dad doesn't recovery from injuries like you."

With a grin, Yubanis stroked the mare's muzzle. "Yes, he's being a cruel driver, isn't he?"

She exhaled hard before muscling her way over to a basket that Yubanis's younger sisters, Opila and Sophi, were pouring a bucket of grains into the bottom. Their reddish hair shone in the fall sunlight.

Opila giggled and patted the mare's muzzle. She was the youngest of the family, seventeen and past the cusp of becoming an adult on her own.

This was her first grand moot, just like Yubanis and Sophi. When they started the long journey a week ago, all three of them had gotten their adult tattoos. The intricate knot design that traced their collar bones, from one shoulder to another. His sisters' tattoos were red-edged with healing but his looked like he had them since birth thanks to his ability to recover quickly.

His father swore as his horse bumped into him. The younger mare tried to jam her head into the basket, but Yubanis's mare shoved back. The two equines jostled for a moment before they found a comfortable spot for both of them to eat.

From one of the wagons, Penilil came down. She stamped her feet to get their attention. "Tali and Yuba, get those harnesses off. Opil and Sofi, brush them down. Where is Tubo?"

Yubanis looked around. They were in a roped-off area about fifty feet by twenty. A brightly-painted post marked each corner. Theirs was painted red with a “North-102” written in white. More stakes marked the other lots, each one marked off into neat rectangles. Over half of them had arriving families, some with horses and others without. Everyone he could see had similar broad shoulders, rugged skin, and wind-scoured skin from traveling the steppes. Beyond that, there was a variety of brown, red, and blonde hairs and skin colors that went from perpetually red burn to almost black.

Turning back, he shrugged to Penilil. “I don’t see him, Mom.”

His mother held up her hands in exasperation and then let out a groan. “The whole reason your brother went ahead was so we didn’t have to wait or wander around!”

Yubanis avoided shrugging or making other noise. When his mother was ranting, there was little he could do.

“Fine, Yuba, finish and then help me with pitching my tent. Girls, set up yours on the Yuba’s wagon over there.” She pointed to the far end of their lot.

Sophi looked startled. “We aren’t setting up one in the middle?”

Frustration and annoyance fluttered past Penilil’s face before she smiled broadly. “No, not here. This is the safest place to be so spreading out will be a lot more enjoyable for all of us. Besides, I don’t want to listen to whoever your sisters bring to their cots this week.”

Opila grinned even as her cheeks darkened with a blush. She had been excited about coming to the grand moot ever since the announcement came. Like Yubanis and Sophi, she was conceived during the celebrations. Not much was known about their fathers other than there was something about them that her mother found alluring.

Yubanis's father came up and rested a hand on Yubanis's shoulder. He chuckled as he leaned over and spoke not-so-quietly, "What she means is that she doesn't want you to hear her company tonight."

Penilil turned toward him and waved a finger. "I'm done with being pregnant, Goisay. Let the girls have their time." She turned slightly and looked around at the surrounding. "Besides, I don't have time for little boys who can't keep going all night."

She pointedly looked at her husband.

Goisay chuckled and then gestured to the side. "Well, if you need a real man—"

Her eyes narrowed.

"—I saw Warin's wagon when we were coming in." He finished with a grin. "He's still got a bit of steer left in him, from what I heard."

She rolled her eyes before focusing her attention on her children. "Finish up and have your father get you three into line to get marked. The only thing I want to bring back with us is memories and babies, not diseases."

His father laughed, a deep booming noise that added to the growing din from the surrounding families.

A choir of agreements rose up before everyone went about their chores. Yubanis finished taking care of his mare before he dragged the wagon to the far side. His sisters hung the canvas of their tents on each side, draping it from hooks near the top and pinning them in place with spikes. Normally they would create a single tent braces across both wagons for more protection and shelter.

Yubanis had just finished pitching the tents when Tubocak strolled up.

"Where have you been, Tubo?" snapped Penilil.

Tubocak didn't seem perturbed. Somehow he had managed to lose his shirt and walked around with his heavily-

tattooed chest bare to the slightly cool air. “The line for the rune marker is about a quarter mile long. I’m betting you’re looking at a three hour wait.”

“Damn the woods! I told you could go ahead—!”

“However...” he interrupted with a drawl and a smirk. “One of the Crows is about to set up over there.” He pointed in the opposite direction. “Five lanes over, line forms to the south. Probably a half hour wait.”

Their mother closed her mouth with a snap. “Lead with that next time.”

Tubocak shrugged. “More fun this way.”

His mother took another look at him. “What happened to your shirt?”

“I saw a pretty Storm girl.”

Penilil pointed at him accusingly. “You stay away from Storms and Chains! I don’t care how pretty they are!”

Tubocak smirked.

