

In Search of a Cat

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Broken Typewriter Press • Cedar Rapids

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Chapter 1

A Fallen Tree

The grand moots are the rare occasions the Hidanork gather together to make decisions that affect the entire country. It is also a time of private and public celebration among strangers.

—Jilal of Odir, *The United Hidanork Tribes: Before the War*

Yubanis sighed as he leaned back against the seat. The reins to the wagon horse rested in his palm and he used his thumb to keep the worn leather straps from slipping from his grip. The late spring sun tickled his face and there was a gentle breeze that brought the smell of new flowers.

He took a long, deep breath and smiled. It was a lovely end to a long day of travel. More importantly, it meant he would be sleeping in a few hours and that thought pushed back the exhaustion a little. Somehow sitting on a wagon bench for a few hours at a time dragged down on his eyelids and brought a craving for a soft blanket and dozing off to sleep.

From inside the wagon, he heard a shuffling noise. Judging from the grunts, it was his mother working her way over his sleeping siblings to the front of the wagon.

Yubanis shifted to the side to give her space.

Penilil, his mother, stuck her head out to look around. Her bangs had gotten long in the last few weeks and they stuck to her face. “We’re about two hours from sunset.”

Before he could say anything, she crawled out of the wagon and sat down heavily on the bench. The wood underneath both of them sagged and creaked. His mother sighed as she scanned the horizon. “It’s been a seven years since I’ve been in this area.”

Yubanis shrugged. He had a vague memory of the area but he couldn’t quite place exactly when and where he had seen it. His family’s traditional route took thirty-one years to complete, but they frequently came back to the same regions to reconnect to the more fragile lands.

His family, like everyone else he knew, gained their powers by connecting to the tiags, the semi-sentient presence tied into areas of land. There were countless tiags of all sizes and shapes, ranging from the trivial spot surrounding a spring to the snowcap of Mount Ilosigan.

He was only twenty-two and had never seen the full route. He hadn’t been able to touch all of his family’s tiags and establish his own connection to each one. To him, the route they took was memorized but only as abstract lines on a map instead of the drawn by the memories of experience. By the time he started to go over the same trail again, he hoped to have the same ease of remembering as his parents.

His father stuck his head out of the wagon. “Are we there yet?”

“Just looking for a stopping place, old man,” said Penilil. “I’m a little fuzzy.”

“Getting forgetful already, Peni?”

Yubanis tensed, struggling to keep a smile from his face.

His mother stiffened. “Gois?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Just tell us where we are before I smack you.”

Goisay laughed and pointed ahead of them to a gap between two clusters of trees. “See that rotted tree we knocked over? Follow the tree line around it and then head up along the north side. There is a good clearing for the night. They have a spring, but it’s down at the bottom of the ravine and a long walk.”

Yubanis couldn’t help be impressed by his father’s memory. “Who’s land is this?”

“The tiag claimed Warin’s family nine generations back. They return every three years but won’t be back until next year. She should accept us for a day or two before we’re overstayed our welcome.”

Yubanis nodded and focused on the rotted tree. It was a thick one that leaned drunkenly against another pair of trees that were bowed from the weight. Judging from the number of mushrooms and vines hanging off it, it looked like it had fallen over years ago. He wondered how his parents were responsible for it falling over.

“You remember that tree, don’t you?” his father said while nudging his mother.

Penilil frowned for a moment.

“Big storm? You were wearing that flower dress before it ripped. The one with the pink flower on the shoulder. We were sitting underneath it when you decided to whisper something...?” His voice trailed off suggestively.

His mother said nothing.

Yubanis glanced over to see his mother blushing. Her beige skin took on a reddish hue. Then she turned and shook her fist at her husband. “I will end you,” she said in a tone that balanced between the edges of violence and amusement.

Goisay chuckled. “Oh, you remember now?”

She pointed to the other side of the tree. “I also remember you trying to take me over there, after your father specifically said that the land was sick.”

Yubanis followed his mother’s gesture curiously. The trees on the other side of the trunks were lighter and more branches were bare. Despite being near the end of the day, he spotted a few wisps of mist clinging to the back of the thick underbrush.

A feeling of dread prickled the back of his spine. Something felt off, like a sour taste in the back of his throat whenever he considered driving the wagon closer.

A small white creature ran along the base, its body half-hidden by the branches that reached out from the trees like a thousand claws preparing to dig down. It stopped for a moment, looking around sharply, before it raced out of sight.

“Yeah,” Goisay said. The amusement had fled his voice. “Yub? Why don’t you avoid that side? That tiag has never welcomed me and I don’t want to risk your sister’s pregnancy.”

His mother grunted with agreement.

Yubanis steered the wagon closer to the broken tree. Sometimes, it was hard to tell if a land was rejecting the family or it was poisoned. In both cases, the tiag skewed perceptions to make the area look unwelcoming and less appealing. He shivered and looked away. “Should we ask Tubo to look?”

“Your brother is still sleeping as are Opila and Sophi,” said his mother. “We are heading further north to Blueberry Point and won’t be back here for another few years. I’ll wake them up once we get to the patch of flowers.”

Goisay chuckled and then yawned. “Finally remembered where we are? Good. You going to stay up?”

Penilil indicated she would remain on the bench.

Yubanis didn't say anything but he would appreciate the company.

Goisay reached up to squeeze her arm and then headed back to return to sleep. "Call me if you need me."

Yubanis yawned.

"Just another hour or so, then you can rest until dinner. Don't worry, I won't let you fall off the bench."

It was his turn to drive the wagon and clean up dinner. Thankfully, having a short nap would help him stay awake for the first shift of the night. Yubanis nodded.

He turned to look at the unwelcoming area and wondered what was inside.

"Don't be curious about places like that. Nothing ever goes well venturing into those boundaries. Trust me, specially that place." She groaned and rubbed her shoulder.

When he noticed her glancing at the tree, he looked at her in surprise. "The tree?"

She blushed again and nodded.

"I thought he was..." Yubanis realized he didn't want to continue.

"We were." She smiled and shook her head. "He was a good kisser and talker. I liked spending time with him away from the others."

"Uh—" He was confident didn't want to know about his parent's sex life.

"But then he somehow convinced me to head over there. It was a dare or something; I don't remember exactly what he said at the time. We only made it a few yards into the trees before the trees came to life and threw us out. Your father was thrown across this space—" She gestured up and over the wagon from one side to the broken tree. "—and into that. He broke his arm and leg when the tree snapped in half."

Yubanis snorted. “He broke a tree because he was doing something stupid?”

His mother leaned over and grinned. “He’s a man, that’s what all you do. You see a pretty bird and have to puff up your chest. I mean, that’s what you did with Ami, isn’t it?” She reached over and poked his shoulder.

It was his turn to blush. At his first grand moot, he had tried to impress available women with his fighting abilities but he wasn’t very good at sprawling. His own strength was his ability to recover from almost any injury in a matter of seconds.

That impressed Ami enough that she helped him discover a new talent of his, a near immunity to being drunk. After guiding him through a night of drinking contents, she then guided him into another first, a night with a woman.

“She saw something in you. Don’t ever forget that. You are a good man, Yubanis.” She smiled and hugged him with one arm. “I’m just so proud of you.”

With a smile of his own, he flicked the reins and let the complement carry him forward.

Chapter 2

Abandoned Wagons

When a family has to spread out, almost always the family matriarch remains in a central location to function as the anchor and a place to return.

—Ijosil Ogamial, *Surviving the Wilderness, One Family's Horror*

They drove in relative silence for almost an hour and a half before they came up to the broad ravine. Following his father's directions, he directed the horse and wagon up along a dirt road that had been marked out with brightly painted rocks and wooden signs that named both the area, Palifil Nibaras, and Warin's family.

Before he reached the top, he could feel the vague presence of the tiag pressing against his thoughts. It was a bright, windy sensation, a memory of a brisk breeze that brought the scent of older leaves. It was not an uncomfortable feeling, just the sensation of someone staring intently with curiosity, the wariness of watching someone and wondering if they were armed with a weapon.

Reflexively, he reached down to the edge of the seat toward a small box underneath the center of the bench.

When he touched his mother hand, he jumped but didn't pull back. Together, they pressed their fingers against the carved wooden door. Inside the locked box were the various token of appreciation their family had gathered over the years. One of them was a coil of braided rope from Warin. His mother had gotten it years ago after repeated encounters as their two families grew closer together.

Yubanis knew that his parents would be allowed into Nibaras without it, but having the rope sped the tiag's acceptance. It also gave one more proof that he belong in case the tiag decided he wasn't his parent's child.

The curiosity faded into a welcoming breeze.

His mother took a deep breath and let it out. There was always a chance that the connection had been broken and they would be rejected. She chuckled and then gestured ahead. "There's smoke. Someone else is camping here."

Even though there was no sense of danger or wariness, Yubanis couldn't help but tense. They had a few bad encounters over the years, though he had to admit he had never seen violence on Warin's lands. The man was welcoming to everyone and his family's lands had a tendency to match the mood.

"I'll get your father and the others ready." She crawled into the back of the wagon.

Unspoken was that she was also getting Tubocak. Yubanis's older brother was adept at connecting to tiag's and using the magic from the land. If things came into a fight.

