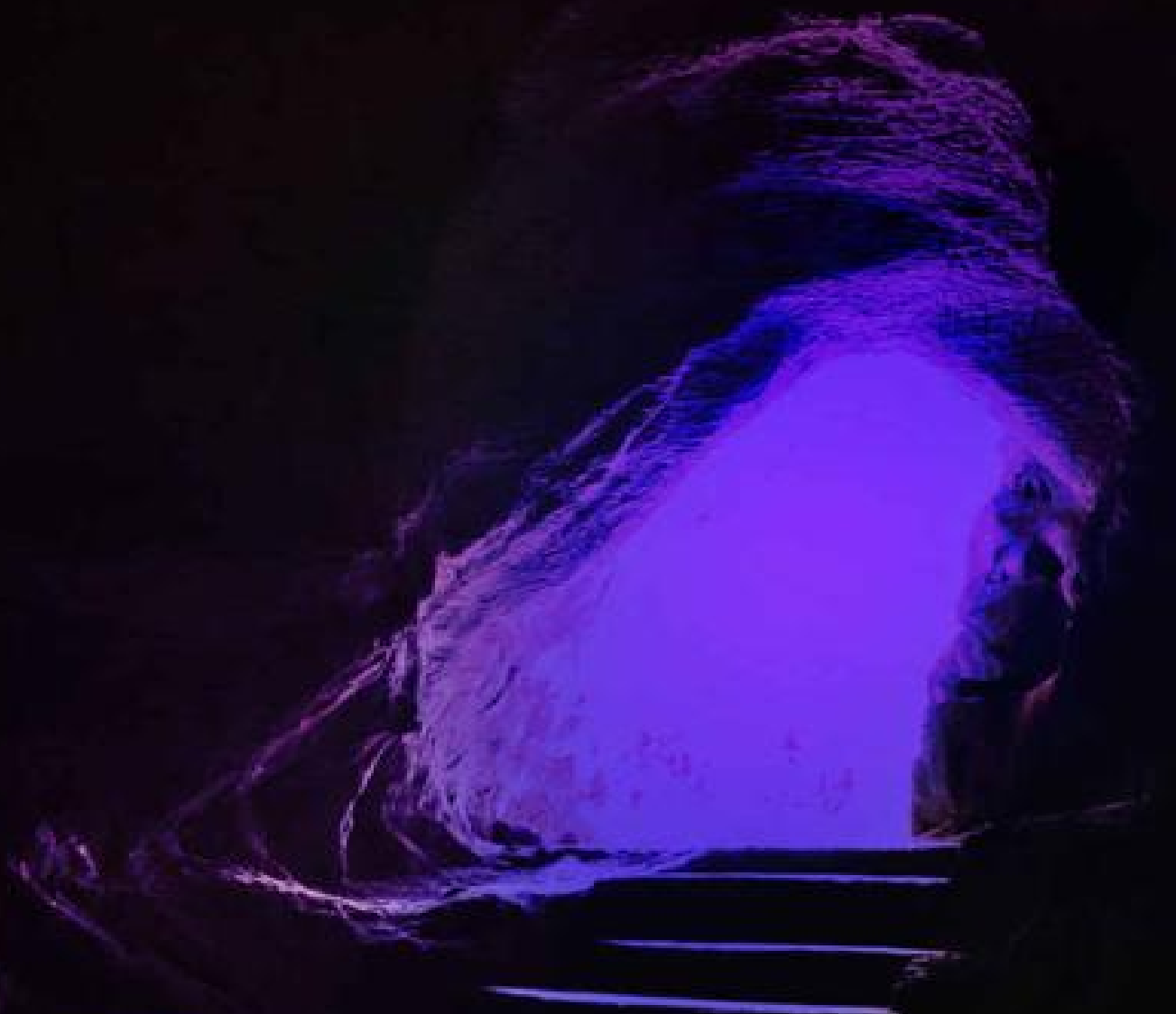


MEGAN DERR



FROM FEAR

PRINCES OF THE BLOOD

The poster features a dark, atmospheric scene of a cave entrance. A bright, ethereal blue light emanates from the opening of the cave, which is framed by jagged, rocky walls. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, purples, and blacks, with the bright blue light providing a focal point. The text is rendered in a metallic, 3D font style.

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FROM FEAR

PRINCES OF THE BLOOD

Fifteen years ago, several wolf pups were kidnapped by poachers to be illegally sold abroad. They were rescued by a Prince of the Blood, and the Wolves of the Moon vowed the debt would someday be repaid. Now of age, wolf Ilkay Thrace is determined to fulfill that vow. Before he can, though, the Wolves' home high in the peaks of Dragon Claw Mountain is ravaged by an earthquake that reveals an ancient, forgotten temple—and awakens something dark and terrible in its depths. Now, instead of repaying their debt, the Wolves must once again ask the King's Legion for help.

Despite the time that has passed since the Legion was nearly wiped out, their greatest strength, the Princes of the Blood, remain few. It is one of their newest, Prince Dalibor, who is sent to evaluate and assist the Wolves. But Dalibor is born of a demon of wrath, his greatest power the ability to drive all living beings out of their minds with rage and fear. He is brash, loud, and reckless, even by the standards of the Legion, and the very last person that should be going into dark, treacherous caves containing ancient evil.

From Fear

Princes of the Blood 4

By Megan Derr

Published by Megan Derr

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FROM FEAR

PRINCES OF THE BLOOD 4

MEGAN DERR



Disaster

The moon was high, and Ilkay was hungry.

He ran through the evergreen woods with relish, chasing the promising scent of a stag. His companions fanned out on either side of him, so they could take it in a pincer when they caught up to it. Snow and dirt flew up beneath his paws, hot breaths clouding the air. The woods were silent, save for the running of the wolves, everything in it hoping not to draw their attention and wind up as dinner.

They caught up to the stag in a small glen, forming a circle and closing in. The stag moved restlessly, shrieked in fear,

but had the sense not to try to run—alas, because the chase was the best part.

Ilkay surged in and took it by the throat, one hard bite enough to snap the neck. Blood, hot and sweet, filled his mouth. He growled and released the stag, let it fall, then tore it open right down the middle of the gut. Blood and organs spilled out, steaming in the cold. Though he would have preferred to linger, savor, there were others in need of food and much yet to do that night. Ilkay took his fill quickly and moved out of the way, so the rest of his hunting pack could feast.

As the smell of blood and fresh meat faded, and wolves licked their muzzles clean, Ilkay gave a soft yip to signal it was time to return home. The other wolves acknowledged the order with yips and head shakes, and Ilkay turned, plunging back into the evergreens to lead them home.

Other hunting packs merged with them along the way, the sound of their panting filling the night air, misting breaths like puffs of smoke.

As they broke the tree line and crested a low hill, the village came into view: sprawling, neither small nor large, the home of the Wolves of the Moon for as long as they'd lived in Tria Noor. They were tucked high and deep in the peaks of Dragon Claw Mountain, where few dared to tread for fear of the Wolves and the many other monsters that roamed.

This was their domain, where not even the King's Legion dared to venture—except once. Just once. When a fresh-made Prince of the Blood had returned Ilkay and four other pups after they'd been captured by poachers. By filthy humans who had learned the hard way not to take what did not belong to them.

Ilkay ran down the hill and across the valley, through the enormous stone gates of the wall that protected the village. People milled around, Wolves and Wolfkin, humans who had found a home amongst them. Lit braziers were scattered about for the humans, and the village bustled with activity, as the Wolves preferred a nocturnal life.

Wolves greeted him with yips and short, sharp howls, his pack steadily falling off as they went to greet friends and family.

He lingered at the second to last stop, bidding a longer farewell to Göksu, one of his closest friends, and one of the kidnapped pups. He shifted as he did so, going from an enormous white and gray wolf to a man who looked exactly like his father: a tall, lithe but muscled figure with silver-threaded black hair, dusky skin, and a hunter's teeth even in this weaker form. The only major difference between them was that his father's eyes were holy blue, and Ilkay's were blood red. They were rare in the Wolves, his blood red eyes, but no one yet knew why he had been gifted them when everyone else in his line had the blue eyes bestowed by the Moon Herself.

He pulled on the clothes waiting for him: fitted pants, sturdy winter boots lined with rabbit fur, a long-sleeved homespun shirt he quickly laced at the throat before lacing his sleeves at the wrists as well. Though the cold did not bother Wolves as quickly or severely as it did humans, still he shrugged into a fur wrap and belted it down before ending with fingerless leather gloves.

His father, Egemen, joined him as he left the house again, arms crossed idly across his chest, smells of food and sex and mead wafting off him. "Ilkay, welcome home. You're back sooner than expected."

"The hunt was good."

"I'm glad. Walk with me," Egemen said, pulling his fur more tightly around his shoulders, black where Ilkay's was silvery gray.

Egemen led them back the way he'd just come, until they reached the corner where a path split in three directions. From there he went straight, instead of turning right to go toward the front of the village. He took them east to an older gate for which only he had the key, an old entrance to the village no longer used but maintained for emergencies.

Unlocking it, he motioned Ilkay through and locked it behind them before heading off into the forest, walking until they were far enough away that even the keenest wolf ears would not be able to hear them, at an old altar by the lake where once Prince Telmé of the King's Legion had returned Ilkay and four other pups. He'd heard the story all his life, and though he

couldn't remember it well himself, he would always know the scent of that Prince of the Blood. The stench of thousands of Morbid Serpents lying dead in pools of their own blood. Of those bodies being set on fire, smoke filling the sky as he was taken to safety.

The Wolves of the Moon never forgot a scent.

“What’s wrong, Father?” Ilkay asked as the silence stretched on, liking this unexpected private conversation less and less.

Egemen only stared out across the lake, frozen solid this time of year, though there were always holes where various beasts had broken through the ice in search of frost pike, a prized winter treat. Ilkay would be coming out here in a few days with his hunting pack to obtain several of them for the winter feast.

“There’s no easy or gentle way to say this,” Egemen finally said, turning to face him straight on. “I’m dying, Ilkay. The healers don’t think I’ll make it through winter.”

Ilkay jerked back, froze, nostrils flaring. “You. What? Father—” He shook his head. “They’re wrong.”

“They’re not,” Egemen replied. “I’ve been feeling poorly for quite some time, and finally had the matter further looked into. Even Wolves are not immune to the wasting sickness.”

Ilkay’s eyes stung. “You can’t—”

“We all go to run with the stars eventually, pup,” Egemen said gruffly. “Come here.”

Ilkay moved almost before he’d finished speaking, wrapping his arms tightly around his father and crying into the fur draped over his shoulders. Fathers weren’t supposed to get old and weak and sick. They were supposed to be there forever, a strength and comfort to always depend on.

His father was only fifty. This wasn’t fair. He’d already lost his mother when he was fifteen. Now here he was nearly of age, and his own father wouldn’t even be there for the ceremony.

Ilkay cried harder and held on tightly, until his father's gasp let him know it was a touch too tight.

Reluctantly pulling back, Ilkay said, "Is there truly nothing we can do?"

"We can enjoy what time we have left," Egemen replied. "I'm sorry, Ilkay. I wanted to be here for your coming of age. I wanted to formally declare you my heir then. I will do it sooner now, of course. The council has already granted permission."

"They already know?" No, the council couldn't know. If they knew then it was all true and real and he was going to lose his father far too soon, it wasn't *fair*.

"One of them is the healer I went to, pup, of course they do. I've been putting off telling you because... Well, you are my son, and I did not want to see you in pain."

"I don't want you to die—not like this." Not so soon, when his father still had so much life left to live.

Egemen cupped his face, voice gruff again as he replied, "We don't get to choose when the Moon calls us home. You're a good wolf and a great leader. You'll be just fine without me. Which reminds me of something else we must speak of."

"The debt."

"Yes," Egemen replied. "I'd meant for you to undertake it after your coming of age. There's no reason for that to change. But you will also be Moon, which means you will have to choose someone to lead and serve our people in your place."

That required no thought on Ilkay's part. "Müge." She should be going with them, but she had never been as eager to go as the rest of them and would not mind staying behind to lead the Wolves in his absence.

Egemen smiled, proud and approving. "An excellent choice. I'll see she's named your official representative. Joining the Legion will take most of your time for many years, but come home as often as you can; do not let our people think they've been forgotten."

"I won't. I could not forget them anymore than I could forget the Moon herself."

“I know.” Egemen hugged him again. “I love you and am proud of you. I am sorry you’ll be carrying on without me come spring, but I know you can do it, and the Moon will guide you.”

“Yes, Father,” Ilkay whispered before burying his face in his father’s furs again.

Why was life so fucking cruel?

“Come, let’s return, I want—”

They froze, growling as a sensation Ilkay had never felt rushed over him. Terror and vertigo and nausea, like he was being dangled over a high cliff after having too much to drink. “What is this?”

“I don’t know,” Egemen said. “I’ve never felt this, or even read—”

The ground rumbled. Shifted.

Sheer panic ripped through Ilkay, a clawing *need* to run, to hide. He ripped off his clothes and shifted even as he dove for the dubious protection of the old altar. Egemen joined him in the very next breath as the rumbling turned into ominous shaking—up, down, back and forth. Birds filled the sky in numbers he’d never seen before, and throughout the mountain, he could hear screams of fear, could *taste* it on the air.

The ground was not supposed to shake like this. Ilkay whined, curled up tightly against his father. The nearby altar stones cracked, broke, fell to pieces, and only just in time did they lunge out from under the altar table they’d taken refuge beneath as it broke clean in half and crashed down right where they’d been.

Panting heavily with the effort to contain his fear, Ilkay followed Egemen back the way they’d come, fighting the heaving earth as they struggled to return to the village.

Ilkay grunted as a particularly nasty heave threw him into a tree, panting through the pain as he hauled back to his feet and continued to fight his way home.

By the time they reached the village, the shaking had ceased, though that sensation of terror and vertigo continued to

crawl along Ilkay's skin.

Everything was in shambles. Entire buildings were gone. Water was everywhere, and livestock was running around loose. Somebody screamed, a wail of grief and terror that cut through the whole village, freezing everyone in their tracks.

Egemen bolted toward the sound, and Ilkay followed close behind—and slammed into him just moments later. Rough hands dragged him back, dragged Egemen back.

There was a hole. Right there in the midst of the village, where Alp's home had been. Nearby was Eser, one of his two wives. His other wife, his husband, and their three children were all ominously missing.

Eser was still wailing.

“Where are they?” Egemen barked out.

“Gone,” said a woman through her own tears. “Eser was with us when the shaking started. Then we— we— we heard a horrible cracking sound. More rumbling. We came outside and — and they were gone.” She dropped to her knees and cried into her apron.

Eser had stopped wailing, and now was screaming angrily, swearing, lashing out. Ilkay immediately rounded the gaping maw of the hole to help, as the others were swiftly losing their attempts to hold her back, shifting as he went.

“Eser, don't!” Ilkay cried out—and reeled back when she got an arm free and slammed it into his face.

Then she broke free entirely, and in the next moment had vanished to join the rest of her family.

Ilkay sank to his knees at the edge of the hole. Gone.

Eser had been one of the five. Ilkay, Eser, Müge, Safa, and Göksu. They'd been close friends ever since that incident. They were all supposed to go with him to repay their debt. It was an honor they'd been waiting for their whole lives. Of course Müge would be staying behind now, but he'd thought...

His breath hitched, heart lodged in his throat threatening to choke him. There wasn't even a body. They could not take Eser and her family up to the Cliff of Bones for proper rites.

Instead of going to the sky, to the embrace of the Moon Herself, they were trapped down in the dark earth, lost forever.

Ilkay pushed to his feet. He was Moonrise. He would someday—a day far too soon now—be called Moon, and only that, the highest honor and greatest responsibility. He could not sit here falling apart.

He turned to face his father right as Egemen said, “Ilkay, go around the village gathering everyone, have them brought to the square. Injured are to be taken to our home. Understand?”

“Yes, Moon,” Ilkay replied, and raced off, signaling three others to come with him before shifting back to wolf.

Everywhere he went, there was destruction. Chaos. Blood and tears. There was nothing left of the village he’d known all his life except ruin—and in the dead of winter. Rebuilding would be impossible. They would have to salvage what they could and move to tents or even the caves for the rest of the season.

Ilkay’s stomach knotted as a new worry struck him: were the caves intact? Had the shaking destroyed them as well? Were there more of those holes? Even wolf eyes might not see them in such an absolute dark.

One problem at a time. His mother had stressed that endlessly. One problem at a time. Right now his task was to find everyone and get them to either the square or his home.

He and the others had gotten through roughly two-thirds of the village when the trembling started again. This rumble only lasted seconds, though, and didn’t seem nearly as severe as the initial one, which... he didn’t know how long that one had lasted? It had felt like hours, but had probably only been minutes.

As the last of the rumbling faded, though, the wind brought a stench like nothing he’d ever smelled before.

Sulfur. Rotted meat. Old blood. Hot metal.

All around him, wolves whimpered and humans sobbed. What was the source of such a fetid stench? Was it related to the shaking or caused by it?

Ilkay growled. He barked sharply at the three helping him to keep on task. His father could not leave the village, not right now, not even for this new problem. So it fell to Ilkay to see to it.

He ran through the village as quickly as he dared, shouting for those he passed to get to the square, headed north toward the stench—toward the caves that were meant to be their refuge of last resort.

The stench grew stronger, so bad he had to pause to throw up the partially digested stag. What was it? Sulfur was an indication of demonic presence, but if there was a demon on the mountain, it would have already come for them. This smelled dead, whatever it was. Dead, rotted, *wrong*.

He climbed the wide, shallow, rough-hewn stairs that led up to the caves, growling the whole time, hackles up, the smell threatening to make him puke again. Inside, the old magic in the caves shimmered to life with his presence, casting bright, magic-made light and banishing the worst of the darkness.

Revealing the source of the stench: at the very back of the main cave, the wall had split like doors cracked open. Whatever was rotting lay beyond that.

Returning to the cave entrance, Ilkay howled, sending a message down to the village. After he'd heard an acknowledgement, he padded back into the cave and toward the split—the wound. He gagged at the smell, which seemed burned into his nostrils, sunk into his fur. Like a wound that had gone foul, fit only for the maggots already taking up residence, with no relief for the victim save to hack the ruined limb off. Or put them out of their misery in a swifter, kinder way.

There were no lights beyond the split, but a soft, rolling bark brought one of the bobbing lights to him.

Beyond the split, he'd expected more caverns, maybe another big, open space. He had not expected stairs, worn but clearly once carved with great care. They led down, down, down in a spiral, that horrid smell wafting up from below. Why were there stairs in a place nobody had been able to reach until the earth shaking cracked the mountain open?

Ilkay did not want to know the answer. He had no choice but to seek it out.

Thankfully, he heard the familiar scrape of claws against stone coming up behind him, and turned as three wolves joined him, all in human form, carrying torches—and clothes. Ilkay shifted and took them, dressing quickly. “Thank you. How is everyone?”