Her fingertip tapped to his collar tattoo. All four of the siblings had the same right side, an intricate design of chains that stretched like fingers to the shoulder. It matched their mother’s design. Each one had a different left side: Tubocak’s was storm clouds and lighting; Yubanis had intertwined ram horns. The chain represented their mother’s father while the other side was their biological father.

“No Storms!” she repeated.

Tubocak shrugged again and the smirk didn’t leave his lips. “Your sister is at Red-South-23.”

“Don’t interrupt me when I’m telling you off.”

Yubanis suspected Tubocak got away with being difficult since he was five years older and already established as a solid hunter for their little group. His deep connection to the tiag—the living pulse of the land—meant that he was also needed for their visits to their ancestral homes.

Yubanis thought his abilities gave him a swelled head.

Tubocak held up one hand. “Mom, I got to get the kids over to marking otherwise they are going to lose most of the early evening. Don’t want to bring back any diseases, right?”

Penilil’s jaw clamped shut. Then she smacked him lightly. “Stop being a dick then.” She was fighting a smile.

He leaned over and kissed her check. “I love you. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they’re safe before I have fun. I’ll see you for lunch tomorrow? Noon?”

She started to say something but stopped. Looking up, she stared at the sky which was already beginning to turn orange. “Fine. By noon, do you understand? Your asses on the ground or I’ll hunt you down.”

Yubanis shivered at the idea of his mother catching him.

When Tubocak agreed, she pointed to Yubanis, Sophi, and Opila. “All of you? Be back by noon.”

Each one agreed with various degrees of excitement. Yubanis was the last, it was his first moot and he wasn’t sure what to expect. The sudden freedom was daunting and a bit scary.

Her eyes focused on him but she spoke to all four. “This is your first moot and I’m sure you are anxious to get out. You have five days to have fun, relax, and explore. If you want to drink, drink. If you want to brawl—”

Her gaze turned to Tubocak who grinned back. “—then just try avoid breaking any bones or serious injuries. You also know the rules about mating: no means no, women provide the beds, the men provide babies. You know which families to avoid.”

She paused to tap her collar. Then she took a deep breath and turned back to Yubanis. “It’s okay if this isn’t for you. The moot is about having fun. Even if fighting isn’t your thing, it’s okay. We will never—” Her eyes narrowed as she

stared at Tubocak. “—tease anyone for that. Do you understand, Tubo?”

The smirk finally faded. “I won’t tease him,” he said quietly.

“You better not.”

She gave each of them a kiss and then them on their way.

The four siblings headed to get a rune to protect them against disease, nausea, and discomfort. It was the perfect way to enjoy the moot when the main goals were freedom, fucking, and fighting.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 2

Brass Bracelets

For a man, one purpose of the moots is to prove oneself. There are many opportunities from fighting in the rings, drinking contests, and trivia.

—Dianois dy Ladnia

Three hours later and the clouds were purple fingers stretched across the sky. Along the western side of the moot, there were streamers of colorful spray of light being thrown into the air. The pops and bangs of the celebrations punctuated the sound of laughter and talking coming from all directions.

In the time it had taken to get the rune, the camp had gotten a lot more crowded.

While there was an overwhelming variety of strangers around him, he couldn't help but notice that most of them had the same weathered skin that hours of exposure had created. The strangers, more than he had ever seen in his life, all spent their lives on horses, wagons, and foot traveling across the lands to their secret places, their family claims. They were all muscular, with deep wrinkles that faded only when they smiled.

At the moment, there were a lot of smiles.

“Good thing we only do this every twenty years,” Tubocak said next to him. He was barely watching where he was going as he nodded and waved to the various women that were wandering in the opposite direction. He was strutting and getting all the attention he could use. “So many beautiful ladies.”

Yubanis had to agree, but he did it silently. There were many pretty women there and the possibilities of finding a mate for the night hung over him, but he didn’t have a clue where to start. He sighed and nodded; as much as he wanted, he didn’t have his brother’s gregarious nature or the raw physique to match.

Tubocak patted Yubanis on the shoulder. “Don’t expect anything, brother.”

“What?”

“If you are here just to prove that you are a better fighter or lover, it never works out. You get frustrated and then you’ll do something stupid. The next thing you know, you are knee deep in a chasm of shit with a shovel.” He pulled a face. “Trust me, there are fewer horrors than looking into the asshole of the God Tree to teach you to behave. Three days of cleaning up this—” He gestured to the people around them. “—and you will be praying for freedom and a new nose.”

Tubocak spoke from personal experience, at least according to their father.

Yubanis glanced at a pair of women passing them. They wore leather tops with plunging necklines to show off their cleavages and their collar tattoos. He wanted to say something but he felt invisible as they only hesitated to look at Tubocak before moving on.