The winding path led up to an open area. Two other wagons, both with an identical blue pattern, were arranged along the north side of the space. Even though one of the wagons looked a decade older than the other, they both had wide tires with metal rims and a black covering that looked softer than wood.

Whoever the family was, they were one of the experimental folks who either had a lot of money or dealt with merchants from other countries. Most of the families couldn't afford metal rims.

He pulled his wagon up along the east side of the clearing. It wasn't as ideal as the north, which had an rocky outcropping to shield it, but there was shelter and a flattened area.

By the time he positioned the wagon, the rest of his family had already jumped out and were spreading out toward their various chores. His mother headed straight for the other wagons; as the mother in the family, it was her job to introduce herself first.

Tubocak yawned as he grabbed the horse and unhitched it. "There you go, girl. Let's get you something to drink and eat." Then he looked toward his brother. "Good job, Yuba. Why don't you get some rest?"

Yubanis yawned and nodded. Driving was exhausting and he had been steering the wagon all day except for a few hours near midday. He nodded before hopping off to follow the signs to where he could relieve himself.

The back of the wagon was relatively spartan but very colorful. Like the outside, there were a lot of flowers and chains. It had two entrances, a larger one in the back and a small hatch on the starboard side that led up to the bench.

He noticed that Sophi was awake but resting on the bottom bed. She had a small glow lamp while she read a book. The warm light gave her skin a golden appearance as if she was glowing. Her normally bound hair spilled out across her shoulder in copper waves. Her other hand rested on her belly that was just beginning to show her pregnancy.

"Mind if I sleep?"

"Go ahead. I started to get up but then got dizzy. Mom said I had to remain inside until they start the food." She

groaned and rubbed her belly again; she had gotten pregnant during the grand moot where he had spent the night with Ami.

“Got to keep the family going,” he said. With one foot, he kicked up the fold-away bed that his brother frequently slept in and then hiked himself up to the bed above his sister’s. It smelled of his parents but the soft mattress and still-warm blankets called to him.

With a groan, she closed his eyes and sank into the pillows. Just a few hours then they would wake him up.

Even though the curved outer edge of the wagon had been well insulated with batten and canvas, he heard the faint voice of his mother. “Tubo, ask the tiag where the others are.”

“Problems?”

“No idea, but usually someone stays behind the wagon.”

“I can ask.”

A moment later, the air strummed as if someone had plucked a harp string. The taste of a breeze tickled the back of Yubanis’s throat.

“She says it was a family of nine that came in. They were worried about something and have spread out in all directions. They’ve been here two... no three days.”

Yubanis sat up, a prickle of concern. He cocked his head.

“Anything else?”

“No,” his brother’s tone had a worried sound to it. “I can’t get a better image from her. Should I get Yuba up?”

“No, not yet. Let him sleep.”

Yubanis didn’t move.

“Their mom is down at the bottom of the ravine, near the spring.”

There was a quiet conversation. “Let your brother and sister sleep.” Then she spoke louder, “Goisay! Grab the water barrels, we’re going down to the spring!”

Yubanis started to lower himself.

Then someone banged on the side of the wagon. “Go to sleep!” snapped his mother.

With a smile, Yubanis relented and slumped back into blissful unconsciousness.

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Chapter 3

The Call

The tribes of the Hidanork are isolated during their long family journeys. They can go weeks without seeing a stranger but when they do, they do with open arms and helping hands.

—Idail of Orsina, *Honor Among the Wanderers*

A palm pressed against Yubanis’s mouth, a familiar warning to remain still and silent. He tensed as his heart quickened and a rush of wariness flooded through his veins. He slid his hand to his side where he had a short knife strapped to his thigh.

“Yuba,” came his brother’s low voice inches from his ears. Tubocak’s breath smelled of sweets and wood smoke. He pulled his hand away. “We aren’t in danger, but we need you up.”

Yubanis relaxed minutely. He groaned and sat up slowly. His eyes ached and his thoughts were fuzzy. It felt like he had just put his head down on a pillow. “Is it my turn already? Doesn’t feel like I’ve been sleeping long.”

“Sorry, youngest brother. It’s only been twenty at the most. I wish I could give you longer, but the other family came back and they need our help.”

Yubanis shook his head. "Yeah, of course. Just give me a second."

Tubocak patted Yubanis on the shoulder. "Hurry up."

It took a few minutes for Yubanis before he stumbled out of the back of the family wagon. Despite the warmth, he shivered in the sunlight. Every movement tugged at his limbs as he leaned against the wagon.

He hated the fuzziness of having to wake up quickly. Fighting back a yawn, he came around the back of the wagon.

He saw his brother first. Tubocak was the pride of the family, a muscular man who could go thirty rounds in the sparring resting and had an immense power when it came to tapping the powers of tiags. His was bare-chested, again, and his chest was heavily tattooed.

Tubocak glanced at him and gestured with one hand to where his mother was speaking with another older woman; the other woman would have been the other family's matron. It was always the mothers that made decisions and led the way.

Penilil held the other matron's hands as they spoke quietly. While they both had reddish hair with white streak, Yubanis's mother was broad-shouldered and sturdy compared to the lithe appearance of the other woman.

Both women were products of constant traveling, with brown skin with reddish tones, auburn hairs, and deep wrinkles. Nature had weathered their skins, etching them like stones. His mother had wrinkles that reminded him of her constant smiling.

Behind the mothers stood three younger woman. Two were appeared to be in their twenties while the youngest didn't even look to be six or seven at most. All four women wore patterned white tops though they were patched and

repaired heavily. They all shared their mother's slender builds and red hair.

He had not encountered families that didn't travel with a father or brother but it wasn't uncommon beyond a curiosity.

Yubanis stood next to his brother. "Who are they?"

His brother leaned over until their shoulders bumped. He whispered quietly "Their matron is Rainel. The older sisters are Unil and Osain. Youngest is Gibi."

Then Tubocak turned slightly to the side. "You probably want to avoid anything improper with Osain, she's a ram like you. There are five others, but they are further out and won't be back for hours."

Tubocak, Yubanis, and their sisters all had tattoos across their collarbones. On the right, they shared a chain motif which matched their mother's father's lineage. The four had different left sides, to represent their biological sires: Tubocak had storms, Yubanis had ram horns, Sophi had thorns, and Opila had waves. The motifs were part of the moots, symbols to indicate parentage and to prevent children from being born of someone too close of blood.

Yubanis curiously looked at the two sisters who were talking to each other. One of them had the buttons of her shirt opened up to reveal a hint of her own tattoos: roses and storm.

Unil was slightly taller than her sister, but not by much. She glanced at him and then back to her sister. One of her brown eyes was cloudy.

Yubanis smiled and looked at his brother. "Hoping to have a chance with Osain?"

"No, Rainel is a storm," he said tapping his chest. "Besides, I think we're not going to have time to enjoy ourselves. Whatever the mothers are talking about, it's pretty serious. Look at the little girl."

Yubanis focused his attention on the girl huddled next to her sisters. Gibi's eyes were red-rimmed and she clutched a stuffed animal tightly in her hand. The freckles on her reddish skin glistened in the fading sunlight.

There was something about the girl's eyes, as if she was devastated about losing something or she had been punished recently. He remembered how Opila had the same look when she found that she hadn't gotten pregnant at the grand moot.

"Shit," muttered Yubanis. With a look like that, they must have just lost one of their family. Despite the realization, he fought back a yawn but failed. The urge to crawl back into the bed rose up. He closed his eyes and rubbed them.

Tubocak elbowed him.

Yubanis jerked awake. He didn't remember falling asleep. "Shit."

Penilil looked sad as she came up to him. "Boys. We need to help."

Tubocak hugged her. "What happened?"

"Their little girl has lost her cat. They've been looking around for three days and haven't seen a whisker or tail."

Yubanis stared at her in confusion. He thought it was something serious, but days of hunting for a cat? He never saw the need for an animal on the wagon but he knew of some families that swore by them. "All this for a pet?"

Penilil reached over and smacked his shoulder. "Just because we don't keep them, doesn't mean they should be treated like that," she snapped. "We do not question the reason of why, only help when there is need."

"Sorry, mother."

"Now, Rainel says they've been looking for three days and it's important they find. The cat goes by the name of Abasa."

Yubanis resisted the urge to scoff. Three days for a pet? It must have been eaten or was long gone. The last thing he wanted to do was go hunting through the woods for some stupid animal.

Tubocak elbowed him again. Then he addressed his mother. “I can ask Nibaras but small creatures are hard to find. Maybe Aba is a stranger to the tiag will be able to detect... her?”

She shrugged. “No idea if Abasa is a queen or a tom but the name sounds like a queen’s. I’m going to ask your sisters to help as soon as they come back with getting water.”

Penilil patted Yubanis’s shoulder, “Help as much as you can. I know you are tired but keep your tongue mild. They are rather upset.”

He rested his hand on hers for a moment. He ducked his head in apology.

“Go help them.” His mother started to walk away but then stopped. “Don’t try anything else until we find Abasa, do you understand? I know it’s been weeks and you are feeling pretty cocky about...” Her voice trailed off as she glanced at his brother.

Tubocak shrugged. “I’ll keep my brother’s dick in his pants until we find the cat.”

With a blush, Yubanis shook his head. He peeled away from his parents and headed over to the sisters. As he did, he approached with open hands and palms facing them as a sign of being unarmed. “May the roads see you well,” he said.