“Shaken, scared, but working together,” said the wolf who’d carried his clothes. Göksu, and beside him was Safa, her still, quiet presence reassuring when the whole world seemed to be falling apart around them. Just behind them was Taner, one of Eser’s cousins, tears still wet on his cheeks. He’d probably come along for the distraction. Ilkay certainly would in his place.

“What in the fuck is this place?” Göksu went to the edge and stared down. “Nothing but stairs. How has this been here this whole damned time and we never knew? What in the Goddesses is going on around here?”

“Only one way to find out,” Safa replied, voice quiet but filled with firm command that instantly brought Göksu and Taner to flank her sides. “Shall we, Moonrise?”

Ilkay didn’t bother to reply, simply moved the light he’d summoned to his right shoulder and headed down the winding stairs. He had to pause occasionally to kick away bits of rubble, and one portion of stairs had collapsed but was easily jumped over.

Reaching the bottom seemed to take ages, and the journey wasn’t helped by that smell. All of them paused to throw up at some point, only adding to the misery, but eventually their noses dulled to it, at least a measure, making it bearable to continue onward.

At the bottom they found the source of the smell, spread out across a mosaic floor that seemed to be some geometric pattern. Bones and rancid meat covered most of it, dripping and hanging from what looked to have been some great beast. A dragon? No sign of scales, though they could have rotted away, given what little was left, though it was unusual that no scales at

all would be left, as they were the strongest part of a dragon. No horns, either, which was stranger still.

No, the more he looked at it, the more certain he was this was no dragon. Nothing else he knew got this large, though. There was also that lingering smell of sulfur and hot metal. *Demon*. But no demon would be down here rotting in the dark. Would it?

“Collect some of that,” Ilkay said.

Grimacing, Taner obeyed, though when he was done scooping bits and pieces into the empty satchel they’d brought along, he shoved his ruined gloves right in there with them. He left the satchel at the base of the stairs and rejoined them as they stepped past the rotting corpse and through an archway that had been carved from the rock, meticulously chiseled with roses and thorns, and at the top, carved into the keystone, was a heart broken into three jagged-edged pieces.

They were in a temple devoted to the Sacred Three. Why was a temple to the Goddesses all the way down here in the dark of Dragon Claw Mountain? That made no sense.

More afraid than ever, Ilkay tamped it down and pressed onward, walking down a long hall that lit up with fading magic lights along the walls and even the floor, in the same geometric pattern that had made up the mosaic. Had it lit up once, too?

“Lots of magic,” Safa said. “Powerful magic, to have lasted this long. Not holy or demonic, though. Sorcery, maybe.”

“You’d know better than the rest of us,” Göksu said.

At the end of the hallway was a set of wooden doors that looked like something large and heavy had crashed through them like paper. Ilkay tore away the remaining dregs and stepped through—and again found himself freezing in place.

This time from horror.

From the doorway was another long path, leading across a bowl-like hollow to a circular outcrop which seemed to be an altar space of some sort, to judge by the table in the middle and the long-dead braziers around the edge.

Filling the 'bowl' that surrounded the altar space were bones. Thousands upon thousands of bones. At a glance, they were all human. The Sacred Three didn't require human sacrifice, though, so whatever this place had once been... It had become something else, something dark and deadly.

"Old blood," Taner said. "This place reeks of it. There are stains on the ground around the altar." He frowned. "There's something on the other side of the table. I'm going to see what." He stepped onto the part of the path that crossed the chasm, and with a soft shimmer, the carvings Ilkay had missed before lit up. Another geometric sort of pattern, this one resembling braids and knots, glowing in interwoven purple and red, fanning out as it reached the middle to edge the circle.

"Maybe you shouldn't," Safa said.

Taner kept going. "The magic in this place is dead or dying. There's nothing here to do the sacrificing. How was all of this here this whole time and we never knew?"

Ilkay growled softly. "I'm not sure we want to know the answer to that. To bury such a secret as this so successfully..."

"Fuck me," Taner said. "This is a beheading block, I think. They sacrificed them via beheading, then I guess threw the bodies in after. There's so many... Like an entire fucking village's worth of people must be down here. *Why*."

It was Safa who replied in her quiet, somber voice, "Because of what's behind *that* door, I'd say."

Ilkay looked where she pointed, and sure enough, on the opposite side of the cavern was another door. It was sealed, and by the carvings he could just barely make out, magically sealed as well. "There's no way to reach it."

"Given everything else here," Safa replied, "I wouldn't doubt there was once some sort of magical bridge or something. Taner, come back."

Taner obeyed, all but running back to rejoin them. "Something bad is beyond that door. Standing by the beheading block, I could feel the barest bits of it."

“I’m going to see for myself,” Ilkay said. “Hold here.” He crossed the stone bridge slowly, examining the markings, the piles of bones below, storing away every scrap of information he could to report to his father—and likely whoever they called for help, because this was far outside the knowledge and abilities of the Wolves.

His nostrils flared as he reached the altar space, the smell of old blood stronger than ever. So much of it that it had permanently stained the stone, and was caked in layers around the beheading block. As Taner had said, standing right here, he could *feel* the something behind the sealed door. No scent, though. It was sealed up too tightly for that, which was good.

That feeling, though, was worse even than the clawing terror that had overtaken him right before and during the earth shaking. It was like something large and terrible was breathing down his neck, hot and stinking, sharp teeth grazing, and Ilkay could do nothing to stop the fatal bite the creature was poised to take.

“It’s time to go,” he said. “Whatever this is, whatever is wrong, is too much for us. No one is to enter this place without my father’s permission. We will set guards, two at all times, until we can bring help.”

“Yes, Moonrise,” the three chorused, and Göksu added, “I’ll stand first watch. I... don’t think I’m ready to go back to the village anyway. Not— not after Eser.”

“Of course,” Ilkay said, and hugged him tightly.

“I’ll stand with him,” Safa said. “Nobody needs me right now. Send relief in eight hours.”

“I’ll send food as well,” Ilkay said as they retraced their footsteps, past the rotting corpse and back up the winding stairs.



Guldbrandsen

They moved everyone to the lake, which had somehow taken less damage than the rest of the mountain. Ilkay set up his and his father's temporary home in front of the altar where once a Prince of the Blood had returned him safely to his family. It made for a good central space, with everyone setting up tents and cookfires outward from there, putting necessities and scrap heaps well away from everything.

Wrapped in furs, given a bowl heaped with freshly slaughtered venison, Ilkay and Taner conveyed all they'd seen to Moon and the council.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” said Cihan, the village healer and an elder on the council. The woman who’d said that Egemen did not have long to live. They were old, old friends, Cihan and Egemen, lovers before they’d each married someone else. Only now was Ilkay able to think about how painful it must have been for her to tell Egemen, lover and Moon, that he was dying.

Ilkay had not thought there would be worse to face than winter than watching his own father slowly die... but so many people were dead, and the rest were mourning, and they had to do it in tents in the dead of winter. The Wolves of the Moon needed no home but their forest and sky, but damn it, soft beds and warm blankets and toasty fires were sorely missed all the same, especially when in pain.

Hopefully the weather would hold. The last thing they needed right now was a blizzard.

One problem at a time. Right now, their biggest problem was the temple, and whatever was locked in its depths.

Another council member, Reşide, said, “You saw no other symbols? Only the Sacred Heart?”

“Only the Sacred Heart, Councilor,” Taner said. “We scoured the place as best we safely could, but there were no further clues to be found.”

“Unfortunate,” Reşide replied. “Thank you, all four of you. That was invaluable work, and brave, especially in the aftermath of...” Her mouth pinched, chest shuddering as she fought tears against the loss of her daughter and grandson, and then she finally finished, “...everything else.”

Egemen said into the silence that fell, “We need help. Legion help. This is beyond the knowledge and abilities of the Wolves.”

A third councilor, of the seven total, said, “We already owe them a debt.”

“It’s not about debts, it’s about lives,” Egemen said sharply, five of the council agreeing with him by word or motion. “Do you want to venture down into that temple, open a magically sealed door, and deal with whatever comes out?”

Nobody replied.

“Can anyone come up with a single reason we shouldn’t go to the Legion for help?”

“This is precisely the sort of problem the Legion is supposed to solve,” Reşide said. “Wolves tend our own affairs as best we can, but only a fool believes they can handle every fight alone. I say we ask the Legion for help, and that we do it before their help comes too late.”

“I put it to official vote,” Egemen said. “All in favor.”

Six hands went up.

“All against.”

One hand went up.

Egemen nodded. “We will ask the Legion for help. Volkan, remain after the meeting, I would hear your lingering concerns. Now we decide who goes to speak with the Legion.”

“I should do it,” Ilkay said. “I am Moonrise. If we are asking outsiders into our domain, then it is the responsibility of my family to do the asking and carry the burden and blame of any ill consequences. Moon should be here, and Müge is to be appointed Moonshadow. She can fulfill my duties here.”

“I agree,” Egemen said, face filled with pride. When no one protested, he said, “I put it to official vote. All in favor of Moonrise going personally to request help of the Legion.” All seven hands went up. “Very well. Go and pack, and have Müge brought here. Moonrise, you leave immediately. Go to the garrison in Mashiar. Hopefully they’ll have forces to spare to help us and the means to take you quickly to Castle Guldbrandsen. Insist on speaking with Prince Telmé or His Majesty.”

“I will, Father. Moon.”

“Good. Now go, travel safely and swiftly, and may the Moon Herself protect you.” Egemen hugged him tightly, and said gruffly, “I love you, my son. Come home to me.”

“I love you too, Father. I’ll be back soon.” Ilkay lingered just a moment longer, savoring the reassuring embrace of his father, absorbing the familiar scent he thought of as *home*.

Finally, though, he tore away and went to pack, throwing the bare essentials into a knapsack that he'd be able to carry easily as a wolf and a human. When that was done, he went in search of Müge.

He found her on the east side of the lake, predictably having taken charge of setting up family tents, supply caches, and cooking centers, along with the gathering of supplies and assigning of other chores. "Müge."

She turned sharply, at the sound of his voice and the tone of it, brow furrowing. "Yes, Moonrise?"

"Come with me; it's urgent."

"Of course." She turned to her sister. "Take over."

"Be careful."

As they walked away, Müge asked, "What's wrong, Ilkay?"

He explained, and said, "I am sorry you are finding out like this, and that there's no time to ask you properly, or have the ceremony you deserve. You will be my Moonshadow?"

"Yes, of course," Müge replied, and stopped them so she could hug him tightly. "I promised I'd always be there for you, and I meant it."

"I meant it as well," Ilkay said, and kissed her briefly. "Come on, Father and the council are waiting, and I must be on my way."

"Who is going with you?"

"No one. I can travel faster alone. Also, there's been enough loss. Nobody should have to send their loved one out on such a dangerous mission while we're still mourning those swallowed by the earth."

Müge sighed but didn't argue.

Once he'd left her with the council, Ilkay bid her and his father a last farewell, then stripped off his clothes, put them in the knapsack, and shifted. Müge got the bag in place, and then he was off, racing through the night and down the mountain,

bound for the town that had once kidnapped him to sell overseas.

High above, the Moon shone bright, until the rays of the dawning Sun outshone her.

He kept going, stopping for nothing, save to drink some water and take a piss. As he left the mountains behind, people slowly appeared, handfuls at first, staring at him with open mouths and wide eyes, and then more and more, until he reached the noisy, smelly town itself. Exclamations greeted him and more followed in his wake, everybody awed and many panicked to see one of the infamous Wolves.

On the rare occasion the Wolves did come to town, they did so as humans to draw less attention, though they were always easily marked from their size and the unique styling of the furs they draped themselves in. Ilkay had only visited this wretched town a few times, mostly to learn how to properly act around humans. Though they could look like humans, Wolves were Wolves, and not nearly as soft as these creatures who had tried to steal and sell them.

That they'd nearly succeeded in doing so was a sore point the Wolves preferred not to dwell on.

Destruction was everywhere, the stench of blood and fear strong as people worked to clear away rubble, unearth the trapped and the dead, and restore what they could of their ravaged homes. Some streets were flooded, others a swampy mess as the water only slowly drained away. Flies and worse lingered, compounding the problem by spreading filth and disease. Priests worked tirelessly to soothe and help, and he could see various other Legion uniforms.

He followed his nose to the Legion garrison, the unmistakable smell of armor, weapons, and all manner of magic: fearsome holy, deadly earth, and terrifying hellish.

When he'd been a child, there'd been no garrison here. It had come when he was roughly fifteen, at the bidding of Prince Telmé, Commander of the Legion, made so when he was no more than a child himself, forced to take up his mantle far too soon after enemies seeking the power of the Princes of the Blood had wiped out the vast majority of the King's Legion.

The guard stationed at the door nearly dropped his glaive. “Fuck me, don’t see that every day. Hail, Wolf.”

Ilkay grabbed the special strap of his bag with his teeth and jerked, sending the knapsack tumbling free, catching it before it could hit the dirty street.

“Just inside, then, as I doubt you want to be flashing your bits all over,” the soldier said with a laugh. Like most dragoons, he didn’t bother with footwear, legs shifted to draconic form, dark yellow scales gleaming, the claws and dewclaw on the back far sharper and deadlier than his glaive. “I assume you’re not here to chitchat, so the captain is in the back overseeing an inspection.”

Ilkay butted the man’s thigh in thanks, then headed into the garrison, which was slightly warmer than outside thanks to a large fireplace and several smaller braziers. He shifted, then pulled out his clothes and quickly donned them, raking his hands through his perpetually messy hair before pushing on deeper into the garrison.

As ever, looks and whispers chased him, so many eyes that the back of his neck prickled. Such staring was rude, could even be considered a threat—by Wolf standards, though, not human. Not always. So Ilkay ignored it, ignored the disrespect they didn’t know they were giving him, and walked until he found a door that led to the area behind the garrison.

As the dragoon had said, the garrison captain was here, overseeing an inspection of the troops. Everyone faltered, fell out, as they saw him, and the captain whipped around to find the source of disruption. Whatever he was going to say was forgotten as he stared at Ilkay.

Even as a human, Wolves were relatively easy to mark out. They tended to run larger than humans, they retained much of their deadly hunter’s teeth, and their eyes glowed ever so faintly with the power and love of the Moon Herself. Ilkay stood out even further, with his silver-streaked hair and blood red eyes, the furs he wore embroidered with the marks of those who led the Wolves.

“What in the world brings the Wolves of the Moon down here?” the captain asked.

“Dire circumstances,” Ilkay replied. “I am Ilkay Thrace, called Moonrise, son of Moon, leader of the Wolves of the Moon. I must speak with Prince Telmé at once.”

“Come to my office. I’m Captain Hallvard.” He strode off, and Ilkay fell in alongside him, until they were secluded in Hallvard’s office. “What’s wrong?”

Ilkay explained, from the unexpected earth shaking to the ancient temple it had revealed, all that they had found within, including the sealed door.

“Well. Fuck.” Hallvard let out a ragged breath. “I don’t have much to spare here, but I’ll send what I have, paladins and dragoons mostly. Lucky for you we have a griffon that just landed and is bound for Guldbrandsen within the hour. I’ll have someone take you while I assemble the forces I’ll send to your village.

“Thank you.”

Hallvard led the way back out of his office, bellowed for a soldier who immediately came running, and strode off after giving him sharply barked instructions.

Looking completely unaffected by the entire exchange, the soldier motioned for Ilkay to follow him. “So the earthquake got you lot, too?”

“Earthquake,” Ilkay repeated. “Is that what they’re called? I’ve never endured something so fucking terrifying.”

The soldier gave a short, sharp laugh. “Yeah, they’re pretty fucked up. We get them from time to time in Lass, but never knew them to happen all the way up here in Taakar. Thought I’d gotten away from that shit.” He grimaced, then gestured as they finished crossing the training yard and came to a long, wide building that reeked of animals, shit, and humans sneaking away for a midday fuck. Hopefully with each other, not with the animals.

“Oh, Tamer!” the soldier bellowed as they entered the stable.

“What?” a sour voice came. They turned a corner, then another, the stable surprisingly mazelike, and then there it was:

an enormous griffon, feathers and pelt, claws and sharp beak, like he hadn't seen since he was a pup. Next to it was a handsome woman with pale brown skin and auburn curls loosely pulled back in a knot, wiping her hands on a scraggly bit of rag. "Why you bothering— Oh, my. There's something you don't see everyday. Hail, Wolf."

"Hail, Tamer," Ilkay replied, hoping that was the correct response. "I have need of a ride to Guldbrandsen."

She looked him over, then tossed the rag into a nearby bucket and pulled on the heavy, fur-lined gloves shoved into her belt. "Lucky for you then that I was about ready to head out. Ever ridden a griffon before?"

"Not really," Ilkay replied. "Just the once, and I was in a basket at the time."

"I see," the woman said with a laugh. "Name's Arnbjørg."

"Ilkay Thrace, though everyone calls me Moonrise."

Arnbjørg nodded. "Moonrise, then. A wolf thing?"

"My father is Moon, leader of the Wolves."

She whistled. "Must be a serious matter then. Come on, I'm all set. Two minutes more and you would have missed me. It gets unimaginably cold up in the clouds, so we might want to dig up some extra gear for you."

Ilkay snorted a laugh. "I live high in the peaks of Dragon Claw Mountain, where you lowlanders struggle to breathe and the cold will freeze your breath before it can mist. We go above the clouds daily. I don't need your 'gear'."

"I see you'll fit right in," Arnbjørg muttered. "Let's get moving, then. I'm supposed to have this griffon back before sunset."

"Mistress," Ilkay replied dryly, making her laugh, before he followed her out into the yard.

The griffon gave a sharp, piercing cry, wings fluttering eagerly. Arnbjørg swung deftly up into the saddle, then jerked her head for Ilkay to do the same. When he was settled behind her, she said, "Hold on tight, don't worry about fucking modesty

or anything. We're going up, up, up, and we'll be flying a hell of a lot faster than you can run. If you fall, there's little to no chance I'll be able to catch you. Should I strap you down?"

"No, that sounds even worse," Ilkay replied. "I'll hold fast. What should I do if there's a problem?"

"Shout in my ear."

"Understood."

"Off we go, then." Arnbjørg took up the reins of the griffon and gave a series of lilting whistles. The griffon pulled back on its rear legs and then pushed up into the sky much the way a cat would, wings snapped out to catch the wind.

Then they were off, climbing into the sky, into the clouds, taking him farther away from Dragon Claws than he'd ever been, far away from the home that needed him—but needed more for him to do this, and so he would. Hopefully his journey would not be in vain, and he would return with the people, the leashed monsters, that could help his wolves.



They arrived with a storm at their heels, and a wind so cold that Ilkay almost winced at the bite of it.

Even the cold, however, could not distract him from the contained-chaos wonder that was Castle Guldbrandsen. It was everything he'd ever heard and more, a towering three-tiered octagon that boasted something like nine floors, with room for thousands, and that didn't include the outbuildings and the beautiful Temple of the Sacred Three across the river.

Guldbrandsen really was the center of Tria Noor, and the castle its beating heart.