Tubocak winked back and then kept going. He was leading Yubanis toward the east side of the moot, where rumors had it that the younger crowds were setting up. It wasn’t

much different than the festivities throughout the moot, but the stakes were lower, enthusiasm was more important than skill, and the spirits had been watered down to keep everyone going well into the night.

They came up to the first of the fighting rings, a large circular area marked with wooden stakes and stone. Arranged in a square field, there were almost forty of them. Most of them were empty but a number already had small crowds watching one-on-one matches.

Tubocak whooped and rushed ahead to the nearest occupied one. “Dinkay!”

One of the brawlers, a bear-like man with a thick beard, turned around. “Tubo!? What—!”

The word was interrupted by a left cross by his opponent.

“—hold on!” With enthusiasm, Dinkay focused on his opponent and rained blows down, missing more than hitting but each impact drove his opponent closer to the edge. Sweat glistened on their bare muscles by the time Dinkay pinned the other fighter against the ropes. A few powerful blows later and he was the only one still standing.

With a whoop to match Tubocak’s, he held out his hand to help the other man up. They hugged for a moment before stepping away.

The fighter who lost pulled off a brass bracelet and handed it over.

Dinkay slipped it on, adding to the two he already had. Then he headed over. “Tubo! It’s been years!”

They hugged tightly, thumping each other’s backs.

Tubocak beamed. “Ready to get your ass beat?”

“Think you can with those scrawny arms?”

Tubocak flexed his thick bicep and grinned.

“Come on, Squirrel.” Dinkay stepped back. “Let me teach you a few lessons.”

A younger child, maybe twelve, ran up and handed both Tubocak and Yubanis a brass bracelet each.

As Yubanis stared down at the heavy ring, his brother shoved his on and crawled into the fighting right. Yubanis sighed. He wasn't a very good fighter, he didn't have either the strength or aggression to keep up with his brother. His only saving grace was his regeneration, he could outlast almost anyone.

A pair of whoops startled him. He looked up to see his brother throwing himself at Dinkay. Both of them were competent fighters but Tubocak was obviously stronger and faster. His blows came hard and fast, slamming into Dinkay as they fought from one end of the ring to the other. Blood splattered on the ground from the attacks.

As if called by the noise, onlookers came streaming closer. There were people of all types: young and old, male and female. They were cheering for Tubocak and Dinkay, though only a few used their names. Most of them were there just to see two anonymous fighters beat each other.

Yubanis cringed at the press of people but kept his position near the ring. He focused on his brother as Tubocak finished with a flurry of blows against Dinkay's ribs, one hit after the other in rapid succession.

Dinkay dropped to his knee.

Tubocak started to bring his fist down but then saw his friend had yielded. He stepped back to spoil his blow. Then, with a grin, he stepped back to reach down with bloody knuckles and help his friend to his feet. "By the Tree, I missed you."

They hugged each other tight before Tubocak took one of Dinkay's bracelets to add to his wrist. Then he turned and headed to Yubanis.

Almost immediately, there a pair of younger women, one appearing in her twenties and the other in their thirties,

pressed up against Yubanis but their eyes were focused on his brother. Yubanis got an eyeful of their breasts nestled in leather bodices as they thrust them forward.

Tubocak flirted for only a few seconds before interrupting. "I'm sorry. I'm just getting started and I'm hoping to get enough of these bracelets to trade in for a silver." It would take ten brass bracelets to get a silver, or he could move over to the higher-stake games where he could earn silver directly.

The two women cooed and promised to follow after them before stepping back.

Tubocak leaned over the rope. "I'm going to be here a while. Are you going to be okay on your own?"

Yubanis nodded. "Yes." He didn't really feel comfortable alone but he also knew a subtle request to be left alone.

"Good." Tubocak reached up and rested his hand on Yubanis's shoulder. "Do you remember where the tents are?"

Yubanis pointed to where "Red-North-102" had been drawn on his hand, right next to the faintly glowing rune that would prevent most diseases.

Tubocak sighed and pulled Yubanis into a hug. "Have fun. This only happens once every twenty years but that means you have many more no matter what..." His eyes lifted up and a smile crossed his face. "... happens here."

Yubanis followed his gaze to where a stunning woman was walking by. She had long brown hair with a blue streak in it and wore a matching leather top and skirt. She smiled at his brother and there was something that told Yubanis that they had been together before.

"... yeah, I need to... renew an acquaintance." Tubocak scrambled from the fighting right and trotted after the passing woman in blue leathers.

And then his brother was gone.

Yubanis looked around, his anxiety rising. The gathered crowd had already pulled apart to drift toward the other fighting rings. He felt alone despite the crowd.

“Want to fight?”

He looked up to see someone about his age, a young man with short hair and dark skin. He looked like had just gotten his collar tattoos also. A single bracelet hung on his wrist.