All three of them tensed with Gibi stepped behind him. “I’m Yubanis, the second son of Penilil.”

Osain held out her hand, fingers pointing up and palms to him. “Osain first of Rainel. These are my sisters, Unil and Gibi.”

As much as Yubanis didn't want to look for the cat, he knew it was the proper thing to do. Out in the wilderness, between tiags, helping strangers was critical to survival. Even if they insisted on having something as helpless as a cat. He took a deep breath. "We are looking for a cat?"

Gibi sobbed and buried her face into Unil's leg.

"What does Abasa look like? Nibaras can't give me a picture of her."

"Boy," muttered Gibi. "Abasa is a boy. He has balls and scratches a lot."

Yubanis squatted down to bring himself to Gibi's height. He gave his brightest smile. "Sadly, it's really hard to catch little cats to see if they have dangling bits. Usually they scratch when you look."

Gibi's lip almost smiled.

"Do you think you could give more hints? What color is Abasa?"

"W-White. About the size of a melon, but really thin."

"So, a melon slice?"

Gibi smiled and giggled. "Yeah."

Inwardly, Yubanis groaned but he kept it from his face. If they couldn't find the cat, then they would have to spread out in a spiral and look for it outside of the area. After three days, the feline could be hours away.

His train of thought jogged his memory. He looked up to the older girls. "Did you come from the south? Near a fallen tree? It would be about two hours away on horse."

Unil nodded. "Yes, that's our route why?"

He straightened as much of the exhaustion fled. "Is there a chance Abasa jumped off there? I saw a brief flash of a white creature when I was driving past. It was too far away and moving pretty fast, but it was small and about the right size."

All three girls gasped.

Gibi whimpered. “That’s where the bags fell out of the wagon!”

Tubocak patted Yubanis’s shoulder. “Let’s go then. Should only take a few hours to go there, get the cat, and come back. Nothing easier.”

Osain shook her head. “It’s almost dark, we’d be traveling blind.”

Tubocak shrugged. “We don’t care, do we, Yubanis?”

Despite wanting to crawl back into bed, his brother had put him on the spot. Yubanis glanced at Unil, then to Gibi who looked hopeful. The little girl’s expression broke his reluctance.

Tubocak grinned back.

“No, they will all sleep better if we can get Abasa back.”

“Great, I’ll tell Mom and the others.” Without giving a chance for anyone to respond, he strolled back to the camp.

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Chapter 4

Driving Along

The tribes do not simply tap a tiag for power, they give something in return. It is a relationship not unlike one of a gardener and her flowers.

—Gaiden Ochyonáka, *The Conquest of Sand and Soil*

Yubanis sat on the front bench of their family wagon as it traveled in a sea of darkness and flashing lights. He had been the one driving when he spotted the cat so they needed his memories of the route to return to the same spot. Like finding ancestral tiags, he knew exactly where to go.

Next to him was Unil, the only one of the sisters to go. Her body was warm and he found it distracting when her hip or shoulder bumped against his own. It didn't hurt or annoy him, but the desire to have her touch him again was making it difficult to concentrate.

His brother insisted on the far side, Yubanis suspected to ensure Unil sat between them, but also because he had to keep his hand out as he channeled his power into the surrounding tiags in keeping them safe.

The tiags responded with endless swarms of fireflies sailing ahead of the horse and lighting up the path. Small patches of moss and mushrooms glowed brighter with his

presence, marking dangerous spots in splashes of color and the rush of smaller animals. Along both sides of the pool of light, animals would set up so their eyes reflected the brightness and lead them steadily away from sinkholes, streams, and holes that would damage the wagon.

Traveling at night would have been dangerous without his brother and Yubanis was thankful for the company.

Unil turned to him, her face shadowed by the single glowing stone mounted above them. "I've never seen someone able to touch the tiags like that," she whispered.

Yubanis swallowed and nodded. Up close, he felt more nervous being almost alone with her. "Tubo has a great gift. It has served us well on our travels. It almost matches his ability at sparing and leading."

She glanced at Tubocak and then back. "What about your gift?"

"Less impressive," he wasn't sure why he didn't want to lift himself up. His talent was less impressive as his brother who had maintained a pool of light for almost an hour.

"Don't bury yourself in the dirt, brother," Tubocak. "Your gifts are just as great as mine."

When Unil looked at him expectantly, Yubanis clutched the reins tighter and took a deep breath. "I'm hard to kill. Most injuries heal in a matter of seconds. Including broken bones and cuts."

Her lips parted slightly and he wondered what it would feel like to kiss them. Then he tore his thoughts away, it wasn't the time or place. He had only been with one other woman and the scant weeks since it had happened were still plaguing his thoughts.

Tubocak, on the other hand, wasn't done embarrassing him. "We found his ability one day in summer. Oh, I remember it—"

"Tubo..."

“Opila was running along a field and fell into a snake pit. Venomous snakes. Rust Fangs. She got bit a few times and started screaming. I was too far away but little brother always loved his sisters. He jumped right in, picked her up, and threw her out of the hole.”

Yubanis shivered at the memory. He had set off the snakes and they started biting him furiously, their fangs tearing into his legs and arms as he struggled to push his sister out of the hole. More than once, he forced his hand between a snake and her body just so it would bite him instead of her. He thought he was going to die that day.

Unil gasped softly and her body trembled against his.

“Yuba managed to crawl out after her and he dragged her away until the rest of us caught up with them. When I got there, she was already unconscious from the poison but he was knelt over her, bleeding from hundreds of wounds and crying.”

It was only a few dozen bites but Yubanis didn’t correct his brother’s exaggerations.

“I asked the tiag for help with finding something for the venom. It took me so long and I couldn’t find enough. I was sure I was going to lost one of them that day.”

Around them, the natural lights flared brighter for a moment and a fox yipped loudly.

“But when I got back, he was planting a warning post with our dad near the snake pit without a single scratch. Which was good because I could only find enough herbs for one of them.” Tubocak sighed. “I’m glad the tiag told me it was okay, she knew what my brother was capable of.”

Unil patted Yubanis’s thigh, sending a thrill up his limb. “I bet it was scary.”

Tubocak chuckled. “Oh, probably not as scary as that time with the ravine.”

With a sudden blush, Yubanis spoke up sharply. “What is your talent?”

Unil didn’t move her hand. “I’m unstoppable. As long as I can move forward, I can push or pull almost anything.”

“What? Really?” Tubocak sounded impressed.

“Sometimes we give the horses a break because I can drive the wagon on my own. That was actually how we found out I had the talent. It was a rainy day and the wagon got stuck in the mud. We were all pushing and it wasn’t going anywhere.” Her voice grew softer with the memory. “Osain felt the flood coming through the ground. We only had a few minutes otherwise we would have lost our wagon and Gois, that was our horse, so I just pushed with all my might and everything moved. I ended up dragging the entire family with me just in time to avoid the flash flood.”

Tubocak snorted.

“What?” she asked.

“Goisay? The horse was named Goisay?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

Yubanis chuckled. “That’s our dad’s name.”

“Well, he is a horse’s ass.” Tubocak snorted.

For a while, they laughed at the joke before riding once again in silence. The wagon creaked and shifted with the movements.

“Yuba, Tubo?” Unil spoke in a soft voice. “If we can’t find Abasa alive, we really need his collar.”

“Why?” asked Tubocak.

“It’s our tiag gift. We are heading to the beginning of our trek, where my granddad was born. Mom was born a few months after they left last time and we haven’t been back in forty-nine years.” She sniffed and a tear sparkled on her cheek. “H-He died a few months ago, in his sleep while we were traveling. We... don’t have anyone who has every

touched Cinifel Abasa. We only have his bracelet. Its our key to make sure the tiag knows us.”

Yubanis closed his eyes tightly. He didn’t know what he would do if they lost his mom before they finished the route either. The idea that one of the ancestral tiag’s would be abandoned left a hollow space in his gut, a feeling of despair he never wanted to experience.

“The cat has it?”

“Gibi likes to play with it. She knows it’s important but you can’t also lock those gifts away. They have to be touched, loved, and played with. The innocence of a child helps imprint the tiag’s gift on their spirit so we let her.” More tears came and she used her sleeve to wipe them off. “I did the same thing when I was younger. Every night we made sure it was safe and that was the first time she had ever lost Abasa. The first time the cat had ever jumped off the wagon while traveling.”

Yubanis shook his head. The cat was more than important to the family, it meant the end of a half-century journey could be lost if they didn’t find the its collar.

Around them, the lights dimmed. Tubocak took a deep breath. “I promise. We will find it. Even if it takes us a year, we won’t leave you without it.”

To Yubanis’s surprise, it was his hand that she squeezed. “Thank you.”

D. Moonfire

Chapter 5

Amber Lights

As a living entity, tiags gather energy until they must be either tapped or they twist upon themselves. But even abandoned, there is great power still stored within the land.

—Ijosil Ogamial, *Surviving the Wilderness, One Family's Horror*

Traveling back took longer because of the darkness. When Yubanis stopped the wagon near the broken tree, it was four hours past sunset and close to midnight. His twenty minute nap did little to push back the exhaustion, but duty had kept him awake.

Unil, on the other hand, had fallen asleep with her head on his shoulder. She kept one arm wrapped around his, clutching it in her sleep.