All around he could see the various types of beings that made up the notorious King's Legion: Dragoons, Titans, Summoners, Sorcerers, Priests, Paladins, Geomancers,

Gremlins, Dredknights, Shades, Shadowmarch, Tamers, and Alchemists... the only thing he didn't see were the Princes of the Blood, the notorious blood-drinking half demons who were the deadliest and most crucial part of the Legion.

Fifteen years ago, all of the princes had been wiped out, along with most of the rest of the Legion. Even Ilkay's inexperienced eye could see the numbers around him, not insignificant though they were, did not compare to their original might. Rebuilding to those numbers would take decades.

Especially the Princes of the Blood, which were difficult enough to make as it was, requiring humans with a very particular amount of demon blood in their veins and a natural acumen for doing and enduring all that was required of the Princes. It was the reason they were afforded a title normally reserved for royalty.

"What in the hell are you?" a voice asked, and Ilkay looked down, down to see a small slip of a thing staring up at him, wide gray eyes set in a delicately pretty face, pale against skin the very color of freshly turned loam. A woman, highly unusual in the Legion, though the Tamer had been a woman as well.

Women were not usually put at such great risk, far too valuable to send into battle. The Legion came first, though, and given their crippled numbers, seeing more women amongst them made sense. This particular woman was a Shadowmarch, by her dark clothing and the crest emblazoned over her left breast: a full-face mask, half of it completely black, the other half black and scattered with stars of various colors.

The thieves, spies, and assassins of the Legion, one of the few other than the Princes permitted to use hellish magic.

"I am Moonrise, of the Wolves of the Moon. I need to speak with Prince Telmé immediately."

The woman snorted. "Don't we all. What makes you so bloody special, wolf?"

"An earthquake cracked open Dragon Claw Mountain and revealed something terrible in its depths, something trying

to break out of the cage still barely containing it. Where is Prince Telmé?”

The woman whistled. “In the great hall, last I saw him, though he’s probably gone elsewhere by now. You’ll find him eventually, though.”

“Thanks,” Ilkay muttered as she walked off. Heaving a sigh, disappointed for no reason he could name, he plunged into the fray, bound for the main keep.

Inside, he swept the room, but spied not a single red tunic, the color of the Princes.

“Who’s the fucking fake titan?” someone asked.

Ilkay snapped his gaze to the speaker, who startled. “I must speak with Prince Telmé.”

“You and everyone else.”

The entire castle was starting to sound annoyingly repetitive.

“Now!” Ilkay snarled. “I am tired of the foolishness around here. People will die if I don’t speak with Prince Telmé!”

“That’s the only kind of matters that really come to Guldbrandsen, or at least the Legion,” said someone else. “But I just saw him and the High Priest leave, bound for the Hall of Magic. I can take you.”

Ilkay gave the man, who looked like a dragoon, a curt nod. “Thank you.”

The man motioned for Ilkay to follow, and strode briskly from the great hall, back out to the grounds, and headed east to an enormous stone building that looked somewhere between an armory and a temple. At the top of a set of wide steps, the man shoved the door open, the wind rushing them inside, and it took Ilkay helping to get the door shut again.

As the door closed, and the noise died down, he heard voices. Three of them. The dragoon beside him brightened. “That’s them, all right. Come on. Who are you anyway?”

Ilkay introduced himself for what felt like the hundredth time, and the dragoon whistled loudly enough that the voices fell silent. What was with all the whistling?

As they stepped past rows upon rows of books, more books than Ilkay had ever seen in his life, his gaze fell upon three men standing in a raised, circular portion of the building.

One had dark skin and white hair; he wore holy blue robes and a circlet set with a sapphire that marked him, if Ilkay recalled correctly, as High Priest of Guldbrandsen and the Reach of the House. After the king, he was the most powerful person in Tria Noor, and possessed so much holy power that only angels and the Sacred Three themselves possessed more.

The second man, older than the other two, had brown hair and beard, the palest brown skin Ilkay had ever seen. He wore a girdle of gold chain, and the ends of his sleeves and robe were trimmed in blocks of vibrant color. Who or what he was, Ilkay had no idea, though he smelled of powerful magic.

The last man, taller than the other two, with pale white skin and black, shoulder-length hair, eyes a bright, animal yellow, was familiar and not. Ilkay did not know his face. He knew the man's scent though, and the blood-red tunic only confirmed it: Prince Telmé, Commander of the Legion and the man who'd once saved Ilkay's life.

"Commander, there's someone here to see you," the dragoon said, and bowed before turning and striding off, patting Ilkay's shoulder in parting.

Telmé's eyes widened slightly, and he strode forward, past the other two. "You're—Is it really— You're one of the Wolves! The one who jumped from the basket, I think."

Ilkay laughed despite everything. "Yes, that's me, Your Highness," and introduced himself. "I wish I was coming to at last pay our debt, but I'm afraid I've come to ask for your help once again."

The happiness in Telmé's face went out like a snuffed candle. "What's wrong?"

Ilkay told his tale one more time, taking pains to repeat every last detail he could recall, no matter how sick he was of

telling the story. When he finished, the three men stared at each other in silent, somber communication. “You know or suspect something. What?”

“To be honest, there’s several possibilities, none of them good. I’m High Priest Korin, by the way, and Telmé’s husband. This is Ness Liefsson, the Master of Magic. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance, Moonrise. I am afraid that at the very least, you have stumbled upon a demon. Which one, we don’t know yet. Rest here for the night, please, and give us time to research.”

“I’ll also need time to choose who to send with you,” Telmé said. “I know you’re eager to return, but acting in haste will do us more harm than good right now. Eat, rest, be where we can ask you further questions if we have them. Come, I’ll show you to where you can bed down for the night.”

Ilkay nodded, tamping down on his turmoil and frustration. They were right. He knew they were. If his father were here, he’d say the exact same things. Still, Ilkay was desperate to act, to do anything other than hold still.

He had to, though. The Wolves were in danger, and his father was dying.

So he followed Telmé back out of the Hall of Magic, back into the keep, where voices fell still and then picked up in whispers full of curiosity. Telmé swept through the hall as though oblivious, or uncaring, though he nodded to a couple of people they passed before vanishing through an enormous doorway into the depths of the castle.

Down a hallway, up two flights of stairs, and down still more hallways, Telmé only then finally came to a stop. “We usually put guests in the dorms, but you merit your own chambers.” He pressed a hand to the door, which shimmered briefly with rainbow light. As the shimmer faded, Telmé used one of several keys on his belt to unlock the door. “Go ahead and get comfortable; I’ll have food sent up to you. I’m sure you feel wide awake right now, but the moment you hold still for more than ten seconds, the exhaustion will get you.” His mouth twitched, and some strange mixture of amusement and anguish filled his eyes for a moment. He was young, still, surely not

more than thirty, but his eyes reminded Ilkay strongly of his father, of all the elders. “If I don’t see you before tomorrow, sleep well. Should you wake up at any point and need food or anything else, the great hall is always open and the kitchens always available.”

“Thank you,” Ilkay replied. “It’s an honor to finally meet you, Your Highness. I wish the circumstances were happier.”

“Me too,” Telmé said. “It’s good to see you grown, and nearly of age, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ilkay nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. “Yes, almost of age.”

Telmé frowned, but only said, “We’ll speak more later. Get some rest.” He strode off, and Ilkay obeyed, not really having anything else to do.

The room was small, simply but handsomely appointed. The tapestry over the wall was mostly in blue, depicting a popular story of the Sacred Three. The rugs on the floor matched it, and the few pieces of furniture were all of dark wood.

As Telmé had said, the exhaustion hit Ilkay hard and sudden. He set his bag on a chair, stripped off his clothes, and climbed into the waiting bed, and was asleep almost immediately.



Return

Ilkay woke to the tolling of bells and a squirming feeling in his gut that he couldn't explain. Heaving out of bed, he got ready for the day and headed out. The castle was even more bustling than it had been the previous day, or perhaps he was simply awake enough to appreciate how busy the place was.

In the great hall, he obtained food quickly, though finding an empty place to sit and eat was a bit more difficult. He'd just decided to go eat outside when he caught movement at the front of the hall, on the dais which was surely reserved for the royal family. Telmé was waving at him, motioning him forth.

He cautiously joined Telmé, who sat with a couple of other people who wore the distinctive blood red tunic. “Good morning, Moonrise,” Telmé greeted. “How did you sleep?”

“Well, Your Highness, thank you.” He bit his tongue against asking all the impatient questions that wanted out and focused on his food.

Smiling in a way that said he understood, a smile that again reminded Ilkay viscerally of his father, despite the fact Telmé was so much younger, Telmé said, “You will be happy to hear, my lord, that my first choice for help to send back with you has returned this morning. He returned from his last mission not even an hour ago and will be joining us shortly. I’m also sending Shadowmarch, Geomancers, and Priests with you. Not many, as large numbers will work against you in the confined spaces of caverns, but hopefully sufficient. Are you well?”

“Fine, Your Highness. Just a strange feeling.”

Telmé frowned. “Strange how?”

“Hard to describe. Not something I’ve ever felt before. Like my body is anticipating something, preparing for something, but has not shared with my mind what that is.” Sounded even stupider when he said it aloud, but he wouldn’t lie about it either.

“Interesting. Perhaps your Wolf instincts dislike something about the Legion. There—” Telmé broke off and stood, a beautiful smile overtaking his somber features, and it wasn’t surprising when in the next beat Korin’s scent washed over them. “Good morning.”

Korin kissed Telmé’s cheek and sat next to him. “Good morning. Moonrise, I have some possibilities for your problem, though sadly not as much information as I would have liked. The royal archives unfortunately suffer several glaring gaps, victims of one catastrophe or another. We collect every scrap of information we come across, but unfortunately many of the villages and towns we get it from have other priorities and so neglect and ignorance often destroy records long before anything else does. That being said, I have come across a few mentions of an old temple in Dragon Claw Mountain, all the way back before the war. Even then, though, it was considered

ancient. No one mentions it by name, only ‘the temple’. I’ve found mention of it in a single journal and a handful of personal correspondence. I’ve set some of my priests to further research, but it will take time. Should we find anything vital, we will send it straight on to your people.”

“I appreciate it,” Ilkay replied. “I...” He trailed off, forgetting what he was going to say, as that squirming sensation grew so strong it was hard to breathe, turned from an anxious awareness to a clawing *need*. He stood, twitchy and restless, and swept the room for the source—

His breath caught.

Striding through the great hall like a wild animal only barely chained was a Prince of the Blood who bore a passing resemblance to Telmé, with the same snow-white skin and coal-black hair, the feral yellow eyes. But where Telmé was all trim muscle, this man was built large. Smaller than Ilkay, but large for a human, broad and muscled, with a fierce, hungry air that made Ilkay’s body ache with an unfamiliar *need*.

Who was this man, and why was he having such a strange effect on Ilkay?

“There you are,” Telmé said. “Moonrise, I make you known to Prince Dalibor, my cousin and our newest Prince. He will be leading the forces I am sending back with you. Dalibor, this is Lord Ilkay Thrace, Moonrise of the Wolves of the Moon.”

Dalibor gave him a long, impudent once over. “Moonrise? What kind of title is that?”

Ilkay bristled. “The chiefs of the Wolves are always called Moon, and as I am the chief’s son and heir, I am called Moonrise. To be called Moon is the highest honor of the Wolves.”

“Guess it’s no stranger than calling half-demons ‘Prince’,” Dalibor said, and bared his teeth, eyes glowing brighter than ever.

A prickling sensation skated over Ilkay, like he wanted to be afraid, angry.

“Enough, Dalibor,” Telmé said sharply.

The strange feeling subsided, and Dalibor sat down next to Ilkay, across from Telmé and Korin. “So what is this new mission for me, now I’ve just gotten back from the last one, without even a chance to bathe?”

“I don’t want to hear your complaints,” Telmé said sharply. “You and I will be speaking privately before you leave, Dalibor.”

“Understood, Commander.”

This was the man they were sending home with him? Ilkay had never been so underwhelmed in his life. This man was even more of a boy than him, a bratty little shit who clearly took nothing seriously. Ilkay kept his complaints to himself, though; he was hardly in a position to reject whatever help Telmé chose to give them. Hopefully the rest of the party would be better than this cocky prince.

Taking a deep breath, he instead asked, “So tell me what little you’ve learned in your archives, by your pleasure, High Priest.”

Korin smiled, something like understanding in his eyes. “The Sacred Three and the Legion are here for you, Moonrise. As to your strange temple... I wish I could see it myself, but alas, I am rarely permitted to leave this place.”

“I would imagine not, Most Holy.” If Korin had to leave to address a problem, that problem was most dire indeed.

“You have stumbled across a temple that was overtaken by a cult known as the Order of the Shadow of Samil, a radical offshoot of a branch of the Sacred Three that faded out of existence not long before the war started,” Korin said. “They never mention it by name, as I said, but it’s not hard to guess from everything you’d told me. Precious few cults engaged in such alarming levels of human sacrifice.”

“*Why* so much sacrifice?” Ilkay asked.

It was Dalibor who snorted and said, “Nothing demons love more than blood and death, especially both given in their name. That’s where the real power is.”

Telmé’s eyes glowed bright. “Settle down.”

“I’m fine,” Dalibor said. “I’m only speaking the truth.”

Abruptly swinging off the bench he was sitting on and standing, Telmé stared at Dalibor. “Attend me. Now.”

“Yes, Commander,” Dalibor said, and strode off, following Telmé out of the great hall.

“Forgive Dalibor,” Korin said once they were gone. “He was only six when the Legion was decimated. He looks up to Telmé greatly and wants, like any youth, to impress him, be as good as Telmé, without stopping to appreciate all that Telmé went through.” His mouth pulled down briefly, vivid eyes darkening. “All that he suffered.”

“I remember very little myself, but my parents and the others have told me the story many times. I know he suffered greatly just in the fight where he rescued me and my companions. I can only imagine what else he’s endured.”

Korin smiled. “You are wise and kind, especially for your age, which I think is younger than even Dalibor, who’s only just turned twenty-one.”

That cocky, loud-mouthed prince was a year older than him? More than, really, since Ilkay didn’t turn twenty until the beginning of spring. “I am Moonrise. It is my duty to see to the welfare and happiness of my fellow Wolves. Especially—” His voice caught, broke, the grief slamming into him with unexpected force.

Korin’s gentle smile vanished. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing to concern the Legion.”

“I am a priest before I am all else. I address all concerns, no matter how small or large. What weighs so heavy on your heart?”

It was strange to confide in a human, and one who had never interacted with the Wolves before, but there was no denying the sheer presence Korin possessed, something far deeper than anything granted by his role as High Priest. “My father is dying,” Ilkay said, the words coming out ragged. “He will not last the winter. Wasting illness.”

“I’m so sorry,” Korin replied. “My predecessor, much like a father to me, was dying slowly before the poisoning finished the job faster. I know a bit of what you’re going through and am deeply sorrowed you must endure that. May your father live well these last months and rest peacefully... or, no, you worship the moon, so I hope his journey home is without strife.”

“Thank you. I’ll be content if I can solve this problem for him, so he might enjoy his final days in peace.”

“We will certainly do our best. Dalibor is a handful, but he’s loyal and true, and his blood-granted abilities are certainly unique.”

Ilkay frowned. “Blood-granted abilities?”

Korin stared at him in surprise a moment, then shook his head and laughed ruefully. “My apologies, I forget you are not immersed in the Legion as is everyone here. Every prince has a unique ability or abilities granted to them by the demon blood in their veins—the demon that first fucked a human in their family line. In Dalibor’s case, his line carries the blood of a demon of wrath. Extremely powerful, extremely dangerous. We don’t even have records of previous princes with his abilities. He can invoke anger and fear in others at will, even turn them berserk. He tried to tease at it with you earlier.”

“So that’s what I felt.”

“Yes, but you’re either naturally resistant or simply good at it.”

“I am Moonrise,” Ilkay replied. Maybe if he said it enough, he would get through their heads the weight of that word, that title. “Is he the best choice for this? A man whose skill is making others angry and afraid?”

Korin laughed softly. “There is the youth in you. Trust Telmé. I know that’s hard, that you’ve no reason to do so, but his position as Commander was hard and bitterly won. If he believes Dalibor is the one to lead this mission, then he has very good reason to think so. Also, you have a demon down there, a great and terrible one. It will take an equally terrible demon to

face it. If the Legion were back to full strength, we'd be sending two Princes, possibly even three."

"I see," Ilkay said, feeling truly sick and afraid. One Prince of the Blood was normally more than enough to solve most problems, with the rest of the Legion as backup. To send multiple Princes... "What else can you tell me about this cult? What did Dalibor mean with all he said about blood and death?"

"Sacrifice is a powerful tool in any circumstance, but especially when holy and hellish magic are involved." Korin poured himself more of the mulled wine that was in pitchers scattered across every table. "I cannot begin to say with confidence what occurred in this ancient temple, but my best supposition is that a demon was summoned and worshipped, and they killed people in rituals to feed the demon, help it grow in strength and power. Someone or something discovered what they were doing and managed to seal the demon away, but couldn't do more than that. That same person then hid the temple. Probably it was several persons. Be careful, because if I'm right in the demon they worshipped, then it was likely what caused the earthquake, and when they've regathered their strength, they will do it again—and again, until they finally get their freedom. You must do whatever it takes to get to the demon before that happens. Dalibor will help ensure that's possible."

"I have asked the Legion for help, and will abide by the choices they have made," Ilkay said. Even if their choice was as stupid as he was beautiful. Ugh, no. He didn't think Dalibor was beautiful. Where had that thought come from?

"Come, if you're finished eating, I'll introduce you to the others who will be returning to Dragon Claw with you."

Ilkay shoved the last of his food in his mouth, unwilling to leave such good meat uneaten, and hastily rose, following Korin from the great hall, going out a side door, down a hallway, and finally outside. Well, sort of outside. The place was still walled, high enough that most creatures would struggle to get over it, but it was open to the sky. Trees, plants, and flowers of all sorts flourished, despite the cold weather, and nearly all of them were well out of season. "What is this? How is this possible?"

“Geomancers,” Korin said. “Masters of earthly magic.”

“It’s amazing.” Just standing there at the entrance he spied at least twenty fruit trees, all of them heavy with fruit waiting to be harvested. A garden like this would see the Wolves well-cared for throughout even the bitterest winter. He could *cry*.

“Thank you,” said a warm voice, and they turned to see a tall, handsome, and imposing woman step out of a narrow doorway that must lead to a storeroom or something. “We work hard to supplement the foodstuffs of the Legion and Guldbrandsen. One day, when we’re back at full strength, we hope to spread the practice as far across Tria Noor as we can. You must be the Moonrise I’ve heard so much about. I just finished my packing. Ümit’s already gone ahead. It’s not often we’re called out to the field. Like Gremlins and Tamers, our role is primarily support.”

“Support is not quite strong enough,” Korin said with a smile. “You are all keystones, to be sure. Thank you for doing this. I know you prefer your gardens to the battlefield.”