Yubanis looked down at his own. He might as well have fun and see if he could garner attention like his brother. Slipping it on, he gestured to the recently abandoned fighting ring. “I have to warn you, I’m not very good.”

Disappointment

Ultimately, the competitions at the Hidanork moots is to prove oneself to potential mates in a situation where people from opposite ends of the country are encouraged to intermingle to avoid one race from dominating the landscape.

—Koisay fon Malice

Two hours later, it was obvious that Yubanis wasn't good at fighting but he had managed to get up to five bracelets before a series of defeats left him with two. He wiped the sweat from his brow as he crawled out of the fighting ring. Defeat always stung but being beaten twice in a row hurt even more. He sighed as he ducked underneath the rope from the fighting ring.

Looking back, he saw that his opponent was on the far side. He had a gaggle of people around him, congratulating him with hearty smacks and stolen kisses.

No one was around him.

He shook his head. He could have hoped to make ripples but it seemed like he was doomed to be stuck with only two bracelets and no attention.

“Are you okay?” He looked up to see a woman approaching him. She was curvy with the full breasts and wide hips. She looked like a mother with a bit of gray in her hair that followed the curve of her pony tail. Functional and authoritative even with her easy smile. He started to look down but then stopped. The front of her leather jerkin strained slightly, revealing the curves of her breasts and her snake and horseshoe markings around her collar.

On her belt was a white flag, a ring mother. They were the adults that understood the body more than others and they looked for signs of concussions or more serious injuries. It was one of the few authorities for the moot.

Yubanis nodded and held up his hands to show they were steady.

She stepped closer, the warmth of her body pushing back the fall night’s chill. With a firm hand, she cupped his head firmly and stared into his eyes.

He stared back. When he exhaled, there was a bit of fog escaping his lips.

“You took some serious strikes to the head.”

Yubanis frowned. That was a fight ago. His regeneration had already recovered from that. “It’s okay, I’m pretty sturdy.”

“Looks like it. Your knuckles aren’t bleeding either.”

He couldn’t look away from her eyes. They were the color of polished glass, the dark amber that filled the windows of one of his family’s winter home. The warmth of her body and the color of her eyes gave him a comforting feeling. “I’m resilient.”

She smiled and looked away.

He found he could breathe again. His eyes took her in, from the wrinkles on her face to the deep-set red that darkened her skin. She had tattoos that delved far below her clothes, the recording of major events in her life inked

across her body. He only had the one besides his collar tattoo.

She turned back with a smile. “Come on, you should eat now.”

“I’m—”

“You’ve just gone ten rounds without a break.” She had a mother’s voice, commanding yet soft at the same time. There was no question he would be eating soon.

Then he heard her word again. Ten rounds? Was she paying attention to him? It didn’t seem like a lot to him, he probably could go another ten with his magical talent.

He looked around to see if any of the younger ladies had been drawn toward him. When no one was giving him sideways glances or approaching, he sighed and turned away. “Yeah, might as well get something to eat.”

She guided him to a nearby tent where they were roasting a pair of hogs. By the time they sat down at one of the wooden tables, he had a heaping plate of food and a large glass of watered-down beer.

“How are you with drinking spirits?”

Yubanis shrugged. “I don’t get much on the road. It weighs too much.”

She smirked. “None of us do, but it does make the nights go easier.” She took a healthy swig of her own glass before setting it down. “Though, it’s nice to have something other than fermented swill. Or... this stuff. It’s a bit weak for me.”

He sipped at his own glass. It tasted like water with a few hops waved over it. Even though he didn’t have much, it wasn’t much better than drinking lukewarm water.

“Don’t worry, just eat a bit before heading back into the rings.”

He obeyed her mom’s voice with a smile though the idea of going back to the rings didn’t really appeal to him. While he didn’t have any injuries from the fight, he also wasn’t re-

markable. His fighting style was just to outlast his opponent. It wasn't flashy or sexy.

"By the way, my name is Ami." She didn't give a family name, but there were only casual relationships at the moot.

"Yubanis. I came with the wagoners from the south."

Ami smiled broadly. "The river runs through my veins. We came down in our barge to the docks on the north side."

"I never met anyone who wasn't on foot, horse, or wagon."

Her eyes sparkled. "Now you do. What's it like riding a wagon?"

That opened the floodgate and they began to talk about their own lives. The conversation meandered through their lives, bouncing from nights on the back of a wagon to storms near the ocean. Somehow it jumped over to her three boys and his sisters before finding more topics.

A series of whoops and a swell of cheers finally broke the moment.

Startled, he looked up and around at the fighting rings. There was a massive crowd around one of the larger rings. Everyone was jumping up and down as they yelled at the top of their lungs.