“Poor girl is exhausted,” Tubocak said. He hopped off the wagon, deftly avoiding a patch of glowing mushrooms. Heading straight for the horse, he started to unhitch the mare who promptly tried to step on his foot. There was a flash of heat and the mare gently put her foot down. “Be good, girl,” chided his brother.

“Sorry,” Yubanis said. It was his fault she did that, since he could heal bones instantly. “Dad told me to stop her.”

“No big deal. The old man can figure it out himself.” Tubocak looked out into the darkness. “It’s pretty late. What should we do? Start looking now? Wake her up?”

The only thing Yubanis wanted to do was crawl into a bed and sleep until morning. He yawned. “Bed?”

Tubocak shrugged. “Okay, let’s get her moved to the top mattress. You on the bottom.”

“I’m not going to do anything.”

“Yes, but I’m not going to be there to make sure you behave.”

Yubanis tensed. “You’re going to look now, right?”

Tubocak lead the mare away to a spot which had started to swarm with fireflies. He clicked his tongue and gestured down to a small spring that bubbled up. As the mare bowed down to drink, he patted her on the neck. “This place feel foul. Twisted. I don’t know if I can sleep.”

Yubanis oriented himself with the broken tree that his parents had snapped and then pointed across the way. “Mom said that the tiag over there was sick.”

Tubocak followed the gaze and then groaned. “Yeah, it is. Where did you see the cat?”

Apologetically, Yubanis gestured toward the poisoned tiag. “Over there. Right along the treeline.”

“Damn the God Tree. Of course that cat would be over there. Even from over here, I can feel the tiag’s thoughts twisted in pain and agony. It has been abandoned and overgrown.”

Yubanis shivered. Abandoned tiags were dangerous, more than anything else he knew. The power that the tiag provided soured when no one tapped it. It turned on itself, becoming a twisted version of its own essence. More than a few horror stories were told about an unsuspecting family that stumbled into one.

“Let’s get you two into bed.”

Yubanis sighed and shook his head. "I'm not going to let you go alone, brother."

"You're exhausted."

He tightened his muscles. "This is not a place to be alone and you know it. You may have impressive powers, but I also know that the tiag will be calling to you if you aren't careful."

Tubocak shook his head. "Fine."

Unil lifted her head. "All three of us."

Yubanis hadn't felt her wake up. He rested his hand on the back of her hand. "Are you sure? It's late."

"Just let me pee and then look for a little while." She didn't have to say how much missing Abasa worried her.

"Oh, a break sounds good." Tubocak lifted up his hand and two paths started to glow as they burrowed into the bush surrounding the broken tree. "Pick one, we'll take the other. It's safe. The water next to the horse is safe as are the berries. Yubanis, why don't you grab some of the dried fruit and jerky from the wagon before we start off."

They went their separate ways. Yubanis got the food first and set it out on the wagon before heading to the area to relieve himself. He passed his brother with a few short words, did what he needed and returned. Less than a half hour later, they were crossing through the dim light toward the ruined tiag.

Up close, the sick feel grew stronger. It wasn't in his stomach, but his mind insisted it should. The phantom discomfort added a sense of going in the wrong direction as the tiag pushed him away from its borders. He groaned and forced himself forward.

Unil caught his hand. She smiled at him and then gestured forward. "I can always move forward," she said with a whisper and then moved ahead. She didn't hesitate, didn't

stumble, and didn't stop. Following after her made it easier to push back as they approached the darkness of the tiag.

"Abasa!" she called out.

Tubocak and Yubanis echoed her cries.

At the edge, Tubocak stopped them. "No further."

He sounded worried as he looked up at the trees. Unlike the their surroundings for the last few hours, the forest was dark and unresponsive.

"You can't produce light?" asked Yubanis. It would help a lot if they could see the cat.

Tubocak grunted. "I might but it's hard. She's resisting me, fighting. There is a lot of power here though. It's been a long time since someone has tried to touch her."

"Be safe, brother."

"I will."

"Just... give me a second." Tubocak sounded distracted.

Yubanis stroked Unil's hand. They had traveled for hours together and he wasn't sure what to talk about. He needed to say something, anything to distract himself from the discomfort growing in his guts and thoughts.

"I was born with a blind eye," Unil said suddenly. "I can't see colors out of my left and everything is hazy."

It wasn't anything he had asked, but one he had been curious. "It's still pretty," he answered and instantly berated himself.

She squeezed his hand and he could almost picture her smiling.

"Okay!" Tubocak said sharply. "This will either give us a bit of light to see the edges of the tiag or will kill me."

"What—?"

The entire woods began to shine. Not specks of fireflies swarming and moss, but something deep in the core of the tiag began to glow with brilliance and spears of yellow light speared out through the mist and fog.

“Shit!” Yubanis said as he twisted Unil around so his body was between her and the light. Tensing, he waited for something to strike.

When no blow came, he relaxed to see her smiling.

“You really don’t think when you do that?” she asked in a quiet voice with a hint of amusement.

Blushing, he shook his head. He wanted to run away and lock himself in the wagon. “N-No, I guess not.”

He pulled his hands away.

She stared at him for a moment and then lean forward. “Thank you,” she said before kissing him on the lips.

Yubanis gasped and kissed her back. She had a sweet taste to her lips, completely unlike anyone else... the only person... he had been with before.

They broke the kiss at the same time.

Cheeks burning, he looked at his brother who smirked. “What?”

“Oh, nothing,” Tubocak said with a grin. Yubanis could see exhaustion in his brother’s eyes, lit up by the amber glow that radiated from the tiag.

Turning to one side and then the other, Yubanis could see that the entire forest had been lit up by the light. It clearly marked the edges of the tiag as a wavering wall painted by light and fog. On one side, it was pitch dark compared to the brilliance. “I... did not know you could do that.”

Tubocak walked up and the other two stepped away from each other. “I didn’t either, but there is so much power there, I had to stop her with just this light. This is not a good place and I have no doubts she will try to kill any of us if we try to intrude.” He cocked his head. “She is strong with plants and thorns, I suspect defensive originally from the memories I picked up. She had been used for defenses a long time ago.”

Yubanis listened curiously. His brother had always picked up more details than anyone else he had known. Where Yubanis could only get a vague feeling of safety or discomfort, his brother received images and memories.

“The tiag’s family died in there. No one has come back since.” Tubocak sniffed as his eyes shimmered. “So much pain. We should find Abasa as fast as possible. As far as I can tell, he is not inside the tiag but I’m not absolutely sure.”

Unil slipped her hand into Yubanis. “Which way?”

Tubocak started to point to the north but then gestured to the south. “Something is that way about a half mile. Not the cat but I can feel it like a thorn.”

“Then let’s go that way,” Unil said as she started forward, pulling Yubanis along.

Tubocak chuckled and joined them. “Well, at least she has a direction.”

“Yeah.”

“I can always move forward,” she said firmly with a smile.

As they walked, they called out to Abasa. Their voices were called out into the silence, the surrounding tiag’s responding to Tubocak’s desire to let their voices carry.

About twenty minutes later, they heard the first pitiful cry of a cat.

Unil gasped and hurried faster. “Abasa! Abasa!”

To Yubanis’s surprise, he didn’t stumble after her as he was dragged along. She carried him in her wake, pulled by her power and desire. Even his feet didn’t ache as much with her leading the way.

Tubocak grabbed her other hand and was pulled along. He grinned and hopped along. “We should keep her and get rid of the horse.”

“Tubo!”

“You know you want to ride—”

“Do. Not. Finish!” snapped Yubanis to his brother.

Tubocak snorted but said nothing.

The cat’s cries grew louder with every second until they came upon the white feline sitting on top of a wagon parked right up against the poisoned tiag.

Unil released both brothers as she rushed forward. “Abasa! Oh, Abasa!”

The cat cried out and leaped off the wagon, racing over to her.

She scooped it up and hugged it tightly. The tears on her face glistened in the amber light. “Oh, you stupid cat. I missed you so much!”

Tubocak and Yubanis walked on either side of her and went up to the wagon. It was rare to see one in the wood. Yubanis wanted to see if there was someone inside, maybe it was the tiag’s calling them to a family in danger.

“Look at these wheels.”

Yubanis stopped and peered down. When he didn’t see a steel or wooden rim, he did a double take. The wheels on the wagon were wide, easily two feet across with horizontal ridges. The material was black but not wood. He gingerly touched it and the rubbery material gave slightly.

“This one is flat?” Tubocak sounded confused.

A prickle of fear rose as Yubanis looked at the wagon more closely. It didn’t look like anything he had seen before. Instead of the rounded top that was ideal for keeping rain and snow off, the wagon had a peaked top with closely fitted planks shielding it. The surface was scoured smooth, polished by something abrasive.

He circled around the back to where he expected a door. There was a hatch, much smaller than he expected. On either side, he could see swirls of paint or writing. “Tubo? Can you bring some light?”

“Yuba.”

The tone in his brother’s voice drew him away. Yubanis hurried around the wagon to the front where his brother peered into the poisoned tiag. A few yards inside were two dead horses. Their bodies were riddled with wooden thorns and spikes. Sandwiched between them was a woman. In the light, her skin looked black as tar. Her clothes were pale blue and had strange writing embroidered on them.

Yubanis stepped forward. “Who are they?”