“I’m always honored to serve the Legion and Tria Noor, Most Holy, and you and Prince Telmé especially.” She smacked her fingers against her forehead. “Apologies, my lord. My name is Gizem, Sergeant in the Geomancers, with a specialty in the underground. I grew up around and in caves, so I have more experience than most with them.”

That was the most heartening thing Ilkay had heard since his arrival. “An honor to have your assistance, Sergeant.”

“Let’s hope we can actually offer assistance. Going down into the depths of a forgotten temple of human sacrifice to kill or better seal a demon is a new one for me. Still, caves are caves, and I know those well. If you will pardon me, I’ll go meet-up with our companions in the stable yard and finish preparations.”

“We’ll come with you, I wanted to introduce him to everyone,” Korin said.

‘Everyone’ proved to be another Geomancer, two stick-thin figures dressed in dark clothes bearing the Shadowmarch

crest, and four priests.

“Good, everyone is here. Well, nearly. Moonrise, this is the rest of the team we’re sending with you. Four of my best priests: Kaan, Arslan, Ebubekir, and Reşat. These two are Shadowmarch, invaluable in dark places where unseen dangers lurk. This is Temür, and this is Yiğit.”

“Our honor to make your acquaintance, Moonrise,” Yiğit said as he and Temür bowed and then smiled. “Where I’m from, the Wolves of the Moon are considered myth. My family is going to call me a shameless liar when I tell them I’ve met you.”

Ilkay snorted. “I’d think a Shadowmarch would be far more mythical than a Wolf.”

“No one is impressed by the Legion,” Yiğit replied, and the others laughed with him. “We’re perfectly ordinary to folks, save of course for the Princes. But enormous figures who worship the moon and can turn into wolves at will, who live high on the peaks of Dragon Claw Mountain, where it’s too cold for much of anything to survive? I have stories. *Lots* of stories.” He grinned and winked.

Ilkay groaned. “I can already think of many in the village who would love to hear these tales of us. I am not one of them.” That gained more laughter, which pleased him more than it probably should. Still, he was a Wolf, and Wolves thrived best in packs. They were not meant to be alone.

He started to say more but was distracted as that prickling rush of awareness from before ran down his spine, the squirming feeling in his gut strengthening. Turning toward the source, he wasn’t surprised to see Dalibor striding toward them in that cocky, commanding way of his. Damn it all, the source of his... disquiet or whatever was happening really was Dalibor. Why, for the love of the Moon?

A question to answer later. Right now, he had far bigger problems. “Where is Prince Telmé?”

Dalibor smirked. “Called away on another matter, but never fear, Your Majesty, I’ve promised to be on my best behavior.”

Narrowing his eyes at the mocking address, Ilkay retorted, “Which is probably still atrocious compared to everyone else’s worst behavior.”

Dalibor stared at him a moment, then laughed, and fuck if that didn’t make the infuriating bastard even more worth staring at. Damn it, what was *wrong* with him? He didn’t have time or energy to spare for whatever strange effect Dalibor was having on him.

“Lives are at stake, Dalibor,” Korin said sharply. “Your decisions will determine if people live or die. Where you’re going will have no grace for your mistakes.”

“I know,” Dalibor said, a genuine growl in his voice. “I can handle it.” He looked as though he had more to say, but only snapped his mouth shut. “Shall we get going?”

“My bag is still in my room,” Ilkay replied.

“No, it’s here,” Korin said. “You’ll take griffons there, and Telmé ordered them to remain, should they be needed to relay further messages to us, or to assist in escape if that proves necessary.

Ilkay bowed. “The Wolves of the Moon are grateful for the assistance of the Legion, and we will not forget that we owe two debts now.”

Korin smiled faintly. “The Wolves of the Moon are children of Tria Noor and so may command the help of the Legion at any time. There is no debt to be paid, you stubborn Wolf.”

“That is not for you to decide,” Ilkay said, throat raw as he repeated the words his father had spoken to Telmé fifteen years ago.

“Stubborn,” Korin repeated. “Get going. There is work in want of doing. Blessing of the Sacred Heart be upon you, and may They see you to swift victory and safe return. Dalibor, have a care, I mean it.”

“Yes, Most Holy,” Dalibor said with a huff, and climbed onto the back of the nearest griffon, Yiğit climbing up behind

him. Ilkay rode with the tamer, the same one who'd brought him here just the day before.

With a final farewell, they rose into the air and were gone, his stay so brief that if not for the company around him, Ilkay might have thought he'd dreamed the whole thing. Hopefully, someday soon, he would finally be able to linger, get to know Guldbrandsen, the Legion, meet Princes not as infuriating as Dalibor.

As if summoned, that prickling awareness Dalibor caused spiked, and Ilkay looked up to see Dalibor was staring at him. He frowned, and Dalibor grinned toothily before putting his own attention back on the sky ahead of them.

Ilkay stifled a sigh and tried to enjoy the strange delight of flying. It was cold up here, but not unbearably so, not quite. Everything below was small and far away, like children's toys scatted across the dirt and grass. If only his problems were as distant and small.

Survive whatever was in the cave. Mourn all those who died. Rebuild the village. Take over as chief in the spring. Mourn his father. He was only nineteen. He shouldn't be taking over as Moon for decades yet. He wasn't nearly old enough, good enough, to take up such an important mantle.

By the time they landed, Ilkay almost welcomed the opportunity to face danger. Almost anything was better than dealing with the contents of his own head for another second.

Normally they'd have landed by the altar rocks, but that was now occupied by his father's tent, and currently the council holding some meeting in front of it. They were standing, pointing and gesturing, as the griffons landed on a clear space further down, right by the shore of the lake.

Egemen rushed forward and embraced him tightly. "You're back, and so quickly. Well done, my son."

"Father," Ilkay replied gruffly, holding him a moment longer before forcing himself to step back and focus on the matter at hand, and not how his father was already starting to go from merely looking tired all the time to decidedly unwell. "Has all been well?"

“Well as can be expected. This is the Legion assistance you brought? We have paladins and dragoons as well from the garrison; they’ve been immensely helpful.”

“Yes, this is the team hand-picked by Prince Telmé himself,” Ilkay said, and made the introductions.

Egemen’s nostrils flared, his eyes glowing briefly, as his gaze landed on Dalibor. “You feel...”

“Unsettling?” Dalibor asked sourly, impatiently. “Don’t worry, if I’m above ground long enough for it to matter, you’ll get used to it. I suppose we must get on with further niceties before I can see this temple for myself?”

“Indeed,” Egemen said. “You are not much like Prince Telmé at all, Your Highness.”

Dalibor’s expression gave nothing away, but something in his demeanor changed as he said, “So I’m often reminded. Regardless, I am good at killing things, which is all the Legion truly requires of me. Shall we?”

Egemen gave a slight nod. “We shall. This way, please. I’ll have food brought. Is there anything I can get you, Your Highness?”

“I have Priests enough to keep myself fed,” Dalibor said, his smile all teeth. “See they are generously attended so my feeding brings them no harm. I enjoy spiced wine if you have it, but otherwise I’m fine.”

Egemen gestured to one of the young wolves hanging about the fringes, who immediately sprinted off to ensure food and wine aplenty would be awaiting them. He then waved everyone else on but signaled Ilkay to linger. When they were alone, where only rude wolves would hear them, he asked, “How does His Highness make you feel?”

Ilkay frowned. “Annoyed. Leery. Strange.”

“Strange how?”

“You seem to already know, Father. Moon. Squirming. Unsettled. *Aware*. Nothing to do with his powers, though I felt those briefly too.”

Egemen scoffed. “The stirring of anger and fear? Wolves will not struggle with such a thing, not unless he makes a much greater, more dangerous effort, and even a demon will not tangle with Wolves so carelessly. That unsettling feeling, though...”

“You feel it too?” A small measure of Ilkay’s tension bled away. “I thought perhaps I was going crazy.”

“I don’t think I feel it as strongly as you do,” Egemen said slowly, thoughtfully. “I must do some consulting. I do not want to speak from a place of ignorance and knowledge gaps. Treat him as kin, though, Ilkay. Kin at the very least.”

The words felt like a punch in the gut. In the nuts. “Kin at the very least,” he repeated hollowly. “Even though he’s a smug, cocky, irreverent fool who thrives on turning people mad with fear and rage.”

Egemen’s mouth twitched, curved into a mischievous half-grin, eyes positively glittering with the laughter he was holding back. “He is rather pretty.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Ilkay retorted, and strode off as his father’s laughter finally broke free.



Farewells

The village, campsite, whatever it was called right now, was bustling with activity as Ilkay and Egemen reached it, everyone excited to see Moon and Moonrise together, to thank them for acting so quickly, doing so much. Egemen brushed the words aside, citing honor and duty, and Ilkay followed suit, slowly working through the throngs of people.

Children ran about the campsite, adaptable as ever, though there were plenty who sat too still, too quiet, comforted by adults who were not their family. Even more adults sat too still, or moved as though not entirely awake, struggling to get through another day while tormented by traumatic events still raw and bleeding.

“I assume rebuilding will begin once the thaw is past?” Ilkay asked as they walked, and people drifted away to resume their various tasks or speak with others.

“Yes, I have assigned some of the council to draw up initial plans. Hopefully by the time the weather permits building we’ll have finalized them. Food stores are sufficient, especially as the dragoons who came from the garrison brought additional foodstuffs for us and established a link in the village, should we require more. All is well up here, my son. You focus on what you will find beneath us and come back to me.”

“I will, Father,” Ilkay replied, and then they fell silent as they reached their tent. The clearing in front of it had a trio of small campfires, with clusters of people around each one, the newcomers chatting with villagers as food was cooked. They all sat on low chairs that kept them off the cold ground, with cushions on the sturdy fabric seats for additional warmth. When the gathering ended, the chairs could be folded and stored away, especially useful in a place where houses were kept small to retain more heat.

Just slightly apart from the crowd, sprawled in one of the folding chairs with his back to a tentpole, was Dalibor, a mug of spiced wine dangling from his fingertips, arm propped on one drawn up knee. The bastard looked infuriatingly beautiful and decadent, very much a prince amongst peasants, though his face was pensive, his thoughts far away. Without his smirks and smug laughter, he almost looked approachable. Not soft, but softer, as though he might call for music and dancing at any moment and invite something small and delicate and pretty to sit in his lap while they enjoyed the entertainment.

Kin at the very least.

The more Ilkay repeated the words, the more he hated them. He didn’t want to treat Dalibor like kin. He didn’t want to treat him like anything other than what he was: a smug, cocky bastard who shouldn’t be anywhere near this problem. What in the world did his father suspect that he would be so cagey about it and yet command that Ilkay treat Dalibor like he was at least as precious as family, if not somehow more so?

Movement caught the corner of his eye, right as a familiar voice called out, “Ilkay!”

He turned, breaking into a smile as his gaze fell on Müge, opening his arms to catch her up and spin her around. Ilkay kissed her as he set her back on her feet, tasting tea and honey. “There’s my Moonshadow.”

“I’m glad you’re home safe and sound.” Müge made a face. “At least for tonight. When do you go back into that accursed cave?”

“Tomorrow, as soon as everyone is rested, and the supplies are ready.” Part of him itched to get straight to work, for what was the point of delaying.

The rest of him knew that taking their time, being careful and well-prepared, was the far wiser course. There was also the matter of saying proper goodbyes, because anything could happen while they were down there... and anything could happen up here, and they would not know until too late.

She smiled, hands curling into the furs draped across his chest. Her eyes were the color of the evergreens around them, and her lips as red as holly berries. Her skin was dark brown, and her nails painted as red as her lips. They’d been kidnapped together, raised together; they’d been each other’s first kiss, first fuck. She was his Moonshadow, and someday he hoped she’d also be his wife and the mother of their children.

Leaning up and in, Müge kissed him, her fingers sinking into his hair, nails digging lightly into his scalp. “Sneak away with me and I’ll give you a thorough good luck send off.”

Ilkay rumbled softly at that, dragging his tongue across her lips, splaying his hands across her back. “What sort of wolf would refuse such a marvelous offer?”

Laughing, Müge dragged him away, past the tents and deep into the woods, until they came to a stop at a cozy little campsite.

“Someone’s been planning this,” Ilkay said with a grin that was one hundred percent hungry wolf.

Müge didn't reply, save to smirk, and immediately set to work on their clothes, casting their furs to join the pile of them that made up their bedding. Ilkay cupped her right breast and bent his head to drag his tongue across the nipple, enjoying the way it tightened beneath his touch. He skated his free hand along her skin, down to cup her ass.

Her nails dug into his back as he teased his mouth up her skin, biting at her neck, her ear, her jaw, before finally taking that perfect mouth once more. "You're more intoxicating than the hunt," he said against her skin before licking into her mouth and kissing her deeply again.

She dragged them to the bedding and pushed him onto his back before straddling his hips. Ilkay immediately reached up to cup and fondle her tits, rubbing his calloused thumbs over her nipples, relishing the way she rubbed against him, already wet and eager. The long, heavy locks of her hair tumbled around her, the wooden and stone charms in them clacking, their polished shine catching the firelight.

After a moment, she pushed his hands away. "Enough, this is your send off, not mine."

"Doesn't that mean I get to do whatever I want?" Ilkay asked.

"It means lie back like a good boy," Müge said, voice husky.

Ilkay laughed in delight. "Yes, Mistress."

Rumbling her satisfaction, Müge shifted back so she could put her mouth to his, taking a deep, biting kiss before working with agonizing slowness down his body, interspersing soft kisses with sharp teeth and scratching nails, leaving marks she immediately dragged her tongue across.

By the time she reached his cock, Ilkay was moaning and writhing in frustration, hands fisted in the blankets in an effort to heed her command to let her do as she pleased. She breathed over his cock, licked the head of it, laughing as he groaned. "Do you want me to suck you or ride you?"

"Ride me, damn it," Ilkay gasped out, because as much as he loved her mouth, there was nothing better than her tight

heat wrapped around him, being buried in her as deep as he could get.

Shifting to straddle him once more, she rose up and grabbed his cock, guided it to her entrance before sinking down with agonizing slowness, leaving him groaning loudly enough to startle away any lingering birds. “Stop tormenting me, woman.”

“It’s so much fun, though, and who knows how long I’ll have to wait before I can do it again.” She started moving faster though, hands braced on his torso as she lifted up and drove back down, fucking herself on his cock. Ilkay clung to her hips, guiding without controlling, admiring the flush to her cheeks, the sweat that made her skin gleam, the heat and hunger in her eyes.

“Müge...” Ilkay said with a groan, because he was close, so close, but it wasn’t enough, and she knew it.

Laughing in smug delight, Müge *stopped* because she was *evil*, and leaned down to plaster herself to his chest and say, “Think you can do better? Prove it, then, Moonrise. Put me on my back and make me feel it, show me what you can do, what you’ll do to me when you come home, when you’re back where you belong. When you can claim me properly before Moon and Wolves, fill me up, make me fat with our children. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*,” Ilkay said, practically snarling the words as he flipped their positions and slid back into her tight, slick heat, kissing her mouth and biting her neck as he fucked her exactly the way she liked, filling the forest with her screams. Her nails dug into his shoulders, legs wrapped around his hips, urging him deeper, keeping him close as she howled her climax.

Ilkay thrust into her a few more times, then took her mouth in another kiss, wet and messy, as he spilled inside her. Pulling out, he collapsed on top of her and lingered briefly before rolling off so his weight wouldn’t crush her.

She sprawled across his chest, heavy locs itching his sweaty skin. “I hope that was a suitable sendoff.”

“A kiss from you would be a perfect sendoff, but you won’t catch me complaining at getting a great deal more,” Ilkay said with a laugh, tracing her mouth with one finger. “I’m glad you’ll be here to take care of everyone for me. Make certain my stubborn father doesn’t push himself too hard.”

“I’ll keep a close eye on him,” Müge replied, and sucked on his finger, making his breath hitch. If they had time, he had every intention of availing himself of her mouth, or putting his mouth to her, making her come so hard her thighs clamped down tightly on his head and he had to push and pull to pry them open again.

“I like whatever thoughts are filling your head, but I don’t think you’re ready to act on them quite yet,” Müge said with a pleased laugh.

“My mouth is always ready to serve you, regardless of the state of the rest of me,” Ilkay said, and put word to deed by pushing her into the blankets and setting to work, loving the way he could taste himself in her.

When they were finally too wrung out to move further, he cleaned them up and pulled the blankets and furs up over them, pulling her close and breathing in the scent of woodsmoke that clung to her hair.

Despite all the worries and fears pressing down on him, Ilkay slept, lulled by the warmth and comfort of Müge’s presence, the simple pleasure of being home.

He woke to the sharp crackle of fire logs breaking and tumbling in on themselves, the flare of sparks—and strange gibberish coming from Müge, still fast asleep beside him. The mumbling words made no sense, perhaps because she was speaking so rapidly.

“Müge?” Ilkay shook her—and reared back when Müge jerked upright, gasping for breath. “Müge, are you all right? What’s wrong?”

“Bad—” she swallowed, pressed a hand to her temple. “Bad dream. Sorry. Hope I didn’t punch you in my sleep or something.”

Ilkay shook his head. “You were speaking strangely.”

“That’s weird. It was just a stupid dream about the earth shaking.” She threw back the furs and went to tend the fire.

Something squirmed in Ilkay’s gut, but he shoved it aside. He knew all about bad dreams and not really wanting to talk about them. Instead, he fetched the basket of food near the fire, and they shared a meal of smoked venison, bread, and soft goat cheese before fucking again in the moonlight.

He was just settling back beneath the warm furs when his father’s summoning howl filled the cold, crisp night. “Damn it.”

“Go,” Müge said. “I’ll pack all this up and follow behind.”

“Are you certain? Come with me, and then we can come back—”

“Run along, Moonrise. I can handle this just fine all by myself.”

He grinned and nipped the finger she’d put to his lips. “Never in doubt, Moonshadow.” Ilkay kissed her, then pulled on his clothes and headed out, pinning the furs in place as he walked quickly through the woods back to the lake.

His father stood just a few paces from the tree line—along with Dalibor, who grinned, his fangs white and sharp in the light of a fat moon.

Egemen’s nostrils flared, and his mouth tipped into an amused smile. “Well, that explains where you’ve been. Come on, your presence is required by the council.” He turned and strode off, steps crunching in the frozen-over snow.

Dalibor, however, lingered, his feral eyes glowing brightly as he looked Ilkay up and down appraisingly that made him bristle. “You smell of pleasure, little pup, but there’s another smell lingering on you, something rancid and burning.”

“Little pup? You’re only a year older than me—you don’t get to call me anything except my title, Your Highness. What I smell like is none of your business.” Ilkay stormed past him, but was stopped by a hand on his wrist, cold and hot all at once, too strong for him to break. He glared. “Let me go.”

Dalibor simply stared back, the glow of his eyes more intense than ever, an oddly pensive look to his face. “The wind smells of demons and old blood, and the ground is saturated with bone dust and forgotten graves. Have a care where you walk and where you find your pleasure, little pup. The moon is too far away to protect you once we are down in the dark and one step closer to hell.”