"Someone must have just earned a silver bracelet."

Yubanis tensed as he stared. He didn't feel any excitement for whoever won, but he had a feeling that he would be seeing his brother coming out sporting a silver ring.

Though, when the crowds did part around the victor, it wasn't his brother that he saw.

The winner was a powerful-looking man with a short-cropped beard and a hair chest covered in blood. He had a broad smile on his face but that probably had to do with Sophi riding his shoulders.

Yubanis's sister was cheering just as loud as everyone else. Half of her clothes were loose around her body as she

rocked back and forth. Her thighs flexed to keep her balance as the victor trotted out.

“Oh, Pilos won? Good for him.”

Yubanis glanced at Ami.

“My youngest son,” she said with pride. “He’s a good man. A little strong-headed but has a good heart. That girl is going to get a ride of her life tonight.”

“That’s my sister, Sophi,” Yubanis said quietly.

Ami’s eyebrow rose. “Small moot.”

“It’s her first.”

“Don’t worry, Pilos will take care of her. She will have good memories.”

Yubanis stared at them as the two headed back toward his camp. He was happy for her, Pilos appeared to be everything she wanted when she talked about the moot.

Then he caught sight of his brother entering another fighting ring. Tubocak had both arms covered in rings and it look like he had already converted a few of them into silver bands. His hair was wild and his right eye puffy. It look like he had been fighting for hours.

His opponent had three silver bracelets of their own.

The fight look evenly matched but Yubanis realized he couldn’t stay to watch it. “I... I need to go. I can’t be near this fight.”

Ami stood up. “Come on.”

He hesitated. “Don’t you have to stay?”

“Do you want me to?”

He didn’t. He liked talking to her. She was comforting and kind, with stories he wanted to hear.

Ami came around the table and slipped her arm around his waist. She was soft and warm, the comforting sensation washing over him. “Come on.”

They walked away as the cheer rose up.

“That was my brother.”

“I take it he’s a good fighter. He really should be in the silver fights instead of hanging around the brass.”

“Best I know. A strong sense of the tiag also.”

She didn’t say anything.

After a moment, he sighed. “I’m not as good as him, am I?”

Her hesitation answered the question. “You are not very aggressive in the ring.”

“Or strong or flashy.”

She squeezed him with her arm, pulling his body tight to hers. He hesitated after a moment and then slipped his own arm around her. She smelled good, like flowers in the morning rain.

His thoughts darkened. He had hopes for tonight, to be amazing in the ring or at least good enough to be asked to mate. He wanted to feel the touch of a woman’s hand, the comfort that he imagined was there.

Yubanis would never get it, not at the moot. He shook his head and stopped between two aisles.

Ami stopped with him, her eyes moving back and forth as she stared at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I should go back. There isn’t anything for me out here.”

She didn’t let go.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“How resilient?”

“What?” He stared at her in confusion.

“You got beaten on pretty well but don’t show any signs of it. Healing? Regeneration?”

“Regeneration. Pretty fast, I can heal broken bones in a few seconds.”

She smiled. “What about drinking? Ever get drunk?”

“No...? I haven’t really tried though.”

“Come on,” she said with a sly smile. “I have an idea.”

Curious, he followed as she lead him away from the brass area and toward the western side of the moot. It got quieter but he still saw fighting rings with older warriors. The blows being traded looked more brutal and skilled, precise hits instead of flailing around. He also saw the flash of magic in the strikes; the fighters were not holding back.

There were also other games going on: card and dice being the more obvious. Three men were debating something, it was passionate as they waved their hands at each other and somehow someone was keeping score on a chalkboard.

Ami lead him to a drinking hall and sat him down between two men old enough to be his grandfather. There were ten other men at the table, all of them with little glasses filled with amber liquid in front of them.

As one, they stared at him.

“Pour him a gold, Zanno,” Ami said to a bearded man holding a bottle.

“Ami?”

“Go on.”

Zanno shrugged and set down a small glass in front of Yubanis. It looked barely large than a cap for a bottle. When the other man poured in a glass, however, he could smell the sharp scent of a powerful drink. He had never had anything even close before. “You know the rules, Boy?”

“Yuba. No, sir.”

“First person to leave the table, either falling off or stepping away, has to give a silver ring to everyone left. Same with the second and third. You get the idea. If you make it to the end, that’s a lot of silver rings you can turn into gold.”

Yubanis stared in shock. Gold rings? That was worth ten silver or a hundred brass. He was in one of the highest stake contest at the moot? He looked at Ami in shock. “I-I don’t have any rings.”

She winked. “I do. Show me what you can do.”

Swallowing to ease his dry throat, he turned back.

Zanno nodded and then grinned at her. "Ami's covering the boy. Everyone good with that?"

A flurry of nods and grins.