“Yuba! Back—!”

Too late, Yubanis realized he had crossed the threshold of the tiag. Something whistled past him and then another. Before he could turn away, three large thorns slammed into his side, puncturing flesh and scraping against the bone.

He grunted and stepped back. “Damn,” he muttered. Reaching up, he pulled out the thorn. It was easily six inches long and made of brittle wood that crumbled between his fingers.

Abasa howled as Unil rushed up.

“Yuba, are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, wasn’t paying attention,” he muttered as he fished out the other thorns. By the time he pulled out the last one, most of his injuries had healed leaving only bloody cloth behind. “Well, now we know what the tiag does to intruders.”

She stared at him in shock. She had a bemused smile on her face.

The cat hissed at him.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” she asked.

Yubanis shrugged. “Not really. It takes a lot to hurt me.”

“I can tell. I’m impressed.”

The cat meowed again. He shook his head and the bracelet around his neck rattled loudly.

Yubanis gestured to Abasa. “We found the cat.”

He looked at the wagon. It didn't look right but it was too dark to really inspect it. Curiosity wanted him to say, to explore and see what had happened to the woman who tried to bring it into a twisted tiag. "What now?"

Unil turned away from the corpse. "We should go back."

Tubocak peered at the wagon before he also turned away. "I'm curious, but I don't think we should travel tonight. I say we spend the night in the wagon and head out in the morning. I'd..." He glanced at the wagon. "I'd like to look at this when it is brighter. Something seems off to me and this needs investigation."

It was obvious that Unil wanted to hurry home.

When they both turned to Yubanis, he felt the mental pressure from both. He was just as curious as his brother about the wagon but he also wanted to keep Unil happy. He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I've been up since sunrise yesterday. I've been driving a wagon most of that time and only had twenty minutes of sleep. I need more." He focused on her. "I'm sorry."

For a moment, he thought she was going to leave them and head home on her own. Then Unil's shoulders slumped. "I understand."

She worked the bracelet off the cat's neck. "We put this somewhere safe on your wagon though. Even if the little brat runs off again, our family will be able to finish." She held up her hand. "I want to get home, but I also want to see what has happened."

D. Moonfire

Voices in the Dark

The question of why each culture's magic is distinctly different is a matter of society's themes. The desert is focused on sand and that found within, therefore their magic also has those same themes.

—Deangel Grousel, *Flaws of the Crystal Spheres*

Morning came too early for Yubanis. Even after a day of exhaustion, waking up to a cat's ass in his face was more than he expected. Sputtering, he shoved Abasa away and crawled out of bed.

Tubocak snorted from the seat near the back of the wagon. "I was wondering how long it would take. You seem remarkably tolerant to a cat in that position."

"You're an asshole."

"No, I'm pretty sure you know what an asshole looks like. It looked close enough you could taste it."

Yubanis glared at his brother and then looked back to the other bed, half hoping to see Unil sleeping.

"She's getting cleaned up outside. I gave her some of Opi-la's clothes, they were pretty loose but better than wearing the same outfit all day. Get dressed. We're still going to check out the wagon and then head back, right?"

Yubanis grunted. "Clothes, food, then look. I don't want to spend the day on an empty stomach or your favorite, jerky."

Tubocak stood up. "Well, you're in luck. Abasa got us breakfast."

"The cat?"

Without answering, his brother headed out of the wagon.

Yubanis had a few choice words for him as he dressed. Coming out, he saw Unil returning with wet hair and his sister's clothes draped over her slender body. She moved steadily but he noticed she turned her head frequently, no doubt to see with her one good eye.

"Morning," he said when she got closer.

"Good morning." She almost had a song in her voice.

"Sleep better?"

"Oh," she smiled broadly. "I can't tell you how well I slept. It's been days since I wasn't waking up worrying about the future. I put the bracelet in the foot drawer by the bed, next to the first aid kit. Is that okay?"

Tubocak leaned around the wagon. "Why are you asking him? You already asked me. Its almost as if you are just looking for an excuse to talk to him."

Both Yubanis and Unil blushed.

Tubocak smirked and returned to his duties. The smell of smoke and roasting meat filled the air and Yubanis's stomach rumbled. He peered around and saw his brother roasting a hare. "Abasa provided breakfast?"

"Yes," Unil said. "He does that a lot."

She was very close to him. He blushed hotter. "I-I should get cleaned up so we can head back."

Leaning into him, she kissed him again. "Thank you," she said in a quiet voice.

Cheeks burning, Yubanis glanced at his brother to see if Tubocak was smirking but his brother appeared to be focused on breakfast. With a nervous chuckle, he headed back the way she came in hopes there was a spring or small waterfall to clean himself.

After a quick breakfast, they moved the family wagon near the other one. It seemed like a better approach than walking a half mile back and forth.

In the light, the other wagon looked even more foreign. It had greens and blues for coloration but no real designs. The only decoration were swirling symbols written along the edges of almost every surface. None of them could read them but they appeared to say the same things over and over again.

“What language is this?” asked Tubocak.

“I don’t know. Nothing I’ve seen.”

Yubanis felt uncomfortable, as if something was about to drop. He headed to the back. “You think it’s safe to look inside?”

“I don’t know,” Unil said. She stood just behind him, looking over his shoulder.

He took a deep breath and reached for the door. It resisted but he wrenched it open to reveal a brightly lit inside. It looked cozy, not unlike his own wagon.

Just as he let out his breath, a symbol appeared in the space of the door frame. It was a series of letters that glowed brightly. The air around them grew tense and his ears popped.

Without thinking, he shifted his body to stand between the opening and Unil. “Look out!”

An explosion of wind and dust slammed into his face, searing him with an intense heat. He turned his face to the side as it scoured his face and cut into his flesh. A thousand tiny abrasions ripped across his arms but he refused to let

go of the door in fear that it would pull him away and expose Unil.

The wind continued to blow. The heat dried his nostrils and stung his lungs. It beat against his skin, adding the smell of burning hair and flesh before the wind ripped it away from him.

“Yuba!” Tubocak’s voice could barely be heard over the howling stream.

Then, just as it appeared, the letters faded and the wind stopped.

Yubanis gasped for breath as his flesh healed. He shook and streamers of sand poured out of his clothes. “Oh, that hurt a little.”

“Are you okay!?” gasped Unil. She pulled him away as she looked for injuries.

“Yeah. I said, I’m hard to hurt.”

“What was that?” she asked Tubocak.

“A trap of some sort. Who traps their wagons?”

Yubanis groaned. “Plenty of people. But I’ve never heard of anyone using sand and heat. Do you think these are people from the desert?” They were only a few hundred leagues from the Great Desert but the sand people almost never left their territories. He vaguely recalled they had a writing system that looked like the words on the back of the wagon.

“They have black skin like the woman in the tiag.” Tubocak cringed as he peered into the wagon. “Do you think there are more traps?”

Yubanis groaned. “Let me look.”

His brother turned to him. “Don’t push your luck.”

“I’m sure they didn’t trap every drawer. Can you imagine opening up your underwear to a blast of air? It’s probably just the hatch.”

Tubocak snorted. “Fine, but if one more traps goes off, you get out and stay out.”

Yubanis nodded and then crawled into the wagon. His entire body was tense as he stood in the opening, half expecting a second trap to go off. When one didn't, he gingerly began to inspect the contents.

It looked like a family wagon but it appeared as if they used sleeping rolls instead of a built-in beds. The storage was also chests strapped to the instead of built-in. Overall, it appeared to be a freight wagon that had been hastily converted into a family one.

He frowned and felt like he was intruding on the dead. But he opened one chest and then the other, finding more clothes than expected. Then he came up to a smaller basket filled with children's toys. There were balls and stuffed animals.

Yubanis crouched down and ran his hands over the smooth wood. The toys had been played with hard, with the polish of constant attention. One of them, a stuffed bird, had some stitching on it that felt rougher than the rest.

He looked around and saw a ball of thread of matching thread and some needles on top of another chest. He picked up the thread and sniffed it. It had the same smell as the toy.

It appeared that there was more than a single traveler in the wagon. Yubanis wanted to be sure. He crawled over to the rolls and sniffed each one, picking up the distinct smell of at least three individuals on them.

"Anything, brother?"

"I think this was a family. A little and two adults judging from the packs." Yubanis shook his hand and more sand came tumbling from the rolls. "They were from the desert. They left in a hurry though, this wagon looks like it was thrown together in a hurry."

Just as he started back, he noticed something jammed behind one of the chests. It was a pair of swords wrapped in cloth with the same words along the ridges. The fabric had been stained with blood.

Next to the swords was a basket with dirty clothes. He pulled out a few unfamiliar outfits, but there were distinctly three different sets that matched his thoughts.

The sense of being in an intruder redoubled. He crawled out of the wagon. "I think they were all together though."

Tubocak groaned. He turned slightly to look at the sick tiag. "What do you think happened to the other two?"

With a sinking sensation, Yubanis followed his gaze. "What if she was bringing the wagons to her family? Would the tiag let them in long enough to think they were safe?"

Tubocak's sigh was all the answer he needed.

"Are they still alive?" asked Unil in a quiet voice.

Tubocak shrugged and headed toward the corpse and the horses. In the daylight, all three of them could see what appeared to be a trail leading straight toward the center of the forest. It was dark but flashes of amber light still rolled in the distance.