“I don’t need advice from an impetuous, spoiled brat like you, especially not regarding my own home. You’re here to get rid of a demon, not lecture me.” Ilkay yanked his wrist free, all the angrier because they both knew Dalibor was letting him, and stormed off after his father.

His back and shoulders ached, almost burned, from the ferocity of Müge’s pleasure, improving his mood slightly. He would do whatever it took to fix this problem and come home, work hard to help his wolves through this horror, rebuild what they could, mourn what they could not. He would do his father proud, so he could return to the arms of the Moon with no worries.

Back by the lake, all was calm and quiet, the majority of the village asleep. In front of his father’s tent the council was gathered, smoking pipes and sipping the liquor they never brought out while children might still be awake. Silvery moonlight shone down on them, soft and delicate compared the harsher light of the fire they sat around.

“What need has the council of me?” Ilkay asked as he took his seat beside Egemen. Dalibor stood immediately behind them, looming like an omen.

“Goals,” said Reşide. “Going into that damned cave without a plan or goals is stupid, so we have tended the matter.”

Annoyance stirred in Ilkay, but he tamped it down. “I thought the goal was to find the demon lurking down there and either kill or better cage it. What else would you have the Legion do?”

“Indeed,” Dalibor said. “I answer to Commander Telmé and His Majesty the King. Your goals do not interest me, unless they are the same as my goals. It’s not your place, Wolves, to tell me what to do. You asked for our help and we are helping.”

Several of the councilors bristled, and Reşide said, “Dragon Claw Mountain is *our* domain, and we have the right to demand that you keep the welfare of the whole—”

“You dare lecture me on the welfare of the whole! I, who am one of precious few survivors of the slaughter of the Legion and Guldbrandsen? I, who gave up my humanity to serve the *whole* of Tria Noor? You are not fit, tucked away up here on your cliffs, to lecture *me*—”

“Enough!” Egemen said sharply, and Dalibor subsided with a snarl. “Councilors, you are going about this all wrong. Prince Dalibor, I beg your pardon, their intent is not to give you orders. Their intent is to ensure as best they can the safety of my son. I am dying. He is the next chief of the village. It is absolutely vital he returns alive, whatever the cost. To that end, the goal of the Wolves is to go down there, assess the full weight of what we face, and either fix the problem or withdraw until a true solution can be found.”

Taner said, “It is the duty of Moonrise to put his wolves first, even if that means abandoning the mission to return himself safely to the surface. Do you understand, Moonrise?”

Ilkay would burn in hell before he left others to suffer and die, least of all at the hands of a demon and whatever else lurked down there, but he only nodded as they expected. “I serve the Moon and Her Children. I will do all that I can and must to return to my proper place, I vow.”

“Good,” Cihan replied. “We have mustered all the supplies we can spare for you, and the Legion of course came well-prepared.” Her gaze flicked to Dalibor, then back to Ilkay. “We wanted to send at least three Wolves with you, but Prince Dalibor advised against it. He acceded to one, so we’ve chosen Göksu to accompany you. He will meet you here at sunrise.”

Göksu was coming with him? Relief and worry mixed together in his stomach. He didn’t want Göksu to come to harm, especially when the Wolves had already lost so much... but if there was anyone to have at his side in this nightmare, it was one of his dearest friends. “Understood, council.”

“Then go get some more rest, Moonrise,” Taner said, blowing pipe smoke. “I sense you’ll not get much of that below

the earth.”

Ilkay nodded, rose, and headed into the tent just a few paces behind him, where he stripped down to all but his leggings before crawling beneath the blankets and furs awaiting him.

Sunrise was only a few hours away, and he still needed to pack his own personal supplies, but he couldn't deny that right then he was suddenly exhausted and more than happy to get what sleep he could.

Despite the exhaustion, bad dreams chased him into waking early, and Ilkay scrubbed tiredly at his face as he climbed out of his bedding and stumbled outside to relieve himself, shivering at the biting cold air.

Movement in the lake caught his attention, and he stared, bewildered, as a very naked Dalibor heaved himself out of a hole cut in the ice. Ilkay tucked his cock away and washed his hands with water from a bucket meant for that purpose, unable to entirely tear his eyes away all the while.

Dalibor strode back across the frozen lake, toweling himself dry idly, as though it was a pleasant summer day and not so cold that boiling water would turn to snow if thrown in the air. Had the bastard lost his fucking mind?

He drew closer and closer, and though Ilkay should turn away and get to packing, he couldn't stop staring at the beautiful, arrogant, and irritating figure walking toward him.

Not him, but the pile of clothes, armor, and weapons left just a few paces to his right. Ilkay shook himself. “Why in the world are you bathing in a frozen lake?”

“I like fresh water, and being clean, and neither of those things will be in abundance once we begin our adventure,” Dalibor said, and grinned like a wolf. “You don't seem to have any complaints.”

“I was watching to see if you'd turn blue and fall over like you deserve,” Ilkay retorted. It was a lie, and they both knew it. He'd been staring because Dalibor was hardly difficult to stare at. He was ridiculously beautiful, especially bathed in moonlight, his hair as dark as the shadows around them, those

feral eyes points of golden light. All that trim muscle, the skin as white as the snow... Dalibor was beautiful and drew the eye of anyone in his vicinity without even trying, but that didn't mean Ilkay had the right to so brazenly stare uninvited.

Then again, if the man was going to strut across a lake bare assed for the world to see, of course people were going to fucking stare. Argh. It was too early for this nonsense.

Biting back a snarl of pure frustration, chased by Dalibor's laughter, Ilkay returned to his tent and started going through his belongings for what would best suit for a days long journey into deep, dark caves. A spare set of clothes. He'd come out smelling like the latrines after a bad batch of stew, but there was no help for that. Food would have already been taken care of, but he added jerky and a spare waterskin anyway, along with matches and other camping basics. He also added a tin of tea, one small, nice thing to have. He finished with a couple of knives and some basic writing supplies, should it be necessary to leave messages for others to find.

Ready, he gathered up his clothes for the day, slung the bag over one shoulder, and went inside to clean up and get dressed.

Unlike certain insane princes who dove into frigid lakes, he bathed with warmed water by the fire, and soap that smelled of the wild woods all around them.

"Nice claw marks," a deep voice rumbled.

Ilkay stiffened and turned, glared at Dalibor. Normally he'd tell the bastard to fuck off, but fair was fair. That didn't mean Dalibor got to make remarks on his appearance. "What can I say, the people who fuck me tend to enjoy marking me."

Something flared, hot and bright, in Dalibor's eyes, and for a single moment Ilkay had the wild impression Dalibor was about to surge in and do some marking of his own. He didn't move, though, and Ilkay let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. What in the world was wrong with him? Turning sharply back to the wash basin, he said, "Go away. It's too early to be putting up with you, I don't care what my father has said about treating you like kin."

Dalibor chuckled and the sound of his footsteps rapidly faded, leaving Ilkay feeling tense and wrung out all at once. Fuck, why did that stupid, irritating bastard get to him so much?

Well, he was about to have plenty of time to figure it out.

For the present, he shoved the problem of Dalibor away and finished washing up. He tossed the bathwater out across the lake before pulling on underclothes, dark brown leggings, his good travel boots with fur lining and thick, sturdy laces, along with undershirt, tunic, fur-lined leather vest, braces for his forearms, sheaths for his knives, hidden and not, and finally his furs, a mix of brown, grey, and dark russet-gold. He braided his hair and pinned it up, and settled his pack over his shoulder and across his chest.

He'd be much happier if he could face this problem as a wolf, head on with teeth out, but for now he'd have to settle for human form.

High above, heavy clouds blotted out the sky and promised heavy snows. Ilkay ached to help his wolves, to be here to support them, ensure everyone was warm and safe, had sufficient food and firewood, a shoulder to rest on and ears to listen to all they needed to say. He was required elsewhere, though, and so he shoved the ache away with everything else he couldn't deal with at present and focused on the task entrusted to him.

"Morning, Moonrise," Göksu said as he reached the clearing, carrying a bag similar to Ilkay's.

"Good morning." Ilkay clasped his forearm, then reeled him into a tight embrace nuzzling his cheek before burying his head in Göksu's hair, feeling Göksu's warm breaths against his throat. "Thank you for coming with me."

Göksu smiled, though it didn't quite drive away the sadness in his eyes. "It's always an honor to serve you, Moonrise, and you're my best friend besides." He slowly let go and resettled the strap of his bag. "Anyway, I'm still not doing well being amongst... everyone. Holding still is bad for me."

Ilkay hugged him again and kissed his cheek before nuzzling softly, sharing scent and offering comfort. "All will

never be right, but it will be well.” His father had said the words to him a thousand times, and Ilkay could only hope he sounded half as reassuring. He wasn’t ready to be Moon.

As always, life didn’t care about ready.

“Göksu, good morning,” Egemen said as he came out of his tent.

Bowing his head, Göksu replied, “Good Morning, Moon. Thank you again for permitting me the honor of serving as Moonrise’s protector.”

“My *what*,” Ilkay said. “Nobody mentioned that part.”

Egemen chuffed and ruffled his hair, laughing when Ilkay scowled. “Of course you would go with a guardian. I wish we did not have to send you at all, but if the problem is as dire as it seems...” He sighed, then pulled first Göksu and then Ilkay into a tight embrace. “Be careful, both of you. There’s been enough death. We do not want to have to send more of our children to the Moon’s embrace before we absolutely must.”

“We’ll fight with tooth and claw to return,” Ilkay said gruffly. “Have a care yourself while I’m gone, Father.”

“No promises.” Egemen drew back and reached behind his neck. “Take this with you.”

“Father...” Ilkay’s eyes stung as Egemen affixed the necklace around his neck. It was made of what the Wolves called tree quartz, rare and beautiful white stone with black inclusions that resembled the branches of the evergreen trees so vital to their way of life. This particular piece was carved into a rounded triangle, like a small piece of mountain forest captured in stone. It had been a wedding gift from his mother and was his father’s most precious belonging. His voice cracked as he said, “Father, you can’t—”

“I can and I will. If you’re so worried about it, make sure you can return it to me.”

Ilkay just hugged him tightly, painfully aware it might be the very last time he was able to do so.

He only pulled away at the sound of additional people entering the circle and nodded in greeting to the Legion. Two

Geomancers, two Shadowmarch, four Priests, a Prince of the Blood, and two Wolves of the Moon. That was all that would stand between Tria Noor and the monster lurking in the dark.

Moon willing it would be enough.



Into the Dark

“Demon for certain,” Dalibor said as they reached the entrance to the cave that in turn led to the hidden temple. “I thought that was what I sensed upon arrival, but standing here, the power and the stench are unmistakable. There is a demon buried down in the dark, and it is close to escaping its cage.”

Ilkay covered his nose and mouth as the overwhelming stench assaulted him. He’d really hoped he’d just imagined how bad it was. Unfortunately, it seemed his memories had in fact dulled the horror. “Why does it smell so moon-forsaken awful?”

“Lots of death, lots of rage, lots of rancid hate,” Dalibor replied. He motioned the others through, until only he and Ilkay

remained on the safe side of the entrance. Looking at the wolves standing guard, he said, “Seal the entrance behind us. No one goes in, no one come out, not until you see me or Moonrise. Even then, assume the worst until we can prove we are true and not something possessed. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“After you, Moonrise,” Dalibor said, the words not quite flippant, but close enough to set Ilkay’s teeth on edge all the same.

Ilkay stepped through the crack in the stone, into the putrid dark, followed closely by Dalibor. He stood so close Ilkay could feel the brush of the fur that trimmed the collar of his cloak, the leather of his armor. So close he could smell woodsmoke and blood, and a faint hint of something feral beneath that. Something that scraped and clawed at him, left him feeling restless and on edge.

Glowing yellow eyes met his, something hungry and aching in their depths, something that beckoned, made Ilkay’s breath hitch.

The echoing scrape of stone broke the spell, and he jerked back, away, until there was space enough between them he could breathe. “Why are you like this?” he muttered.

He’d meant the words for himself, but Dalibor grinned in that toothy, hungry way of his before striding past him. Praying for the patience that always seemed to vanish the moment Dalibor was in sight, Ilkay followed him, deeper into the rotting dark.

Dalibor lingered at the foot of the spiraling stairs, staring down into the depths, though whether he saw something or not, Ilkay had not the slightest. “Smells like dead minion. Sergeant, weave us a return, keep a priest with you at all times.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“We can leave off formalities down here; there is no time or space for them,” Dalibor replied. “Shadowmarch, do what you do best. The rest of you, spread out as you go down the stairs, Wolves to the rear for the clearest exit. Don’t argue with me, Moonrise,” he added when Ilkay made to do precisely that.

“We are sealed up in here with a demon—I am in charge, and you’ll do as I say. See you at the bottom.”

Before anyone could reply, Dalibor took a quick running leap off the edge and vanished into the dark.

“I hate him,” Ilkay said, the words pitched low enough that only Göksu could hear him. “I hate him so very, very much.”

Göksu cast him a far too knowing look. “Really? Because the way you two look at each other, I’d swear you want to fuck.”

“I would rather be eaten by the fucking demon we’re trying to find,” Ilkay said, and strode off as Göksu just laughed more.

First his father, now Göksu. Why was everyone so convinced he wanted to do anything other than throttle Dalibor?

Gizem called up small orbs of light much like the ones that had followed them inside from the entrance, save hers glowed more of a greenish-yellow. She walked close to the inner edge of the stairs, one hand on the wall at all times, though from the way she murmured beneath her breath, it wasn’t for safety. Every now and then the wall seemed to shimmer where she touched, so that must have to do with the path Dalibor had ordered her to make.

The Shadowmarch...

Where were the Shadowmarch? Ilkay could smell them ever so faintly but not see them.

No one else seemed bothered by their absence, though, so he said nothing.

The Priests were fanned out as ordered, one a few paces ahead of Ilkay, who in turn was followed by Göksu. Another Priest was with Gizem, the remaining two spread out in front of them, leading the way with blue-white lights of their own.

Save for their footsteps and occasional talk, the place was silent. Too silent. Too still. There was no wind, no scent of sky and forest. Just damp and rot.

A distant crashing-thud echoed and boomed up the stairs, signaling Dalibor's dramatic jump had found its dramatic finish. Ilkay rolled his eyes. "Why was that necessary?"

"To clear a path," Kaan, one of the priests, said. "In case anything dangerous has emerged since your last visit, which is far from impossible."

Ebubekir, another priest, added with a huff of amusement, "Don't let Dalibor fool you—all the Princes are like that, even Prince Telmé, though he's better than the others about controlling it. Demons and humility don't really go hand in hand."

The rest of the Legion snickered, even the Shadowmarch Ilkay still could not see.

"All right, I give up, where are the other two?" He scabbled for their names. "Temür and Yiğit."

"Ahead of me," said Arslan, the priest in the lead. "Weaving their own magic, learning the shape and feel and taste of the darkness here. You won't see them often and be worried when you do."

Ilkay bobbed his head in silent acknowledgement of the words.

He breathed a sigh of relief as they reached the bottom without incident. He hadn't expected problems, but he also wasn't going to get cocky.

Unlike certain stupid Princes.

Who was crouched in the midst of the rancid corpse at the base of the stairs, idly licking something from his thumb. "What do you sense, Shadowmarch?"

"Residue of a minion, dead at least one hundred years," came a soft, sibilant voice.

Another, pitched only slightly lower than the first, added, "Came close to breaking free, but a last trap caught it unawares. The trap will not work a second time. Whatever comes this way will break free unless new means prevent it."

"Set your traps, and tell me where I am needed," Dalibor said, and stepped out of the center of the remains.

“What’s a minion?” Göksu asked.

Dalibor glanced his way. “A sliver of a demon’s shadow, most often sent out to protect or investigate, occasionally as a vanguard to clear a path. I would wager this one was attempting to find sufficient resources to break the demon itself free, but it was not strong enough to survive all the safeties that were laid for just such an occurrence. Where is this altar room filled with bones?”

“This way,” Ilkay said, and took over the lead as they walked the unexciting straight line to the end of the hallway, where the broken doors awaited.

Surging forward, Dalibor grabbed and pulled, tearing the broken remains away, reducing them to little more than splinters, until the doorway was cleared. Baring the grisly altar within. The stench of blood and old bones remained, punctuated by a sharp undercurrent of sulfur and hot metal.

Dalibor prowled through the doorway and along the walkway to the sacrificial altar. “There must be thousands. Pity we’ve no hyper counter; knowing the exact number of bodies might be useful. At the very least, it would be interesting.”

Ilkay stared at him. “What in the world is a hyper counter?”

“It’s an ability found in those who bear the blood of demons of greed and avarice. Rare and prized. I don’t recall if there was ever a Prince who possessed the skills. Such demons are more dangerous than most, for the nature of their skills lies in knowing and manipulating.” He grinned at Ilkay, all teeth. Did he know any other way to smile? “Unlike my ilk, where subtlety is a waste of time.”

“Something tells me you weren’t much for subtle as a human either,” Ilkay retorted.

Dalibor laughed. “True enough.” He jumped off the edge of the altar and into the bones, vanishing swiftly from sight. The sharp smell of fresh blood filled the room, making all the markings carved into stone shimmer and glow.

Walking to the spot where he’d jumped, Ilkay hissed down, “Would you be more careful? What if you just woke

something up?”

“That’s the point,” Dalibor said from behind him.

Ilkay whipped around, slipped on a slick piece of stone—and was caught by a hand in his furs and hauled back in, right into Dalibor’s space.

“Careful, little pup.” Dalibor let him go slowly.

“Don’t call me that,” Ilkay hissed. “I’ve told you before. Call me Moonrise, or don’t fucking talk to me. I’ll forsake the Moon Herself before I let someone like *you* call me an endearment like that.”

“Like me?” Dalibor asked. “A demon, you mean?”

“I mean an arrogant, reckless fool who cares more about being flashy than doing the right thing.”

Dalibor’s lip curled. “Better than a sanctimonious, unbending tyrant whose only interest is being better than everyone else.”

“It is—I am not. Fuck you,” Ilkay said, and shoved him away, striding across the altar to the beheading block. “So how do we get across? Short of wading through bones and climbing up, anyway.”

Dalibor’s laughter filled the room, a rolling, rippling sound filled with power and a hint of gleeful menace. There was a timbre in his voice, enthralling and terrifying, that hadn’t been there a moment before as he said, “Bones, of course, wolfling. Fresh would be more fun, but old and dusty will suffice.”

Ilkay whipped back around and stared, hairs on the back of his neck standing up. “What—”

He stopped as bones rattled. Clicked and clacked. Shuffled and shook, until the entire bowl of them looked and sounded like somebody was stirring a grisly stew meant to feed giants.

Then the bones began to move up, around, coming together in front of the beheading block, arranging into a grisly bridge, with the large thigh bones forming planks, supplemented by other leg and arm bones, the edges lined with skulls and

pelvises, and more skulls set on bones like spikes, the eyes glowing hellish red, to mark the ends of the bridge.