Zanno focused on Yubanis. "Got the balls to play?"

What else did he have to lose? He nodded. "Yes."

"On three. One. Two."

Yubanis grabbed the glass with a shaking hand.

"Three!"

Everyone slammed back their drink. The spirits tore at Yubanis's throat, burning all the way down before pooling in his stomach. His vision swayed and he coughed violently.

The table burst into laughter.

Zanno slammed his glass down in front of him. The others followed suit. Yubanis gulped but set his glass down.

"Again?"

The burn was already fading from his gut. He smiled and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You got some heft to that shaft of yours, don't you, Boy?" One of the grandfathers clapped Yubanis on the back while Zanno refilled the glasses.

By the time all the shots were full, the burn was gone. He was thirsty again and the spirits didn't seem so scary.

"One... two... three!"

The second shot went down much easier.

Chapter 4

Under the Table

To yearn for the older man, one who knew that the war of pleasure was not won with a single fight but through the battles that test one's edge.

—*Queen of Solitude* (Act 2, Scene 5)

Yubanis slammed down his glass. His body ached and he was starting to feel the affects of the spirits but he still had one person left sitting at the table. The others had passed out or staggered away a while, each leaving a pile of gold rings behind to mark their defeat. Now, he saw victory ahead and he was willing to try for it.

Zanno swayed as he gulped at the tiny glass. He paused and took a long time to find the bottom. He shook his head for a moment and then slammed it down hard. It teetered and almost fell. “Damn, still... first time...?”

Yubanis smiled and nodded. His eyes were blurry from exhaustion, not drunkenness. It was getting late and the din of the celebration outside had died down to only a few bursts of noise and cheers.

Zanno picked up one of the empty bottles and tried to pour it out. Only a drop came out. He muttered and swayed as he tried to grab another but failed. Slowing down, he

shook his head and then clutched the table for balance. “No... no, I’m done. Damn it, I lost to... a boy.”

With a rush, Yubanis realized he had just drunk twelve older men under the table. He smiled broadly, his heart beating faster. He had never done it before and the rush through his veins was intoxicating.

Zanno reached out. “You were a worthy opponent, Yuba. I’m... hon... honored to have lost to you.”

His hand smacked the table and he sat down heavily. “Now... take care of my wife... while I take a... nap.”

Zanno slid off his chair and landed on the ground with a thump. He groaned and rolled over on his back. Seconds later, he was snoring.

Ami set down her beer mug and clicked her tongue. “I’m impressed. I don’t think I’ve seen anyone drink him under the table.”

“Wife?”

Ami got up and headed for the edge of the drinking hall. She came back with two blankets, one she bunched underneath Zanno’s head and the other over his bulk. “He’s a good man and a good provider. We’ve been together almost thirty-six years. Even though he was born a walker, he took to the rivers well.” She smiled and stroked his cheek.

Yubanis watched nervously. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. “Is he going to be okay there?”

Ami straightened. “Of course. The ring mothers and hall fathers will be around with a cart to bring him to the sleeping area. That way, someone is there to make sure he doesn’t get hurt when he’s sleeping and he gets something for the hangover when he wakes up. We plan for five years for these moots, everything from supplies to drunks to making sure there are enough latrines and paper to wipe asses.”

She grinned and stretched, her back arching.

Yubanis's eyes took her in. She was nothing he had been looking for, but he found himself wanting to stay. Whatever had been happening that night felt more real than what he had seen around the fighting rings. He glanced at the pile of silver rings in front of them. There were a lot, more than he had ever seen before.

She yawned and then reached for her pony tail. It took her a moment to unwrap a sparkling leather thong that kept it bound. Pulling it free, she shook her head to the side until her hair spread out across her shoulders. It was a honey brown streaked with silver and gray.

His body grew tense.

“Come on, let's get your winnings wrapped up.” Keeling down, she grabbed a pouch from her husband's belt. Together, they pushed all the rings into the bag and then tied it shut with the thong from her hair. He noticed that the leather strap had gold and silver charms along with a stylized snake and horseshoe on the end, the symbols matched the ones on her tattoos.

Yubanis finished and stood awkwardly. “Um, what do I do now?”

She held out her arm as if to take him by the waist. “Walk me to my barge?”

An intense longing filled his heart as he slipped his body next to hers. The warmth and softness enveloped him again and he felt happy as they made their way out of the now quiet drinking hall. His fingers stretched out to rest his little finger on her hip and his thumb along her side.

Ami made a soft noise of approval and then nestled closer, her body melding with his. He could feel her breast bumping against his side and his body grew warmer at the touch.

In the hours since he had started drinking, the celebration had quieted dramatically. No one was fighting any-

more and there were no contests of strength. He spotted a few card games still going on, but it looked like everyone else had gone their separate ways for the night.