Taking a deep breath, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Anyone in there!?"

Yubanis held his breath and strained to listen.

Around them, the sounds of the grasses and woods faded into quiet. Tubocak's will affected the world around him except for the deathly silence of the poisoned tiag.

"Hello!?"

Yubanis and Unil also added their yelling, making as much noise as they could.

"Anyone?"

"Yell if you can hear us!"

All three of them stopped, leaning toward the threshold as they listened for a sound, any sound.

Unil got too close. There was a whistling noise. Yubanis spun to pull her free but Tubocak snatched her as a thorn speared out of the darkness. It reached the threshold and then lost all of its speed, tumbling to the ground only inches away.

“Be careful,” said his brother.

“Sorry, I—”

Tubocak held up his hand sharply and then cocked his head. “Listen!”

Yubanis held his breath and strained to hear.

It was a voice. He didn’t understand the language but he could hear fear and exhaustion. A girl then cried out, soft and sobbing.

“Shit,” Tubocak said. “They’re in there.”

He took a deep breath. “Can you hear us!”

A response drifted out, Yubanis assumed it meant yes.

Tubocak looked worried as he turned back. “How do we get in? Those thorns are going to tear us apart.”

Yubanis shook his head. “Tear you apart.”

“No,” snapped his brother. “I’m not going to let you do that.”

“Why not? I’m hard to kill.”

“Because you are going against a poisoned tiag! This isn’t the horse stepping on your toe or you falling in the ravine and getting a spear up your ass! This is more dangerous than anything!”

Yubanis blushed hotly at the reference. He was crawling up the side of the ravine one day when he fell. A friend’s spear caught his rear and he was impaled from ass to throat on it. Pulling it out of his throat was one of the most painful experiences in his life. Not to mention one of the most humiliating.

“Can we make a shield?” asked Unil.

Tubocak pointed at her. “See, that’s a smart idea! Not a stupid, suicidal charge!”

“Fine, I’m just come up with ideas, brother!”

“We don’t know your limits, Yuba! I’m not going to lose you because you were doing something stupid.” He took a deep breath. “Damn it. You don’t have to show off for her.”

“I’m not!” Yubanis forced himself not to glance at Unil. He couldn’t stop blushing.

The two brothers stared at each for a long moment.

“Fine. There are some spare boards under our wagon. I don’t know anything about this.” He gestured to the wagon. “But I know our wood is solid and should help us.”

Yubanis spun and hurried away before Unil could see him. He knew where they kept the repair supplies. By the time the others joined him, he had them out. It would take a while to make the shield and he hoped the strangers would be able to hold out long enough.

Chapter 7

A Fatal Idea

One will take a thousand arrows for love.

—*Shore Upon Stars* (Act 3, Scene 2)

Some time later, Yubanis hefted their makeshift shield with two hands. It was heavy but thick. They had also used all of their spare boards to make it three layers thick and bound together with nails.

Unil came up next to him, shoulder to shoulder. She grabbed the ropes they crafted into handles. “You know this is probably the stupidest thing we could have done. We probably should get the rest of the family.” It was the thing one would say before doing something potentially fatal anyways.

“It’s for the right reason,” Tubocak muttered as he picked up his end. “Besides, how long have those people been in there? They are pinned down at the best, fighting for their lives at the worst. We’ve talked while making this thing, they may not survive getting the others.”

She sighed and nodded.

“Ready?”

Yubanis grunted.

Together, they used the shield and stepped over the threshold.

Almost instantly, whistling filled the air and something struck the shield. Another thorn slammed into it and then dozens more.

The edge of the shield tilted dangerously away from Yubanis as one of the thorns scored his arm. He grunted through the pain. "At least this is only shooting from one direction."

"Yeah, but it hurts!" Tubocak bellowed. "Forward."

"That I can do!" Olin's eyes flashed and then suddenly they were steadily moving forward. It felt like he was being pulled into the wake as she forced the shield forward, walking it with unstoppable force.

The tiag continued to assault them, firing thorns and barbs with rapid speed. Each one thudded into the shield, splintering wood and causing it to shake violently. The attacks were relentless and brutal.

"We have a problem," Tubocak said through gritted teeth. "The path is going to the right."

"I can't do sideways, only forward." Sweat prickled across Unil's brow.

"We'll turn the shield. Yuba, you are going to be the more at risk."

A wave of thorns crashed into the shield.

"Yeah," Yubanis grunted. "I can handle it."

"Turn on four, three, two, one!"

The shifted the shield so Unil could turn and force her way forward. With the pressure from the thorns, the shield dipped dangerously close and the safe space grew too small. Yubanis had to grab the edge as part of his body was exposed.

Sharp thorns slammed into his side, punching into flesh and digging deep.

Yubanis bit down on his lip and kept his head behind the shield. The agony burned white across his vision but he didn't dare to speak up.

They continued forward until the path straightened again and they were able to tilt the shield back to protect all three of them.

Unil gasped as she looked over at Yubanis. Then her eyes grew wide and her lips parted.

He glanced down. There were a few long pieces of wood that had pierced his arm and stuck out the other side. The entire side of his body was coated in blood. Cringing, he looked at his brother who didn't seem to notice and then to her. He shook his head.

She frowned but didn't say anything. Turning back, she tensed and her body glowed before she forced the shield forward, driving it along the path toward the louder sounds of fear and terror.

"We're getting close to the heart." Tubocak's voice was strained from his effort. "I can feel it raging against me."

"What about the others?"

"Ahead but I can't see around this damn thing."

Yubanis cringed. He knew how to look. Shifting the weight to one hand, he took a deep breath to steel himself from the pain.

Unil took more of her weight. "Go on," she whispered.

The thorns slammed hard into the shield.

Yubanis used his hand to shield his eyes and then peeked around the corner.

Two thorns pierced his palm, splattering his face with hot blood. Before the pain could register, he looked quickly around. Just ahead of him, he could see a streamer of thorns were slamming into a wall of shifting sands. More of the strange letters floated among the grains, flashing brightly with each impact.

He ducked behind the shield. “Three yards forward and then one to the right. There is a ditch of some sort, so watch your step.”

“You better have not just looked, damn it!” snapped his brother.

“No, I just used my powers to feel the fucking air around us. Of course I looked.”

“Damn it, Yuba! Mom is going to kill me if you die!”

Unil interrupted as she forced the shield forward. The impacts of the thorns grew faster and harder, beating on the shield. Splinters of wood began to buckle on their side from the force of the impact.

“One more step, then to the right!” yelled Yubanis. Then, he yelled at the top of his lungs. “We’re coming to help!”

A man yelled back but Yubanis couldn’t understand the words, only the intent. It sounded like “save me now” and he could understand that.

Grunting, they forced the shield past the wall of sand and then stepped into the ditch. With all of his might, Yubanis jammed the shield into the ground as the wall of sand died around them.

The strangers had dark skin, not quite black but much darker than anyone he had met before. The older man had graying hair and many fresh scars covering his face. He wore the same blues and greens as the wagon but his clothes were drenched with sweat and he visibly shook.

Next to him was a little girl, about same age as Gibi. She had the older man’s coloration but the exhaustion had drawn her frame and she looked as if she was starving. Tears glistened on her cheeks as she fell back.

Her father or grandfather, Yubanis wasn’t sure, tried to pull her close as he gasped for breath. He looked up at them and said something in their foreign language.

“Sorry,” Tubocak said. “I don’t understand you.”

The man groaned and muttered something.

The little girl whimpered and clutched to him.

He stroked her sweat-soaked hair, saying something. "... Áchi, Áchi." The way the "A" was said sounded strange though, as if it was spoken in a higher tone.

Unil frowned for a moment. Then she pointed to the girl. "Áchi?"

The older man pointed to the girl. "Fiáchi." Then to himself. "Batomatsu Garonàga."

Tubocak chuckled. "Okay, that's a long name."

The desert man pointed again. "Áchi. Nàga."

Unil pointed to herself. "Unil. Yuba. Tubo."

"Ú-nil. Yùba. Yùbo."

After a few tries, all of them seemed to get the foreign names right.

Tubocak sighed. "Okay, how do we get out of here. We need to—damn you, Yuba."

"What?" He looked down to where his brother was staring at his blood drenched side. "Oh yeah, forgot about that." He reached up and pulled out the thorns, wincing as they pulled out but his body quickly healing the wounds.

"We're going to have words," grumbled his brother. "But we have to get out of this first."

He gestured to the shield where the thorns were still hammering on the far side. More splinters were forming where the attacks were witting away at their defenses.

"Quickly too. I don't think we have much time. Something is changing in the tiag and I don't have a good feeling about it."

Unil sighed. "The thorns are coming from one direction, the center. If we keep the shield at our back, it should give us a straight line out."

“Good as any plan,” Tubocak said. He grabbed the shield and prepared to lift it. With one hand, he gestured up. “We need to run. Can you get up, Nàga?”

The desert man sighed and got up on his knees. He pulled his daughter close.

“On the count of four.” Tubocak held up four fingers. “Four, three, two, shit!”

Yubanis started forward when he heard his brother swear. Looking up, he saw a thorn covered vine swing up from the back, slicing through trees as it came directly for their vulnerable side.

“Yuba!”