“What in the *fuck*,” Göksu snarled, eyes glowing as he fought the urge to turn into a wolf and run the way common sense dictated. “Who comes up with this shit?”

“The kind of people who think nothing of amassing a pile of bodies, a pile that is almost entirely women and children,” Dalibor said. “Shadowmarch, take point.”

At first, nothing seemed to happen, which was hardly surprising, but as Ilkay looked away from the bridge, the corner of his eye caught the barest hints of movement. Faint shadows moved, like the dark itself had taken form. When he tried to watch directly, though, they weren't there. “They're giving me a headache.”

Dalibor grinned, but for once said nothing.

After a few minutes, the shadows returned and slowly faded into the familiar figures of Temür and Yiğit. “There is a slight crack in the door, near the bottom right corner,” Temür said. “That is likely how the minion broke free, but the remaining power on the doors kept the demon itself from escaping.”

Yiğit continued, “I feel no residue of the demon itself, so chances are it couldn't even make it this far.”

“Let's hope that remains true. I'd rather go to it than the demon find us,” Dalibor said. “Anything else?”

“Blood of the Three to break the binding,” Temür replied.

Dalibor grunted. “We expected that. Stand ready. Gizem, Reşat, with me. The rest of you, remain here until I tell you it's safe. Well, relatively safe.”

Ilkay chafed at having constantly to heed the orders of others, especially *his*, but the Legion had spoken and Moonrise had agreed. *Kin at the very least*. Bah.

He stood with the others and watched, nerves taut, as Dalibor led the way cross the bone bridge, up to the door where all their problems waited.

When the trio reached the door, they fanned out, with Gizem to Dalibor's left, and Reşat to his right. Almost as one, they sliced open the palms of their hands and pressed them to the door: Earth, Heaven, Hell, the Sacred Three.

An echoing, almost booming groan filled the air as the doors cracked open, and the entire place rattled and shook alarmingly as they continued to open, the marks carved into them glowing what seemed like a hundred different colors.

Ilkay and Göksu covered their ears against the noise, cringing back into each other, whimpering softly. Why did everything always have to be so fucking *loud*. He really should have thought more about what it meant to go into such a quiet space, where every single noise would echo.

“Get back!” Dalibor snarled, even as something came lunging out of the half-opened doors, slamming into him and Gizem and sending them both toppling backward into the pile of bones. The smell of blood filled the air, sharp and metallic, thick like a rich soup or sharp cheese.

More movement came from the doors, and Ilkay threw off what he could of his clothes before shifting, Göksu doing the same behind him. He lunged out of the way of the *thing* coming at him, back to the door they'd originally come through.

There seemed to be six of the things in all, some bizarre combination of cat and dog, with claws far too long for either, their skin a strange, patchy mix of fur and scale, and teeth that seemed too big and long for their jaws. They looked less like a single creature and more like someone had taken two or three and mushed them together.

They smelled rancid and burning.

Something about those words...

The thought flew from his head as two of the creatures came charging at them. Ilkay braced himself, dodged at the last moment, then turned and threw himself at it, sinking teeth into the back of its neck and biting down. Bones crunched, flesh and sinew tearing, but the damn thing only threw him off, sent him slamming into the nearby cave wall, causing chunks of rock to come crashing down on all of them.

Ilkay picked himself up just in time to face off with the little fucker he'd bitten, feinting a lunge, then slamming it into the wall before clamping down on its snout and heaving for all he was worth, sending it flying, then sliding-tumbling across the ground to dangle over the rim of the bowl.

As it struggled to its feet, Ilkay lunged one more time, getting the back of its neck again and not letting go until it stopped squirming, using all his weight to keep it in place.

When it had gone still, and he could not longer hear its heartbeat or feel it breathe, he withdrew and took stock.

The fight seemed to be over. Ilkay yipped and howled, heart seizing when no reply came—and then nearly melting into a puddle of relief as a series of cranky yips came from the bone pile. He looked over the edge, tongue lolling, and chuffed in amusement as Göksu came into view. *“Well done, dumbass.”*

“At least I didn't get thrown into a wall like a toddler's toy.”

Ilkay laughed as they shifted and extended a hand, the other braced on the rim, and pulled Göksu up as he grabbed it. When they were both on their feet, he swept his gaze over Göksu, looking for injuries, but minus some scrapes and bruises, he seemed fine. “All well?”

“All well, Moonrise,” Göksu said, and Ilkay would swear he'd gone red in the face, though in the poor light it was hard to tell for certain. From the fight? Before he could ask further if Göksu was truly well, movement and voices drew his attention. He looked over each of the others. “Everyone all right?”

“Yes,” replied Gizem sourly, holding a badly mangled arm against her chest while Ebubekir healed it. Her skin had lost much of its color, but she stood as though being able to see her own bones and muscle was completely normal.

He squinted at her. “Aren't you in horrible pain?”

Gizem shrugged the shoulder of her good arm. “I think the brain sort of shuts off after a point, it's so overwhelmed, and now the healing has started it's not as bad. You should have seen the time a goblin almost took my whole foot off.”

“How pleasant.”

“Welcome to the Legion,” Reşat said from behind them, and Ilkay turned to look at him. “Do either of you require healing?”

“Only my pride,” Ilkay said with a sigh. “I really did get thrown like a damned ragdoll.”

Nearby, Kaan snorted as he finished healing Temür. “You must have missed His Highness being thrown all the way up and bringing down several stalactites with him.”

Ilkay frowned and looked around the cave again. “Where *is* Dalibor?”

“Here,” Dalibor said, and Ilkay looked up to where he was sprawled on a narrow ledge high up the cave wall. “Those little bastards were quick and strong, I’ll give them that.” He rolled to the edge and tumbled down, landing on his feet like a cat.

Göksu wrinkled his nose. “What were they? I’ve never seen nor smelled anything like them.”

“Mountain Kobold,” Temür replied, fading into visibility several paces away. He looked Göksu and Ilkay over, mouth quirking in amusement. “Shall I fetch your clothes for you?”

“Oh, right,” Ilkay said with a sigh. “We can get them, thanks. They don’t look like any Kobold I’ve ever seen, but we rarely get them around here. Too high up for them. They only come this far when they’re especially hungry or sick and mad.”

He walked across the stone bridge to the altar, where his clothes thankfully proved to be intact, as all Wolf clothes were stitched with hasty transformation in mind, the seams meant to be easily torn and easily repaired, sparing the fabric itself. Pulling on what he could, he shoved the rest into his bag to stitch up whenever they made camp.

“Useful having Wolves around,” Gizem said, gingerly testing her freshly healed arm. “You move *fast*. I rarely see that kind of speed outside the Dragoons and Princes. I also keep forgetting how big you are, which is stupid, but still.”

Ilkay grinned, not above a touch of preening. “We are forged by and for the Moon, to fight in Her name until the end of time.”

“I’m sure she’ll have a thrilling reward for you, someday,” Dalibor said with his toothy smile, sharp fangs gleaming as they briefly caught the light hovering just over his shoulder. “Bet she’d leave scratches on your back too.”

Göksu stared at him in horror. “That’s blasphemy!”

Dalibor laughed, the sound genuine and more pleasant than it had any right to be. “You should hear what I say about the Sacred Three.” He prodded one of the dead Kobold with his sword. “These Kobold were possessed by demon taint, turned into something very like minions... but they could not find their way back to their master, grew warped and twisted. Strange and rare. Where does the demon reside that its own minions could not return to it?” He sheathed his sword. “I hear nothing further behind the spelled doors. Shall we continue on?”

“Is no an option?” Göksu muttered, but at a look from Ilkay, fell into place beside him and followed after the others past the half-open doors and onward to the next stage of the nightmare.

After the grisly altar room, Ilkay had expected more of the same. Neatly stacked piles of bones, maybe. Pools of blood that somehow never solidified. Something horrific, for certain.

Instead, they seemed to be in some sort of living quarters. An entry hall, specifically, but he could see doors cut into several walls, entire boulders standing free that had been somehow hollowed out and turned into living quarters.

“How is this possible?” Göksu asked. “I’m not crazy, right? It’s not normal to be able to do this? The rocks would shear and break. You can’t just hollow them out like a fucking squash.”

Laughing, Kaan cast him a look. “I get the distinct feeling you’re the level-headed, no nonsense one in your family.”

Göksu flinched back like he’d been slapped, and Ilkay immediately surged in to pulled him close, offer comfort.

Kaan's face filled with horror. "I'm so sorry, I'm an ass, that was a stupid thing to say."

Ilkay shook his head. "You couldn't have known, and it's a common thing to say."

"All the same, I'm sorry. I don't know your traditions, but I hope your family has found solace wherever they now rest. With your Moon, and not in a crass way." She shot Dalibor a look.

Dalibor rolled his eyes. "As though being fucked by a Goddess for the rest of time would be such an awful fate."

"Your Highness," Temür hissed.

"Fine, fine," Dalibor said. "Explore this area, see if we can find a suitable place to make a base camp. Go in pairs, and for the love of the Three be careful. We'll be lucky if more warped Kobolds is all we come across. When you've gone a thousand paces from this spot, turn back and report."

"Yes, Your Highness," the group chorused, despite his earlier admonition to leave off formalities. Habit was habit, though.

Ilkay headed off with Göksu at his side, going southeast from the entrance, where it seemed the living quarters curved around part of the altar room.

They came across bedrooms first. One room was large enough to have multiple bunks, similar to the kind used by soldiers in garrisons, a human school Ilkay had seen once while visiting the city with his father.

Other rooms held just one or two beds, and writing desks hewn from the stone itself, like so much else. Sadly, nothing remained on the desks but mildewed ruins, too ravaged to glean anything from them.

"This place smells of sadness," Göksu said. "At least, that's the best way I can describe it."

Ilkay grunted. "Despair. Sadness and despair." He stepped out of the latest room explored and went on to the next—and froze in surprise as he registered it was not as barren as the others. A skeleton sat at the writing desk, in a chair that

looked like it would crumble the moment someone breathed on it. “Fetch one of the priests; they seem best suited to this.” When Göksu frowned, Ilkay waved him on. “I’m fine. Go. Quickly.”

Göksu obeyed, running off back the way they’d come.

Ilkay ventured further into the room, increasingly baffled as he took in the contents—that there were contents at all, when the other rooms had been essentially bare. The bed even still had blankets, though they were rotted and covered in thick layers of dust and mildew. Beside the bed, a small crate of some sort held a small brass candleholder, the candle itself long gone, the brass so badly aged it probably couldn’t be salvaged. Beneath it, as though the candleholder had served as a weight, were papers surprisingly free of rot and mildew, thin and fragile, the writing faded to almost nothing.

There were more papers on the desk, and a book covered in rotted leather that might have once been red. Hunched over it, as though they’d died doubled over in pain, was the skeleton, draped in robes that might have also been red once, though Ilkay had no idea for certain.

Near one of the skeleton’s hands was a bottle of brown glass, the kind still used now to hold various medicinals. The label was long eroded, but it didn’t take a sharp mind to guess the bottle’s contents had been more poison than solution.

Not much of a mystery how this person had died.

Ilkay was far more curious about why they’d been down here, why they seemed to be the only one down here, though to be fair, he didn’t know what the others had found.

What a sad, grim fate.

On the other hand, if this person had been party to the sacrifices in the altar room, it was hard to keep feeling sorry for them. Still, Ilkay wouldn’t judge until he knew for certain the role this person had played in the grisly world around them.

He turned at the sound of footsteps, bristling as he recognized the tread, scowling when Dalibor came into view. “What are you doing here?”

Dalibor's brows rose. "Following a blood trail. What about you, little pup?"

"Stop calling me that, or I'll punch you so hard I snap those fangs right off," Ilkay retorted.

Predictably, Dalibor only grinned at the threat. "But I so enjoy the way your heart jumps, just a little bit, every time I say it."

"You're hearing things," Ilkay said, and jerked back around to continue studying the desk, determined to ignore Dalibor and his infuriating everything.

Thankfully, before Dalibor could provoke him further, Göksu returned with Ebubekir. "That's the third body we've found so far," he said as he stepped into the room, which seemed suffocatingly small with four of them crammed in there. "This one has a book, a journal if I had to guess. We need that. I'm going to fetch Gizem. The rest of you get out of here before you accidentally destroy something. We can't afford to have that journal so much as breathed on too heavily until we know whether or not it's important."

"Your Highness," Dalibor drawled, mockingly bowing his head. He was the first to slip out of the room, though, followed by Göksu and Ilkay.

"What did you mean by a trail of blood?" Ilkay asked. "I neither smell nor see it."

Dalibor's eyes were on the stalactites above them as he replied, "You wouldn't. It's old, faded, barely discernable even to me. Come, I'll show you where it starts. Have a care—something lurks above us, only curious for now, but that might change."

"If it's a giant spider, I'm leaving," Göksu muttered as they followed Dalibor deeper into the complex.



Death

The trail of blood ended, or rather began, at a scene of violence.

Three skeletons, two of them still covered in scraps of cloth that would probably turn into dust the moment they were touched, the last in nothing at all. That one had a dagger beneath it, as though it had fallen out once there was no longer sufficient flesh to hold it in place.

A close examination of the other two skeletons showed they too had been victims of a dagger. Likely the same one, but possibly more than one had been in play.

“So the man in the room probably killed these men, or witnessed them killing each other, and then went back to his room to drink poison?” Ilkay asked.

“Something like that,” Dalibor said. “Hopefully that journal you found will provide answers. Certainly it was not a pleasant conversation between friends.”

Göksu shook his head, voice barely above a whisper as he said, “What in the Moon’s name happened down here?”

“Nothing good,” muttered one of the Shadowmarch, making Göksu jump slightly. Ilkay gave him an amused look, and Göksu smiled sheepishly. The Shadowmarch snickered and faded off again.

Ilkay looked at Dalibor, who was crouched in front of the two skeletons closest to each other, the ones who still wore scraps of clothing. “Anything you see or smell that we can’t?”

“Magic, barely,” Dalibor replied, prodding at one of the skeletons. “I think this one was what we would today consider a Geomancer. The other one, a priest maybe. Hard to say for certain. The one with the knife, I smell no magic, which is stranger. The one you found definitely smelled of it. I would say whatever happened down here, these four were probably the last remaining, and there was an argument, a betrayal, or both. If it was not the man in the bed who sealed everything away, or one of these three, then it was someone who found them and decided best to leave all as it was and ensure no one else came down here.” He stood up and brushed dust and dirt from his hands. “I could be completely wrong, of course. Only the dead could tell us what truly happened here, and they’re too old and rotted to be made to do that.”

Ilkay hadn’t known making the dead speak was an option, and he really didn’t want to know how such a thing was possible. The less he ever knew about the matter, the happier he would be. “The Order of the Shadow of Samil. The High Priest called it an offshoot sect of the Sacred Three.”

“After a fashion,” said Ebubekir. “A radical offshoot, they believed Three was actually Four: Heaven, Hell, and that Earth was more accurately divided into Life and Death. They believed that Holy Samil had been denied her rightful place, a

goddess of death and destruction stricken from the record, wrongfully relegated to mere demon.”

“I don’t know much about the Sacred Three, but I know they represent the three balances of the world: heaven, earth, hell, and that life and death are represented in each one. Why would you eliminate earth and regulate life and death to that singular place in its stead?”

“Priests spend their entire lives trying to answer such questions, and we rarely find answers,” Ebubekir replied. “Perhaps we did once believe there were four goddesses and not three. Religion changes with the people who follow it, or worse, doesn’t change, and brings only zealotry and ruin.” He spread his arms. “Much like you see before us.”

Dalibor laughed. “Well, I guess none of us will be accepted as members of the order.”

Ilkay rolled his eyes. “Did a cult like this have some ultimate purpose? Or did they just murder people in the name of death and then go home for dinner?”

That made Dalibor laugh again, but this one was different somehow. There was no mockery in it, just amusement, warm and pleased at what was really a stupid joke that didn’t deserve encouragement. “I’m sure for the leaders, the power was enough. Strictly speaking, though, I believe their goal was to spread Samil’s name across the world, give her back her ‘rightful place’ as the Goddess of Goddesses, above her lesser sisters, supreme ruler, so on and so forth.”

Ebubekir added, “They were at the height of their power some decades before the wars, all but forgotten by then, near as we can determine. We thought all of their strongholds had been destroyed, by time if not by purpose. Until you came to us, we had no idea this temple even existed.”

Göksu looked around, eyes lingering above them before he dropped his gaze. “How did they build all this?”

“Geomancy and hellish magic,” Gizem replied. “Sorcerers mostly. Wouldn’t surprise me if alchemy was involved too. Not that they would have used those terms back

then. Magic was simply holy, hellish, or earthly in those days, and then subdivided differently according to region.”

The other Geomancer, Ümit, added, “High level Geomancy at that. I couldn’t do this—I can barely carve and mold the earth in the castle.”

Ilkay’s nostrils flared with amusement. “Wouldn’t it be easier to do that with a shovel?”

Gizem and Ümit laughed, and Gizem replied, “For some things, yes. But we’re charged with diverting a great deal of water from the rivers, into ponds and other such things, and that’s easier done with magic than manual labor. Still, it takes a good deal of practice to do it reliably and accurately with just earth, which is malleable and somewhat forgiving. Stone is something else entirely, especially down here, where one mistake could bring the whole mountain down on your head. They must have had several of them, and all highly skilled. The Legion had such once, and hopefully will again someday, but it certainly does not right now.”

“Not that we’re anything to scoff at,” Ümit added, “but it’s true I couldn’t carve all these caves into living quarters or temples. I wish.” He started to say more, but a shout came from the opposite side of the cavern, where the remaining priests had gone to investigate.

Dalibor led the way, sword out, but thankfully when they arrived, it was to see all was well. Absolutely horrifying, but well.

It was Göksu who broke the silence. “That is the biggest spider web I’ve ever seen in my life. Somebody please tell me it belongs to a whole lot of normal-sized spiders and not one unnecessarily giant spider.”

“I’m getting the distinct impression you don’t like spiders,” Dalibor said.

“He was bitten by a giant cave spider as a child, and it was not a pleasant time. Most of us, the bite is irritating for a few days. Göksu almost died.”

“I’m going to die for real if I have to see the spider that wove that web.”

Dalibor gave him a look that was mostly amused, but not without sympathy. “Then I suggest you not look up.”

Göksu whimpered, bringing his hands to his head as though to make absolutely certain he would not see whatever lurked above them.

Ilkay possessed no such restraint and followed Dalibor’s eyes up and up—and there it was, a large shadow tucked in amongst the enormous stalactites. “Is that what’s been watching us this whole time?”

“Yes, and I hope it continues to do so, but there’s a whiff of demon on it, so my hopes are faint,” Dalibor said, then turned his attention back to the priest who summoned them. “Was there something else you wanted us to see, or was it to warn us of our skulking friend up there?”