He frowned. "What happens to those who don't...?"

"Find someone to warm their bed at night? They usually go back to their camp." She chuckled. "If the camp is occupied? Well, there are usually enough beds to collapse without interrupting any fun. If not, there are always the rest tents like where they are going to be taking Zanno. The grandmothers and fathers watch over those, at least the ones who don't want to play."

Yubanis wondered what he would find back at the camp. But then his thoughts turned to the woman he was nestled against. Could she be interested in him? He wasn't looking for an older woman but he couldn't imagine there was anything about her that she would find interesting. Though, the idea appealed to him.

Ami chuckled. "Having trouble walking?"

He hesitated, trying to explain the sudden hardness.

She answered by reaching out and pressing her hand on his length. Without a word, she stepped in front of him and lifted her head until their lips were almost touching. "I would very much like if you joined me tonight, Yuba."

He inhaled sharply. Any words escaped his thoughts, driven out by the firm grip on his manhood and the press of her body against his own. He gulped and did the only thing he could imagine: he kissed her.

The Morning After

The gathering of tokens and trinkets is a ritual in itself, one that is important only for the length of the moot and then quickly forgotten as the Hidanork go their separate ways. Everything is forgotten but memories and those to be born.

—Hasar dea Xahos, *The Noble Nomads*

Yubanis felt like floating on air as he drifted down the crowded lanes between the camps. The press of people didn't bother him as much as before, mainly because half of them were cradling their heads or simply keeping their gazes down as they headed to the communal eating or bathing areas. Throughout, he saw various men comparing brass and silver trinkets with each other and the women teasing them cheerfully at the same time. Everyone was having quiet though muted fun.

Except for the children. They were running around screaming at the top of their lungs and avoiding the casual swipes made by hung-over adults.

His mother was standing at the end of one wagon, grilling meat over a fire rune. To his surprise, she wore her winter robe instead of her usual daily outfit. Normally she

only wore it in the winter house, when they didn't have to leave the warmth. It looked comfortable, not functional like every other day of his life.

His sisters were sitting in their chairs around a small fire. Both wore their sleeping clothes. Sophi's hair had been done up in a braid but Opila's brown strands were tousled and haphazard. They smiled at each other as they sipped from steaming mugs. He didn't have to approach to know that they were drinking strong tea.

He approached and stepped over the rope. "Good morning!"

His mother glanced at him sharply. Then a slow smile crossed her face. "You look cheerful."

Yubanis blushed. "I am."

"Left behind some seeds?"

Tubocak hopped the rope from behind him. "Probably not as many as me. I left three saplings behind this year." He brandished three leather thongs wrapped around his wrist. They were small compared to the dozen brass and silver bracelets that covered him from wrist to elbow on each arm. Each one had various ancestor symbols on it and a few decorations of brass.

Penilil's eyes widened. "My, you were busy last night."

"Yeah, I thrashed a couple silvers in the ring. It was the greatest moment of my life." He mimed an uppercut before reaching past his mother to grab one of the steaks from the grill and yanking it free.

"Hey! I'm cooking those."

"You like it brown, I want it juicy."

"Brown is safe."

"My rune says juicy is good enough for today, mom."

She waved the fork she had been using to grill at him and then shook her head in amusement. Turning on her

heel, she looked at Yubanis. “How would you like it? Cooked or nearly raw?”

“Brown is good, thank you.”

“See,” she told Tubocak, “some of us know how to eat. Now, pull up a chair by the fire and stop gnawing on that steak like a bear.”

“Yes, mom.” Tubocak winked at Yubanis as they both gathered up chairs for everyone and arranged them around the fire. When the wind shifted, smoke rolled over Yubanis who coughed.

Opila reached over and twirled her finger near the fire. The smoke suddenly gathered together and rose up a straight column that ignored the wind. She twirled a few more times before sitting back.

“Thank you, Opil.”

She grinned and shifted to her other side. She looked like she was uncomfortable, not unlike himself. “Good night?”

He had to hesitate, unsure how to describe his time with Ami. “Yeah, it was a good night.”

Tubocak puffed out his chest. “Not as good as mine!” he announced. Then he pulled off a pair of pouches of his own and set them down on the end of the wagon near their mother. Each one clinked from whatever was inside it.

“You call that an accomplishment?” Goisay said as he dropped a larger bag on top of Tubocak. It rattled loudly from the contents.

Tubocak’s eyes narrowed. “And what did you do, old man?” He ended by running his hands along the bracelets that marked his winnings in the ring.

“A little of this, a little of that. Oh, and I got myself one of these.” He held up a golden ring.

“Oh, a little heavy drinking for the old man? Delved into spirits before you had your ass handed to you? Or did you just guzzle some of that watery swill in the brass area?”