Without thinking, Yubanis threw himself up over the ditch and in the path of the vine. With a grunt, he braced himself as it crashed into his chest and arms.

Sharp thorns pierced his chest and into his organs. More of them slapped across his face, tearing at the flesh. The force of the blow pushed him back but he strained to keep it still long enough for the others to find a way of defending themselves.

A blast of sand slammed into the massive vine, relieving the pressure for just a second. Hands grabbed him and yanked him back just as Tubocak dropped the shield over all of them in the ditch.

“Damn you to the roots!” screamed Tubocak.

Yubanis sobbed at the agony. He was blind in one eye from where a thorn had pierced it. With bloody fingers, he reached up to grab it and pull it out. It came with a wet, sucking noise.

The little girl let out a cry as she buried her face into her father’s leg.

The warmth of healing flooded inside Yubanis as he fumbled with the other pieces of wood that had impaled

him. The burning in his lungs was more than he could imagine but he knew if he could pull them out.

“Damn it,” Unil gasp. “Get them out of his chest! He can’t breathe!”

They pulled and yanked thorns until his organs were able to knit themselves together.

Pain caused Yubanis to stagger. He clutched at his stomach and thrust hard, trying to get his lungs to work again. It didn’t work but he managed to draw in thin thread of air. With tears burning in his eyes, he tried again.

With a rush, his body began to work again. “Shit that hurts!”

Unil hugged him tightly. “You’re okay,” she sobbed.

“Could you not throw yourself into every chance? Mom would be furious if you sacrifice yourself?” Tubocak snapped but he had a relieved smile on his face and tears in his eyes.

“I didn’t think,” Yubanis’s voice was hoarse from where it can be pierced. “I didn’t have time.” He blinked as his eye healed itself, the vision slurping into focus with a wet ripping sensation.

Garonàga rested a hand on his shoulder and gave a nod. Words would be meaningless but the intent was clear.

Tubocak groaned. “The tiag has adapted to us. We’re pinned down. She’s not going to let us leave the way we came in.”

“Shit.”

Garonàga cleared his throat. He said something but at the same time, he gestured around at the broken shards of wood around them. Then he pointed to his heart while miming stabbing it.

Both Yubanis and Unil looked at Tubocak.

His brother groaned. “Of course, it is up to me.”

“Well, you have this amazing power with tiags. If anyone can get us out of here, you would be it.”

“I came up with the stupid idea of getting us trapped inside.”

“I think,” Yubanis started as he sat up. “We all came up with this stupid idea. It was the right thing, maybe not the best of methods.”

“Mom is going to kill us.”

Yubanis groaned. “Yes, she is. But that also means she’s going to come in here after us. If we don’t do something about this tiag, she’s going to be even more furious at our corpses.”

All three of them muttered “shit” under their breaths.

After a few moments of silence, Tubocak spoke up again with grin. “I don’t have any good ideas, but I have one remarkably stupid one.”

Yubanis looked at him and saw the smile. “Does it have to do with us crawling to the center of this thing?”

“How did you guess?”

“Trapped from all sides. We probably have enough strength to make it there and probably brace ourselves while you do something as foolish as everything else we’ve done so far. Assuming Garonàga can help with the shield.” Yubanis mimed a wall.

The desert man nodded but there was no question that he was already at the end of his limits. He clutched his daughter tightly. His shoulders shook from silent tears.

Tubocak closed his eyes. “I think I can project into the tiag if I can get to her heart. Not to kill her but to put her asleep long enough to escape. Or stun her. But I have to get close, very close.”

“But there isn’t a center to tiags,” Unil said. “Everyone knows that.”

“The attacks are coming from a single point. Whatever it is, that’s where we need to be. That’s where I need to be.”

Yubanis asked, “Have you ever done this?” He already knew the answer.

“No, but my gut says it’s possible.”

“Good enough for me, brother. I’ll walk to the end of the world for you if I have to.”

“You’re probably going to get hurt though. You know we have to keep Unil safe which means your ass is going to get nailed.”

Yubanis looked at her and smiled. “Of course, I wouldn’t dare put her at risk. Sorry, at a more risk.”

Unil smiled back and most of the pain faded away.

He blushed. “Come on, let’s do this before mom finds out or the tiag finds a new way to kill us with roots.”

All five of them sat down and planned, using the dirt on the ground to trace out their tactics. It was a weak plan, but it also was their best option they had. It also seemed possible with the abilities they had.

“Ready?” Tubocak asked.

Everyone gave various agreements. Garonàga held Fiáchi tight as he nodded.

“On four. Three. Two. One!”

Yubanis grunted as he held Unil and his brother push up the shield. The rapid-fire thudding of shards resumed immediately, shuddering it forward.

At the same time, Garonàga and Fiáchi rose up with their backs to the trio. They both held up their hands and a wall of sand burst to life. The howling winds added to the whistling thorns.

Grunting, Yubanis held the shield steady until Unil could activate her power. Then, they steadily marched forward. He turned his back to the side, knowing it was only a matter of moments before that tiag attacked from that angle.

It was only a short distance to the center point. Yubanis couldn't see or hear it, but he felt the pressure increasing with every step. The rapid fire beating began to rattle the wood as long cracks formed from the impact.

"A few more yards. How are you going, Garonàga?"

The desert man grunted and said something they didn't understand.

Yubanis chuckled. "I really hope he just didn't say he was about to collapse."

Unil groaned. "Oh, don't make this harder!"

"Might was well laugh in danger," Tubocak said as he braced himself. "We're about to cross over. Get ready, Garonàga! Yuba?"

Yubanis steeled himself against the pain that was coming.

The heart of the tiag was unremarkable. Yubanis almost stumbled over the tree trunk that had been struck by lightning. A human skeleton had been scorched and fused into one side of it. Inside the cracked wood, crystals had formed in a pool of liquid.

"That's it!"

The first branch struck Yubanis's back. He could feel the thorns digging deep into his skin, shredding his shirt and baring bone. He groaned and gripped the shield tightly. Around them, the thorns stopped firing but the branches slashing and battering them increased with a fury of a storm.

Unil looked at him with concern.

"J-Just brace yourself. I got this," he gasped through the tears. "Tubo, hurry."

His older brother straddled the stump and then shoved his hands into the water. The air pressure around them increased, like a storm about to burst. It crawled across their skin as the tiag threw herself into a flurry of attacks.

Yubanis sobbed as he felt his bones breaking and knitting together. The hammering blows shook his entire frame and it felt like he was being ripped apart. Bloods ran down his legs, pooling at the ground as he shielded himself.

Across from him, little Fiáchi held up both of her hands as she summoned a shield of sand like her father. Despite her delicate form, the power was almost identical as they blocked the attacks that were coming. She cried out with every impact and many of her letters were malformed and garbled.

Yubanis clenched his eyes tightly together as he bore down on the pain. He didn't have many defenses but the agony was difficult to think past. Blood and tears ran down his face as the tiag tried to break him.

Unil's hand pressed against his own.

He cracked open one eye to look at her through the red-tinged tears. She was crying herself. He tried to say something just as a thorn pierced the back of his neck and tore out his throat.

Unil sobbed as she shook her head. "Tubo!"

"I'm... Trying!" Tubocak stood firmly over the trunk as his entire body glowed with a bright light. Little arcs of pink lightning arched between him and the two desert people; every bolt caused all three to shudder in pain and the sand shields to falter. When his brother glanced up, his eyes were nothing but pools of light.

Fiáchi let out a cry as her shield flared and then collapsed. The little girl fell back with a bloody face from a branch that had gotten through.

Garonàga stepped over her and spread out his hands, widening his own shield but dropped to his knees from the effort. He let out a cry of pain and agony of his own as a few branches slipped past.

Forcing his hand up, Yubanis grabbed his brother and pushed him down before one of the branches could strike him from behind. Blood ran down his arms, splashing onto the ground.

Without looking, Tubocak sank to his knees as he bore down into the pool. The air around him grew suffocating and difficult to move, as if it was hardening around all of them.

“Losing it!” screamed Unil.

A loud crack of wood followed. The shield had snapped in half under the battering of the vines. The thorny branches hammered faster against her shield, striking her from both sides with brutal speed.

Her hot blood splashed across Yubanis’s face. He couldn’t feel it through his own, but seeing the agony in her face tore his heart in half. He dredged up as much strength as he could and then grabbed her and the remains of their shields.

“Yuba!”

He hugged her tightly and pressed her back against his brother, making her a smaller target and exposing himself more to the tiag’s fury.

She started to scream at him but the words weren’t many sense anymore. The assault against his body was making it difficult to concentrate or even feel anything.

He closed his eyes tight and pushed back against the vines that were breaking bones and puncturing his back and head. Flashes of light turned into physical sensations of pain.

Then, one powerful blow caught him against the spine. He felt the bones cracking and the entire world went white with agony. The last feeling he had was his chest collapsing from the impact before he ceased to feel anything at all.

Chapter 8

Thanks

The greatest moment in life is this quiet right before the storm, the silence that heralds our great destruction.

—*The Iron King's Betrayal* (Act 2, Scene 5)

Yubanis woke up in the familiar confines of his bed. The blankets and sheets smelled of his parents and he knew instantly he was back in the wagon, on the top bunk. With a groan, he tried to roll over but his muscles didn't quite work right. Something in his back clicked and sent a little flash of pain coursing up his spine before it shifted enough for him to move.