“We wouldn’t bother to think we’d found a monster before you,” Kaan replied with a laugh. “No, it only recently returned to this part of the cave, coming from your side. We’re more interested in what the web is hiding. I think there’s a chamber behind it.”

Ilkay frowned, staring again at the enormous, deeply unsettling web. “You’re right, there is something behind it. But how to get to it?” Because there was a significant chasm between where they stood and the swath of stone where the web and hidden chamber were located, and it was also nearly a full body length higher, which was not an easy jump. Made him wonder just how stable anything they stood on really was.

“Used to be stairs or something there,” Göksu said, pointing all the way to the left, where a chunk of stone higher than the rest of the edge did seem to be carved into stairs. The other end, the chamber side, had a dangling stair and a half as well.

Looking at the distance and angle, frowning thoughtfully, Ilkay said, “I could make the jump as a wolf, but I’m not sure I trust that... platform or whatever it’s called.” He looked upward, a shiver running down his spine as he saw the too-large spider shift slightly, its long, sinuous legs twitching like fingers waiting to grab.

Sacrifices. Bridges made of bone. Murder. Poison. Giant spiders.

This place was a fucking nightmare, and they'd only been down here a few hours.

"It's too dangerous, Moonrise," Göksu said.

"Agreed," Dalibor said before Ilkay could reply. "I'll handle it. Be ready to run if I piss off our mistress up there."

Ilkay stared at him, eyes narrowed, not remotely liking his word choice. "Mistress?"

Dalibor bared his teeth. "Yes, little pup. Mistress. Or didn't you see the egg sac in the web?"

"Can we leave now?" Göksu asked with a whimper, covering his eyes with the heels of his hand. "I was pretending that wasn't there."

One of the Shadowmarch laughed, soft and sibilant, a rustling breeze. "The spider will be no threat to you, pup."

Göksu grimaced. "I'll deal with it if I must. I'm just going to whine a lot in the meantime." He regarded them, or at least the direction from which their voices seemed to come, thoughtfully. "I would imagine I do seem silly to the Legion, who face much worse all the time. Can't imagine there's much that scares you."

"Everything we face is terrifying," Arslan said, eyes on the lurking spider. "It's our duty, though. We are Legion, a formation of monsters to fight worse monsters. At least we can fight our fears, unlike so many of those who die when we fail or show up too late."

Göksu and Ilkay said, "From pain we strengthen, from fear we grow, from sorrow we love."

"I see pain break people far more often than I see it strengthen them," Dalibor said, "but I get the idea. Now less talking and more doing. Stay here. I'm going to check out that chamber and possibly deal with the spider. Hopefully it's the only one, but if there's an egg sac, we have to assume the father might be around as well." He didn't wait for a reply, but did a

standing jump powerful enough he landed on the distant, higher ledge of the chamber platform with neither effort nor trouble.

“Showoff,” Ilkay muttered, causing Göksu and some of the others to laugh, and for Göksu to shoot him a look that he was really getting tired of. A look that said *I know you think he’s good looking and interesting, and you’re not fooling any of us.*

Over his dead body would he ever say anything nice about Dalibor.

Approaching the web, Dalibor threw out a hand, and Ilkay sucked in a sharp breath through his nostrils as instead of the blade he’d expected, Dalibor *burned* a large swath of the web away. The flames were blood red, eerie and out of place, gone as quickly as they’d appeared. He hadn’t known the Princes of the Blood could use fire. Was it unique to Dalibor? Like Telmé’s famous red lightning?

High above them, the spider remained tucked into the stalactites, eight glowing yellowish eyes watching intently. Why wasn’t it attacking? Surely Dalibor at the very least was close enough now that he’d be considered a threat to the sac? So why...

His hackles rose, a feeling of overwhelming dread slamming into him. Next to him, Göksu growled.

“Something’s wrong,” the Shadowmarch hissed in unison, even as from nearby Ilkay heard the sound of something scraping against stone, a noise like a cat hissing and growling at the same time.

He whipped around, and just barely dodged in time as an enormous, sharply pointed hairy leg came crashing down on him. Göksu screamed and reared back in the other direction, terror getting the better of him.

Dalibor shouted something, but it was cut off by a cry of pain, and Ilkay couldn’t spare the attention to see what was wrong as he dodged another attack from the spider.

Which was at least twice the size of the other one.

They’d made a mistake. A stupid, careless mistake. The spider they’d been able to see was the *male*. He’d been biding

his time waiting for the female, had probably called her back to the nest. Stupid, so fucking stupid. He *knew* cave spiders. The females were always bigger, and far more predatory, than the males. How could he have made such a careless mistake?

“Stay away from the edge!” he bellowed. “Get to the other side! She’ll push you off if you don’t!”

The Legion moved immediately at the order. The spider moved sharply at the last moment, cutting right and knocking Ümit back, sending him tumbling head over feet—and right off the edge, into the darkness.

Fuck.

Ilkay yanked off his clothes, not even caring where they landed, shifting to wolf before going to work drawing the spider’s attention while everyone else finished fleeing to a safe distance. Including Göksu, who tried to stay with him, but went with a whine when Ilkay pushed the matter. He didn’t care what his father’s orders were—nobody was dying for him.

One dead already was too fucking many.

He tensed, gathering all the momentum he could, and lunged for one of the spider’s legs, snapping it in his jaws, yanking hard, ripping the broken bit of leg off and sending the spider faltering briefly. That opened up a chance for one of the Shadowmarch to surge in and take out a front leg, which put the spider further off balance.

But by no means stopped it. The spider hissed, lunged, its dripping fangs only barely missing Kaan. Ilkay went for the next leg. Unfortunately, that drew the spider’s attention back to him, and he only barely missed a swipe from one of its deadly legs, which shattered the rock behind him.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Rolling to his feet, Ilkay made another lunge, not stopping as he got his jaws around yet another leg but continuing to run, sending the spider crashing to the cave floor.

The Shadowmarch and remaining geomancer surged in, slicing the spider open the length of its abdomen, reddish flames

flickering around the blade, vines twining around it with brilliant orange flowers blooming.

The spider screamed, shrieked, and thrashed violently in its death throes. They all reared back—but not quickly enough in Reşat’s case, one leg going straight through his torso, leaving a hole at least half the size of Ilkay’s head.

“No!” the other priests screamed, but even as they tried to heal Reşat, it was clearly too late.

Ilkay jumped as the spider thrashed one last time before going still, but too late, and wound up slammed into the cave wall so hard everything shuddered, his vision going black at the edges, body screaming in pain, brain too dazed to work.

There was a cracking sound, an ominous rumbling, and he looked up just as everyone shouted a warning, just in time to see a stalactite snapping free of the ceiling, headed directly for him. Göksu screamed and surged forward—

And stopped as abruptly Dalibor appeared over Ilkay, arms braced over his head as the stalactite slammed down upon him, snapping into several pieces that tumbled to lie in a heap around them. Blood dripped from Dalibor’s head and arms, but he gave no sign of the enormous amounts of pain he must be in, simply asked, “Are you all right?”

“Am *I* all right?”

Dalibor grunted and moved away as he dropped his bleeding arms, going straight to the mortally wounded priest, who was lingering but only barely. “I’m sorry, Reşat. I messed up, and you took the blame for it.”

“Don’t... don’t let me go to waste...” Reşat said, and slumped in Dalibor’s arms, going still.

Growling, Dalibor grabbed Reşat’s hair, drew his head back to bare his throat, and sank fangs into it right where his pulse was still barely fluttering.

Moments later, Reşat was dead, and Dalibor’s wounds healed right before Ilkay’s eyes. Setting Reşat gently on the ground, he rose and went to the edge of the cave floor, staring down. “Still there?” he called out.

“Barely,” came a faint, shaky voice. “Where’s Gizem?”

“Here!” Gizem said, rushing up to the edge and dropping to her knees. “You’re still alive.”

Ümit laughed, the sound faint and shaky. “Hurry it up or I won’t be.”

Lying flat on her stomach, Gizem reached an arm over the edge. Ilkay had assumed it was to reach Ümit, but as he reached the edge himself and shifted to offer assistance, Göksu close behind, he saw she was actually reaching out to the vines clinging to the rock, making them thicker, stronger, and greater in number. Eventually the new vines reached Ümit, balanced precariously on a slip of ledge and clinging to the vines he’d thrown out that had saved his life.

As the new vines reached him, he added his own power to them, until they were sufficient to hold him securely and carry him back up to safety.

Gizem hugged him tightly once they were clear of the edge. “Thank the Three you’re all right.”

“Wish we could say the same of Reşat,” Ebubekir said softly, moving to heal Ilkay. “Sacred Three take him to a warm and loving rest.”

Dalibor stepped in close and threw out a hand, and Reşat’s body erupted in red flames. He then turned to the spider and did the same. Ilkay flinched back from the heat. “I’ve never seen blood red flames.”

“Demonic fire. Holy fire is blue. Dragon fire is green,” Arslan said, smiling every so faintly, despite the sorrow in his eyes at having lost one of his own, a man who had likely been a good friend, at the very least a trusted comrade. “You should see what happens when all three combine.”

“I can imagine.” Ilkay’s thoughts were mostly on his failure though. On his stupid fucking assumption that the spider closest to the sac was the female. He knew better! He fucking knew better. Now thanks to his mistake one person was dead, and it was luck alone that Ümit was still alive.

As the flames died down, the priests moved in to collect the ashes of Reşat, and Dalibor said, “Shadowmarch, find us a place to make camp for several hours.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” they murmured, and then faded off into practically nothing as was their way to see the orders carried out.

“Are you well, Moonrise?” Göksu asked.

“Fine,” Ilkay bit out. “I should have known.”

“We all made the wrong assumption,” Gizem said. “I know spiders very well, nearly as well as the Tamers who specialize in such things, and still I made a foolish assumption.”

Göksu shuddered. “The male was already so big... Who wanted to imagine the female was even bigger? It made sense to all of us.” He looked to the remains of the spider, which was burned clear through but still tenuously holding its shape. “Doesn’t even seem practical to grow so big.”

“It was infected with demon blood. Both of them were,” Dalibor said as he retrieved his dropped sword and sheathed it. “That’s part of the reason we couldn’t save Reşat.” He scowled, threw out a hand, and the fragile ashen spider collapsed into a cloud of foul-smelling dust. “Remain here until I return. I’m going to make thrice-damned certain there aren’t more of those things skulking around.”

He vanished quickly from sight, and Ilkay finally went to fetch his discarded clothes and pull them on. Not really having anything else to do for the moment, and exhausted from the fight, the foul taste of spider leg lingering in his mouth, he sat on a shard of the stalactite that had nearly killed him.

His heart gave an unwelcome flip as he recalled *why* it had failed to kill him. Dalibor had taken the full weight of the impact without even a grunt of pain or acknowledging his wounds afterward. All that after he’d already dealt with the male spider alone.

Ilkay looked toward the isolated chamber, finally taking in what he could of whatever had transpired over there. The web was gone, and the sac burned away completely. He couldn’t see

the spider, so it had either been burned as well or gone over the edge.

Pushing to his feet, ignoring the exhaustion that washed through him, Ilkay went to the edge once more and stared at the distant chamber. He was too tired now to safely make the jump, but he wanted badly to know if there was anything there that was remotely worth all they'd just fucking suffered to find out.

“We can figure out a way across tomorrow,” Göksu said, coming to stand beside him, then snorted. “Well, later. Though I’m sure His Highness will be more than happy to show off for you again.”

“Oh, shut up,” Ilkay muttered, and gave him a playful shove before returning to his stalactite seat. Try as he might, though, all he could think about was Dalibor standing over him, taking the impact of rock at least as big as him, dripping blood from wounds that must have hurt fiercely. For Ilkay, whom he didn’t even like. Who hadn’t done anything but treat him with contempt.

Kin at the very least.

Well. Shit. What the fuck was he supposed to do now?

Thankfully, admitting the answer to that question was delayed by the return of the Shadowmarch, who announced they’d found a more than suitable area to make camp just a short distance away. Dalibor returned minutes later, and they headed off.

A few minutes into the walk, Ilkay said, “What became of the other spider?”

“In two pieces at the bottom of the canyon,” Dalibor said. “Possibly more, but it was in two when I threw it over.”

Ilkay’s lips twitched with a smile he didn’t want to admit to, but the glitter of Dalibor’s eyes said he’d been caught out.

“Well done yourself, Moonrise. So how does giant spider taste?”

“Awful,” Ilkay replied with a grimace. “I can’t get rid of the taste. Hopefully food will fix the problem.”

“Hopefully,” Dalibor murmured in reply, a wicked glint to his eye that ran down Ilkay’s spine like a stolen touch. Before Dalibor could say more, though, the Shadowmarch called out they’d arrived.

It was indeed an ideal camping spot, a natural circle surrounded by stalagmites, twelve of them. Probably more magic at work, because for such a thing to form naturally seemed suspicious. There was also a small stream of running water. Strange they hadn’t heard it before, but it was small, and the source was either far away or muffled somehow.

Someone had already gotten a fire going, its warmth appreciated in the biting chill of the caverns. Ilkay helped set up the beds and fetched water, made certain everyone was tended and food was being made before finally sitting on his own bedroll, slumping tiredly, only the smell of cooking food keeping him awake.

He looked up as someone moved in front of him, and thanked Gizem as she held out a cup of what smelled like black tea. “Thank you.”

She smiled and moved on, handing the other mug she held to Göksu.

Ilkay took a sip, then set the mug down and stood up to go find somewhere to piss. He hadn’t gotten far though when he heard what sounded suspiciously like a moan. The kind of moan someone made when they were being thoroughly fucked.

Scowling, he went in search of the source, sliding between stones to find a small alcove where, not remotely to his surprise somehow, he found Dalibor pressing Ebubekir up against the rocks, cock sunk deep into his body, fangs sunk deep into his throat.

Ilkay must have made some sound, because Dalibor withdrew his fangs and looked his way, those feral eyes glowing like sunstruck gold. He grinned in that infuriating way of his, as if to say ‘you can be next if you want’. Which Ilkay most certainly did not.

Turning sharply around, Ilkay went to finally take a piss before returning to the camp, where he was more than happy to

put his attention on the food and going to sleep and ignore Dalibor entirely.



Legend

“It’s a side effect of the feeding,” Ebubekir said as he came up to Ilkay’s side, the group waiting while Dalibor explored ahead.

Ilkay frowned. “What’s a side effect of feeding?” Then he felt stupid, as the memory of Dalibor fucking Ebubekir up against the rocks returned, making him angry and antsy all over again. “I don’t care. He’s a Prince of the Blood, and I have no claim over him. It just seems in poor taste to do it immediately after someone has died.”

“Reşat was my friend and sometimes-lover. His Highness needed to feed, and I needed the comfort, but as I said,

arousal is a side-effect of the biting, in vampire and human. It often fades for the vampire as they grow stronger, but most continue to enjoy it anyway. I'm afraid I don't know anything really about the Wolves of the Moon. Most of the literature I could find said you keep to yourselves, the old word for you is werewolves, and you of course worship the moon instead of the Sacred Three."

Ilkay's upper lip curled. "We are *not* werewolves. That word is not welcome amongst our kind. It's an insult hurled at us by those who do not understand us."

"My apologies, I had no idea. I will certainly not use it again and will spread awareness it's a slur."

"It's all right. As you said: you didn't know. If that's your roundabout way of asking our feelings on fucking, we're much the same as the rest of the kingdom. As Moon I'd be expected to have multiple spouses. My father has always been looked at slightly askance because he never married any but my mother. They never wanted anyone but each other, no matter what criticism they faced."

The only comfort he could find in his father's grim pronouncement was that at least he would be reunited with her. His father had not been the same since his mother died, and Ilkay could not resent they would be together again. He just wished it didn't mean he'd be left so alone.

"Do wolves have special sorts of bonds?"

"Special sorts of bonds?"

"Like... soulmates or something. There are various terms across cultures."

Ilkay's nose wrinkled. "Not really. There is a legend, of course, but that's all it is. A true bond is forged, not simply handed over by the Moon waiting to be discovered. That's fireside nonsense."

Ebubekir's mouth twitched, like he was trying not to laugh. "What is this legend, if you do not mind indulging me?"

Huffing noisily, Ilkay said, "When Her Grace first rose into the sky to become the Moon, she took with her three

beloved consorts who became the most brilliant stars in the sky, visible no matter the time of year. One star is red as fresh-spilled blood, the other as white as snow in sunlight, the last as blue as the heart of a flame. They glow and shine in time with her, always as bright or as dim as she, auras perfectly synced because the four of them were meant to be together for eternity. Those blessed by the Moon herself will find for themselves the very same deep, abiding bond. We call them the three hearts: blood heart, frost heart, and fire heart. One day a special chief, a New Moon, will come and, with his three hearts, lead the Wolves of the Moon to a new beginning, rejoin the world we were once forced to hide from.” He wrinkled his nose again. “As I said, a fireside tale. Stuff for children.”

“I see,” Ebubekir replied, that infuriating not-smile still on his face, eyes sparkling like they held a mirthful secret. “Why blood heart? That seems a strange phrasing to me.”

“It’s a prettier way of saying ‘violent heart’, the heart of a fighter, of one who will wade into combat without fear, without hesitation. Frost heart is the protector, and fire heart is the homemaker, the hearth to which we all return and rely upon so deeply. A good home needs a leader, a fighter, a protector, and a hearth. The four points, by which you are never lost and can always find your way home.”

Ebubekir finally smiled, warm and sincere. “That’s a beautiful legend, truly. Does it say how you’d recognize your true consorts?”

“Not really,” Ilkay said. He’d loved the story as a child, as any child would, the ease and certainty of knowing your truest loves were already picked for you, that your fate was settled and perfect for you. Life was never so easy or kind. “You’re supposed to be able to sense it, feel it, but the legend doesn’t say more than that. Which only emphasizes how nonsensical it is. Surely if I had three destined hearts, I’d know them immediately, by sight or smell or feel.”

“Maybe, but if you don’t know how it’s supposed to feel, how would you recognize the feeling?” Ebubekir with a smile. “Thank you for indulging me. Not everyone is so patient when I ask questions simply to sate personal curiosity.”

“We’re not exactly doing anything right now, and fireside stories are easy to talk about,” Ilkay replied, even as his eyes went up the wall Dalibor had climbed. Once, there must have been a tunnel or something, but something long before the earthquake had caused a collapse. The only way through was up, and Dalibor had insisted on going first to ensure the way was truly clear—and safe. If he saw so much as a hint of a spider, he’d better be generous with the fire.

“I don’t understand how we’re so far into this cave system or whatever it is,” Göksu said as he joined them, “and still we have not come across this damned demon. It sent a minion out, but how far did the minion have to travel? How far does this complex go? Did they really live down here?” He scrubbed hands through his hair and then dropped them with an aggravated huff. “It just seems so impractical and dangerous. Surely living here constantly, or near-constantly, would cause you to wither and die. No sunlight, no wind through the trees, no flowers or birds or fresh meat to hunt...”