“This old man can drink you—”

Penilil interrupted them by shoving plates into both of their hands. “Stop stroking your dicks and eat. You can show off what good boys I have after the meal. I want to hear all about the night.”

Blushing, Yubanis took his own smaller pouch and set it down next to his father’s. It looked small and pathetic. Ami’s thong sparkled in the light.

Penilil leaned over to kiss him. “I hope you have fun,” she whispered.

“I did.”

“That’s good, I was...” Her voice trailed off.

He looked down to see her running her finger along Ami’s band. The gold sparkled in the sunlight for a moment. Then she looked up at him, her eyes wide with surprise. “Gold?” she whispered.

“It was a good night,” he whispered back even as his cheeks were burning.

She grinned broadly and kissed him again. “I’m proud of you, Boy.”

Together they headed to their seats.

Goisay finished chewing his bite. “How about you, girls? Have fun?”

Both nodded, Opila more enthusiastically than her sister.

“Any grandchildren for the winter?”

“I hope so.” Opila giggled. She shifted slightly and a blush colored her cheeks.

Tubocak gestured to Sophi with a greasy finger. “You made a good choice there. That guy could really fight.”

Sophi blushed. “Pilos was very good.”

“I’d like him on our side if we ever got into a fight,” continued Tubocak. “I wonder if he’s a walker or a wagoner?”

“River,” said both Opila and Yubanis at the same time.

Their mother's head snapped up, her eyes widening even more. Slowly her lips parted as she glanced back at the wagon and then back again. Then she cocked her head as she stared at Yubanis. "Her?"

Yubanis nodded sheepishly. Then he looked up to see the rest of the family looking at him with confusion. He gulped and ducked down to work on his meal. His cheeks were burning and he wasn't sure if the pounding in his heart was from the memories or embarrassment.

After an uncomfortable silence, Tubocak broke it with a grunt. "So, ready to throw down and see who won the night?"

Goisay chuckled. "Why not? I like humiliating my boy."

Penilil stood up. "Hurry up, I need to go to the Council in about twenty minutes and all of you need to clean up."

She stepped near the wagon and casually picked up Yubanis's bag. "Session is until sundown, so volunteer and clean up. And you," she gestured to her husband, "clean up the camp."

The sisters laughed as they levered themselves out of the chairs and grabbed the rest of the bags and pouches. Goisay and Tubocak moved their chairs so they were all clustered around a small towel they used to lay on the ground.

"You first, old man."

Goisay smirked and emptied out his bag. There were silver and brass cards, chips used in dice games, two silver rings, and even a silver bracelet. It was an impressive standing, to say the least.

Tubocak had almost two dozen brass bracelets, five silver, and a handful of brass drinking rings. He also added the three thongs, markers for the women he had enjoyed that night. Two had ram horns and the third had a stylized heron but otherwise all three were plain. Even using the ex-

change of ten brass to one silver, he had one more silver than his father. "Yes! I beat you!"

Yubanis realized he had far more than both of them combined. On the way home and with Ami's help, he had exchanged seventy of his silver rings for gold ones which left him with a sizable but compact amount.

He hesitated as he held his pouch.

"Come on, Yuba. It's okay," Opila said resting her hand on his hand. "This is just for fun."

"No shame in not beating your brother," Tubocak said with a grin.

That pushed Yubanis to act. He carefully unwrapped Ami's thong and set it down on his corner. He trembled with the effort not to smile.

Goisay picked up the thong. "Oh my, apparently your brother shot for the clouds and scored well."

Opila took it from her father. "Mom, I thought you said we couldn't use silver."

"You can't," Goisay said. "You have to be a mother to use silver."

Then his face brightened and he chuckled.

"But there is gold there," Sophi said as she peered closer. "Who can use gold?"

Tubocak's smile froze, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

Their mother answered sharply. "It doesn't matter, let's see what is in the bag."

"Yeah," Tubocak said with a little bit of worry in his voice. "Let's see."

Yubanis opened the pouch and shook out the contents. The first was one of the gold rings.

"Root me sideways," said one of his sisters. "You drank as much as dad?"

Then the rest poured out, gold and silver rings spilling out into a pile. In the sun, the pile shone brightly. It was a

rather small pile compared to the others but there wasn't even a single brass ring visible.

"Root me," swore everyone else, their voices shaking with surprise.

Tubocak sat down heavily, his face paler than usual. "H-How?" Then he shook his head and scrambled to his knees with a broad smile. "My brother!" he yelled as he yanked Yubanis into a tight hug.

The storm clouds that had formed by Tubocak's first question faded from Penilil's face. She smiled broadly and hugged both of them tightly before embracing her husband.

Goisay cleared his throat. There was a look of pride on his face. "Well, I guess two of us were humiliated, weren't we?"

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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