He tested his wounds. It hurt to take a deep breath, but he was relieved that he was drawing air into his lungs. Most of his joints ached and his back felt like it had been dragged along the ground. For someone who had felt his chest collapse, he felt remarkably healthy. Or at least alive.

When he took a deep breath, he picked up a new scent in the air. There was someone else in the wagon, a stranger. Curious, he inched his fingers through the blankets until they met up against the smooth skin of someone else. He froze, half afraid to wake them up.

“Yuba?” came a sleepy, hoarse voice. It was Unil.

He smiled. “Y-Yes.” His voice was in worse condition. He never thought about the limits of his healing, but he suspecting keeping him alive had taken precedence over the little aches and pains.

Yubanis pushed himself to his side. Every movement hurt. Most of the pain focused on his back and his chest. It felt as if he was on fire, a sensation he hadn’t felt since his regeneration abilities had manifested. By the time he balanced on his shoulder and hip, he was sweating from the effort.

Unil had been bandaged heavily. Many of the cuts had darker spots in the middle where the blood had soaked through. The slight angle to the cuts on the gauze told him that his brother had done the bandaging; Tubocak had a distinct way of caring for someone.

“Did we make it?”

“All of us,” she said quietly. She tried to roll on her side to face him but then stopped. Slumping back, she looked at him with a smile. “Some of us don’t recover like you did. The little girl is going to have scars for the rest of her life on her face and side.”

“Nàga and my brother?”

“Nàga had some deep wounds that looked infected and he was exhausted. They are sleeping in the other wagon while your brother watches over us. He says he can’t sleep with a broken arm. Also he wants to be up if your mother comes.”

Yubanis cringed. “He’s a brave man. I’d rather go back into the tiag than be the first person she meets.”

Unil stroked his cheek. “I thought you were going to die.”

He tried to bring up the memory of his final thoughts. “I think I did, actually. It was quite painful. I don’t plan on doing that again.”

“It was very brave. Foolish but brave.”

Yubanis blushed. “I didn’t—”

She stopped him by reaching up and grabbing his neck. He started to make a protesting noise but then she had pulled him down into a kiss.

He stopped fighting and returned the kiss. When her other hand slid up along his side, he couldn’t help but press his palm against her breast. Underneath the thin material of a borrowed shirt, her nipple was hard. When he circled it, she arched her back and moaned.

When they broke for air, he smiled. “Are you sure you are up to this? How hurt were you?”

“I’m not going to feel it in a moment,” she said with a grin.

“Why?”

She grabbed his hand and pushed it down between their bodies. There was no question where she was guiding him and he knew the path. “Because you are going to kiss me again.”

That was all either of them needed.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 9

A New Home

The Hidanork Tribes don't have a concept of marriage like most civilized culture. It is not uncommon for parents to travel separately for a number of years before deciding to travel together.

—Jilal of Odir, *The United Hidanork Tribes: Before the War*

By the time Yubanis opened the door and stepped out of the wagon, most of his aches and pains had faded into the comfortable afterglow of sex. He smiled broadly as he walked down the steps and then held the door open for Unil.

His lover took two steps out and then froze. The smile dropped from her face instantly. “Shit.”

A cold shiver of fear ran down his spine. Slowly, he turned to see both of their mothers standing there, arms crossed and furious looks on their faces.

“Shit.” It was the only thing he could say either.

Penilil cleared her throat. “Yuba, to the front.” Her voice was brimming with the fury of an ice storm.

“I have to pee.”

“It can wait,” she announced before storming around the side.

He gave one last look to Unil before following after his mother. He knew he was going to get punished, it was only a matter of how severe and how long he would be suffering.

Yubanis barely reached the front when his mother spun on her heels and slapped him hard across the face. "You stupid ass!"

Her eyes glistened with tears. With a sob, she yanked him close and hugged him tightly. "I could have lost you!"

Yubanis hugged her back. "I'm sorry, but I had to do it."

His mother's body shook with her tears. Her arms squeezed him painfully. "I almost lost my baby. I can't do that. I can't. You aren't suppose to die on me, I don't care if you can heal yourself or not."

Yubanis's eyes watered with his own relief. He rested his head against hers and held her tight. "It was the right thing."

"I know, your brother told me. I can be upset about how you went about it, but you were right to go in and save Naga and Achi. Your impatience probably saved them from dying like her mother. But... damn it." She sniffed and wiped the tears from her face. "I love that you did right, but I feel like you had gutted me when your brother told me that you had died while doing it."

He struggled to hide the smile from his lips. As much as it hurt, he was happy that his mother was proud of him.

"Now, where is that rash brother of yours."

Yubanis looked around. He saw his sisters, Osain, and Gibi all petting Abasa near a fire pit. They had the comfortable chairs out. He frowned for a moment, trying to puzzle out how long they were waiting until he left the wagon. Or how they removed anything from the storage cabinets underneath without him noticing.

“There is he. Over by... that place. Come on, I have words.”

Together, they walked across the grass toward the tiag.

About halfway across, his mother cleared her throat. “In the future, I would appreciate if you didn’t make me wait two hours to yell at you. I wasted my fury trying to get a chance to interrupt you while still giving you your privacy.”

“What?” He shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I can see why Ami gave you her bracelet, my son. There is no doubt you earned it. Just realize, most men need more than thirty seconds between sparring rounds with their lovers.”

A blush blossomed in his cheeks and ears.

“You never gave me a proper chance to scream at you,” she said with a grin. The smile faded slightly. “But no talking about that in front of her family. They heard enough to know what is going on between you but it would be rude. No doubt, your father or brother will want to make a big deal out of it. Keep that private.”

“Yes, Mom.” He struggled to keep the smile from his lips.

As they approached the treeline, the feeling of dread and discomfort that Yubanis had felt before was missing, only a different sensation that tickled the back of his mind. His brother stood with his hands behind his back and wearing a wide smile.

His mother wagged a finger at Tubocak. “You are supposed—”

“Mom,” interrupted Tubocak with a grin. He held out a small necklace with a crystal pendant. It was the same crystal as inside the stump that his brother had found at the heart of the tiag. “I’d like you to meet Melbith Penilil, our new lands.”

She froze as her eyes opened wide.

He put the pendant into her palm and closed her fingers around it. Leaning down, he kissed her knuckles. “She’s a bit cranky like you, but she would love to meet you.”

“Y-You...?” His mother was at a loss for words.

His brother stepped pass the threshold of the tiag.

Yubanis cringed, waiting for the thorns to shoot out.

Nothing happened except for a few trees rustled.

Tubocak’s eyes almost shone. He gestured down a small footpath that Yubanis hadn’t seen before. “Come on. She’s going to need attention every couple years for a while before she settles down, but I think she’ll be a good place for us.”

“Y-You,” his mother sputtered. “You attuned yourself to the land?”

Tubocak sighed. He focused on Yubanis and shook his head. “When I saw my brother fall, something inside me broke. I had to stop the tiag, so I threw myself into her.” His eyes grew haunted for a moment. “I tried to kill her, I really did, but she wasn’t going to die. Not without taking me.”

“Tubo...” His mother shook her head.

“I couldn’t do it. She was in pain and I had the only thing that could help her. I don’t know how I did it, but Melbith tore something out of me.” He thumped his chest. “Not anything physical, but I can feel this... wound in my heart where she clawed it out.”

“You sacrificed part of your soul to the tiag. Damn it, why did both of my sons end up martyrs?”

Tubocak suddenly smiled. “Well, Yuba got a few hours of epic fucking out of it. So I don’t think he was entirely altruistic—”

Their mother smacked him.

“What? It’s true!”

Yubanis blushed.

“We’ll deal with that later. Right now, what can we do for Melbith, right? You should have called her Melbith Tubocak.”

“Yeah, but she’s somewhat of a bitch.”

Penilil lifted up her fist. “I will end you.”

Around them, the trees rustled in a wind that didn’t exist.

Tubocak reached up and gently pushed his mother’s fist down. “Yes, let’s not do that here. Melbith has been hurt for many years. It’s going to take her decades before those wounds are healed and she’s entirely safe for anyone. That means no gifting entrance to her for at least fifty or sixty years. I suspect that we’ll need to come back here every two to five years until then.”

His mother froze, her eyes flashing. “W-We can do that, we come through her frequently if we change our routes on year nine and twenty-two.”

“I know. Until then, we’ll still need to use Warin’s passage. After that though, we’ll have a new home.”

Penilil smiled and hugged him. “You did the right thing.”

Yubanis cleared his throat. “What about Unil? Well, Unil and her family?”

Tubocak smirked. “Thinking of her already? Going to travel with her now?”

Their mother smacked him.

The branches rustled again.

He chuckled. “She was here when I touched her. She’s got a connection to Melbith, as you, Nàga, and Áchi. They will never need a key to call this place home, even today. But, brother dear, I made pendant for her family also so they will be able to call Mel their home too. She could use the attention.”

Tubocak grinned. “Plus, it means that my brother will have a chance to meet Unil and their child a few times be-

fore they decide to travel together. I mean, after all that, there is no question he gave her a baby.”

Penilil tightened her lips together. “Tubo?”

“Yes, mother,” he said with a smile.

“Come with me so I can beat you.”

He shrugged and then lead the way out of what would become one of their new homes.

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.

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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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