Ebubekir followed Ilkay’s gaze up to where Dalibor had vanished from sight, then lowered it again and said, “Either the demon has sensed Dalibor and is running, or it’s up to something. As much as I wish it was the former, I suspect it’s the latter, and this matter will get much, much worse before it is over.”

“Can’t say that’s not what I expected,” Ilkay said with a sigh. “I just hope we find it soon, before it...” He broke off with a growl, hackles rising as that overwhelming *fear* came over him. “Get somewhere safe! We’re getting another earthquake!” He grabbed Ebubekir and all but tossed him toward a broad hollow that would hopefully shield them from the havoc that was about to be wrought.

He grabbed the others, save the Shadowmarch, who as usual were nigh invisible, ushering everyone into the shallow hollow. Just moments after taking shelter himself, half-covered by a growling Göksu, the earthquake struck. Ilkay bit back a whimper as the world jerked left to right, up to down, moving in ways it shouldn’t fucking be capable of. Terror crawled through his skin, along his spine, and he could do nothing except cling to an equally terrified Göksu, huddled amidst the others.

“Fuck this,” someone muttered. Gizem, maybe, though Ilkay couldn’t say for certain.

All around them was crashing. Booming. Stalagmites breaking. Stalactites falling, shattering into a thousand pieces, recalling viscerally the memory of Dalibor looming over him, asking if he was all right while dripping blood from dozens of wounds.

Where was Dalibor? Had he gotten to safety? Why did his gut twist at the thought of Dalibor coming to harm from the earthquake? He certainly didn’t give a damn what happened to the bastard in a fight.

“Ilkay...” Göksu whispered, and only then did Ilkay realize he was crying. Of course he was. Göksu had lost his entire fucking family to the first earthquake.

Göksu was here to protect him, but that didn’t mean Ilkay wouldn’t also do some protecting. They’d been kidnapped together. They’d been friends ever since, and now there was only four of them left. Göksu had given up everything to be his protector, despite his own grief and pain.

Shifting to press against the wall of the hollow, Ilkay drew him in, across his lap, wrapping arms tightly around him as Göksu buried his head in the curve of Ilkay’s throat, breaths hot and ragged against his skin. “I’m supposed to protect you, Moonrise.”

“Shut up,” Ilkay replied, and licked his cheek before nuzzling him, offering what comfort he could as the world continued to shake and shudder all around them. Could not help but notice how *nice* it felt to have Göksu so close, on his lap. It felt like they’d done this a thousand times.

Slowly, far too slowly, the shaking eased. When he no longer felt like he wanted to crawl out of his own skin, Ilkay lifted his head. “Everyone safe and well?”

One by one, the rest of the team called out they were fine. The hollow, thank the Moon, had done its job.

Ilkay rested one hand against the side of Göksu’s face, staring into the beautiful, silvery gray eyes he knew so well, wiping away the tears on his cheeks, absently admiring the

freckles he'd never truly *noticed* before. "Göksu... Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Göksu said. "I'm sorry—"

"Shut up," Ilkay repeated, and kissed him, because somehow, somehow, that seemed the right thing to do. The only thing. Göksu tasted sweet, faintly salty, and after a moment of frozen shock, he kissed back with an earnestness that sent alarm bells tripping through Ilkay's head.

When they finally drew apart, Ilkay stared into Göksu's eyes, still filled with shadows, but with a brightness, a soft happiness, that he'd never seen before. Ilkay stroked his thumbs over his cheeks again. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"You're Moonrise, and you already had Müge, and I'm from one of the most unremarkable families in the village. Everyone knows you're meant for greater than me. What was I supposed to say?" Göksu laughed weakly. "How was I supposed to say it?"

Ilkay kissed him again, softly, drawing back only just enough, "You're stupid."

"Your face is stupid," Göksu muttered, and pulled lightly at his hair.

A soft rumbling jerked them back to reality, but thankfully the terrifying shaking didn't start up again. Reluctantly pushing Göksu from his lap, Ilkay got them on their feet. "We need to find Dalibor."

"Easier said than done," Yiğit said, fading back into visibility, face grim as he stared up at where Dalibor had gone exploring.

Following his gaze, Ilkay saw exactly what he'd most feared: the hole was gone, buried by rubble. There was no way to get to Dalibor, and no way for Dalibor to get back to them. "Well, fuck."

Before anyone could reply, there was more shaking, banging—but not the whole cavern. Just above them.

"Is..." Kaan started, hesitated, then finished, "Is Dalibor doing that?"

Ilkay stared intently at the rockfall, listening to the noise, the rhythm of it, too regular to be natural. “Yes, I think so. Everyone clear out. Go back to the hollow. *Now*,” he said when Göksu tried to argue with him. Once everyone was clear, he looked the rockfall over again one last time before he set to climbing. He was careful to keep to rocks that didn’t look like they’d go anywhere easily, occasionally kicking or tossing smaller rocks where it seemed relatively safe to do so.

When he reached the top, where the opening Dalibor had used was covered, he braced himself against the cave wall and ceiling so that the rocks wouldn’t take him with them when—if—he or Dalibor dislodged them. Then he set to kicking, striking, pulling, and throwing, until he stank from exertion and his hands were covered in dust and blood. Mostly blood. It dripped onto the rocks, rolled down his arms, sticky and itchy as it mixed with dirt and sweat and slowly dried and flaked.

Finally, *finally*, he pulled on a chunk of stalagmite that seemed to do the trick, as a sudden rattle abruptly became a deafening roar, and the mess of debris went tumbling down like a violent waterfall.

Standing in the gap, equally filthy and bloody, was Dalibor. He extended a hand and Ilkay took it, letting Dalibor pull him into the small tunnel in which he stood. His yellow eyes burned like fire, nostrils flaring. Reaching out, he grabbed Ilkay’s chin between thumb and fingers and reeled him in.

Ilkay sputtered, but completely forgot what he’d meant to say as Dalibor dragged his tongue across Ilkay’s lips and then the underside of his nose. The touch made his nose throb, his eyes water. As Dalibor drew back, eyes still glowing fiercely, Ilkay gently touched his own nose, hissing as that made the pain flare. When had his nose been struck? How had he not noticed? Had he been that immersed in tearing away rocks?

“Why did you do that?” he finally asked, dropping his hand.

Dalibor replied with his usual fucking smirk. “Never let good blood go to waste. Not the pure human blood I need to survive, but stuck-up wolf is surprisingly delicious.”

Ilkay rolled his eyes. “Come on, let’s get back—” He broke off with a snarl as that fucking sensation of impending doom struck him like a fist, right as Dalibor grabbed him and threw them to the ground, covering Ilkay with his body as the world began once more to tremble.

“Aftershock,” Dalibor said in his ear. “In fact I’m pretty sure they’re all aftershocks, minus of course the first one.”

Ilkay had no idea what the fuck an aftershock was, but it wasn’t exactly hard to guess. The more he learned about earthquakes, the more he hated them.

A horrible cracking sound echoed through the tunnel, followed by a slamming bang so loud and hard it jarred his teeth, making him cut his own lip. Above him, Dalibor hissed and held tighter.

When the shaking finally stopped and seemed like it wouldn’t return—not immediately anyway—Ilkay nudged Dalibor until he finally moved. How a man smaller than him could feel twice as large, Ilkay didn’t know. He also didn’t like it.

Sitting up, he looked to the tunnel entrance—and ice filled his stomach when he saw that the horrible bang he’d heard was a large piece of rock slamming into the tunnel. That wasn’t stone he could break through, even if he broke every bone in his body in the effort. “Please tell me you can move that.”

“I’d be lying if I did,” Dalibor said grimly as he heaved to his feet and went to inspect it. He slammed a fist angrily against it. “Nope. We’re not going back. Our only way out is forward.”

“The others...”

“Will have sense enough to know there’s fuck all they can do.”

Ilkay frowned, shook his head slightly. “Göksu is sworn to protect me. He won’t leave.”

“Then you’ll have to make him. Given the way he looks at you when you’re not paying attention, I can’t imagine

convincing him to obey you will be that difficult,” Dalibor said with a smirk.

“Did everyone know about his feelings but me?” Ilkay scowled.

Dalibor laughed. “Maybe. You’re very focused, little pup, on everything but what’s right in front of your face. To be fair, though, at least half the village seems to stare at you the same way.”

Ilkay’s face heated. “They do not.” He yanked his cloak free and jerkily worked on the rest of his clothes before piling them off to the side neatly and shifting. Shaking himself to settle into his fur, he threw back his head and howled for as loud and long as he was able, conveying the message to retreat to safety.

Dalibor had given orders that he or Ilkay must be present if the others wanted out of the cave, but there was nothing they could do about that now.

After a moment, tense and terrible, Göksu responded with a despairing howl. Ilkay bit back a whimper—of fear for his friend, of longing for the opportunity he might never get now to explore what had always been right in front of his face, of being alone when he most needed pack. Göksu gave one last howl, and Ilkay responded, until it faded off and no further sound came from the other side.

He was alone. With a demon who’d happily kill him and a half-demon whose favorite activity was mocking him. Huffing softly, he shifted back to human and pulled his clothes on. As he finished, he wrapped his fingers briefly around his father’s talisman, taking the comfort the stone, always warm to the touch, provided. Then he tucked it away and focused on his duty.

The only way out was through, so through they would go. “What did you find this way in your search?”

Dalibor stared at him a moment, and it was only then that Ilkay realized he could see better than he should be able to. “Why can I see you so well?”

“I set some lights so there’d be a clear path when the rest of you came through. Come on.” He pushed away from the wall

he'd been leaning against and headed on through the dark, until the tunnel widened into a small circle of space.

Ilkay stared around it, noting that here too the stone had been carved into benches, with a strange, shallow pit in the center. Perhaps for a fire? Why would people sit around a fire in here? "What was this place? Why is it so far removed from the rest?"

"I think that... village, for lack of a better word, used to be far more expansive. All we see now are the few homes that survived and a great deal of rubble. It wasn't just a meeting place for the cult down here. It was a *home*. This reminds me of the steaming chambers common in the southern parts of Tria Noor."

"Steaming chambers?"

"Instead of soaking in hot water after cleaning themselves, they would come and sit in these rooms filled with steam. When they'd steamed for as long as they could stand, they would rinse off in cool water."

Ilkay wrinkled his nose. "That does not sound pleasant."

Dalibor flashed a grin that was almost boyish, far cuter than it had any business being. "You should hear their opinions on sitting around in a tub of water."

"Fair enough," Ilkay said with a laugh. "I still prefer my tubs of water. I'm surprised this isn't a dead end."

"So was I," Dalibor said with a grunt. "Come this way." He crossed the room in brisk strides and vanished behind what Ilkay had mistakenly thought was a solid wall.

Beyond it was a clear pathway, strewn with little hollow balls that must have once held lights similar to the orbs of flickering red fire Dalibor had created. As they walked further along the path, they came into view of what could only be described as a manor, the sort of overblown nonsense wealthy humans lived in for no other reason than that they could. There were more buildings around it, forming a pavilion in the center that had been carved with great care once, probably depicting some sort of mural, but time and the recent earthquakes had left only ruin.

“I sense we found the dwelling of the cult leader,” Ilkay said, staring at it in growing disgust. “Everything smells like blood. I couldn’t smell it back in the village, but here...”

“This is as far as I came before I turned back,” Dalibor said. “It smells of blood, of violence and fear and pain. Terrible things happened here, things that delight the demon in me. Have a care.”

Ilkay growled softly as they ventured onward, picking their way around and over fallen rocks and stalactites, leaping across whistling gaps, until they made it up the broken remains of the stairs that led up to the manor. Up close, it was even more ostentatious than it had been at a distance. The village had been simple, straightforward, but this... Great care had been taken to carve elaborate stone statues, sconces, decorate the walls and floors. Someone, likely many someones, had gone to a great deal of trouble to make this cave manor resembled the wood and stone ones of the world above.

A world that seemed increasingly far away with every step.

“How does something like this just *vanish* from memory? An entire city in the heart of the mountain, right beneath my people’s feet, and we never knew...”

Dalibor gave a dry, almost sad laugh. “You would be surprised what humans forget. Thousands slave, thousands more die, for untold wonders that are forgotten by the time their great grandchildren are born. Humans have short memories.”

Ilkay gave him an amused look. “You speak like you were never human.”

“You don’t consider yourself human either, pup.”

“I’m not and never was,” Ilkay replied. “I was born a Wolf of the Moon. It’s all I’ve ever known; all I’ve ever been. You were born human and were one for many years.”

Dalibor flashed that toothy smile. “The demon blood was always there, just waiting to be woken from slumber. I was a human only until I was finally allowed to wake up. Humanity doesn’t interest me. The taste of blood interests me, the taste of fear and rage as piddling humans cower before me, undone by

their own fragile—” Dalibor broke off with a snarl, pressing the heel of one hand to his forehead as he breathed heavily through his nose. “Get away from me.”

“What—”

“Get away!” Dalibor roared.

Ilkay went, fleeing into the house soaked in the stench of old blood, away from the man staring at him with eyes the color of a harvest moon.

He wasn’t remotely surprised to see the dregs of fancy furniture, no doubt carried by people who were never properly appreciated or thanked for such strenuous effort. It was long rotted, turned to dust and the homes of spiders and other insects, all of them thankfully of normal size.

A broken staircase led up to a second story, and Ilkay wrinkled his nose in distaste. In a location as dangerous as this, building a second story wasn’t just selfish, it was reckless. Whoever had led this cult, they’d had more ego than... well, Dalibor. Demons in general, maybe.

What was *wrong* with Dalibor. Ilkay looked back, even turned around, but Dalibor had been clear that he wanted Ilkay out of sight. Mouth flat, Ilkay resumed his explorations, not surprised when a foray into a room that looked like it had once been a kitchen also turned up a door that led down. Of course there was a basement. First a second story and now a basement. Why not be as stupid as fucking possible?

Ilkay hesitated, then shrugged to himself and ventured down, Dalibor’s red lights following him into the darkness.

He’d expected to see whatever remained of long forgotten foodstuffs. Rotted trunks of rotted clothes. Tools and the like.

Instead, he found cages. At least twenty of the fucking things, each one just barely big enough to hold a single person sitting down, or two children crammed in close. He preferred not to think about children.

Ignoring the roiling in his stomach, the remains of their last repast threatening to come up as faint memories of cages

and blood and fire tormented him, Ilkay continued to explore. Some of the cages held bones, scraps of rotted cloth still clinging to them. Other cages had been taken over by vermin, and still others were so perfectly bare and clean that they bothered him more than the one with bones.

These cages... the pit of bones... the murders and suicide... Why, for the love of the Moon? Why had so much death been necessary to these people? How in the Moon had they justified it to themselves? Even if they'd been right, even if this had been what was required of some Goddess, why would anyone want to follow a Goddess who demanded only suffering and death? Violence and pain were inevitable in life, but they shouldn't be glorified, shouldn't be reveled in.

Tears stung Ilkay's eyes, for the people who'd died here, alone and afraid, buried alive in the worst possible way. Whatever it took, he would bring them closure, peace. He would ensure they could at least return to the Moon. To their Sacred Three. Leave this living hell behind.

The sound of footsteps drew him, and he turned to see Dalibor prowling toward him. "Feeling better, oh dramatic demon?"

"For now," Dalibor rumbled. "What in the fuck is all this? These people were tortured, the stench of it lingers even now. Not sacrifices for the main altar. They wouldn't have dragged them this far if they were just going to drag them back. This was something entirely personal, and frankly more sinister than a mere sacrificial altar."

"I don't like agreeing with you, but yes, I agree. Wonder if that journal we found will explain any of this." He doubted it would be so easy, that someone just wrote down what they'd need to know, but he could hope.

Dalibor laughed. "Speaking of sacrifices, why are your eyes blood red? I thought it was a Wolves thing, but no other wolf in your village has them."

"No one knows. My family has always had blue eyes. Red eyes have shown up in Wolves before, but they're rare. Why they showed up in me..." Ilkay shrugged. "They just did."

Alas, they do not come with special powers or anything. They just make me look ill, or creepy, or both.”

“Not the words I would use, but I can see how humans would be unsettled by them,” Dalibor said. “Come, we need to find a place to camp. We both need rest, and your wounds need tending. I also don’t want to linger in this place longer than we must. It stirs the demon in me, and without the assistance of the priests, it’s difficult to keep it contained.”

Ilkay followed him back up the basement stairs. “Is there... something I can do?” He might not like the bastard, but they had no one but each other to rely on now.

Dalibor tried to smile, but it came out more a grimace. “The only way to keep a minor demon like me in check is to remind me why it’s good to be human. You are not human, so...” He shrugged one shoulder. “Come on, I think if we push past this wretched place, we should find a good campsite. If not, we’ll return to the steam room.”

Not certain what to think, let alone say, Ilkay followed him in silence.



Human Enough

Ilkay woke to growling. Not animal growling, but something lower, softer, more felt than heard. The air tasted of fear and anger, an acrid tang he couldn't scrape off his tongue with a knife if he'd tried.

The fire was out, leaving the air chilly and everything around them in absolute dark. He could not see his hand in front of his face, not even when he *touched* his face. Even in the darkest night in the forest, he could still see something. Not here, in the bowels of the earth where monsters and worse skulked, waiting for a moment to strike.

The low, vibrating growl came again, and despite himself, Ilkay's heart tripped and sped up, and now it was the stench of his own fear filling his nostrils.

They'd settled in a small, clear space that had them protected on three sides, and Dalibor had stretched out to sleep across the only entrance.

His heart jumped at the scuff of boots on stone. The sound should be reassuring, because it meant Dalibor and not some unknown monster he'd never see kill him. Or eat him alive.

Except the only thing more dangerous than all the demon-rotted monsters in this hellish place was the barely-leashed demon meant to be helping him.

The demon that didn't even like him. And no longer had priests to hold his leash.

"I can taste it," said a sibilant voice, so much like Dalibor's and yet nothing at all like it. "Your fear, sweet and succulent."

"Fear won't stop me from breaking your fucking nose, Your Highness," Ilkay retorted.

He was shoved, hard, from behind, stumbling forward until he slammed into a wall of rock, barely keeping from breaking his own nose. Fuck.

Before he could turn around, Dalibor's large body pressed up behind him, pinning his hands to the rock, the rest of his body keeping Ilkay from getting any sort of leverage. He was hot and heavy and smelled of blood and metal and stone.

His breath was warm as he said roughly in Ilkay's ear, "I can taste your want, little wolf pup. You've wanted me since you first saw me."

Ilkay jerked and strained, but despite the fact he was the bigger of the two of them, he was going nowhere against the full strength of a half demon. "Fuck you."

"I think we both know what you want is for me to fuck *you*."

“That was pathetic,” Ilkay hissed. “If you’re going to be an ass, at least be a witty one, you stupid fucking blood drinker.”

Fangs, long and sharp, dragged along his throat, scoring the skin but not quite breaking it.

Ilkay swallowed a gasp, ignoring the shivers that ran down his spine. Stupid, traitorous body. “Let me go.”

For a moment, he thought Dalibor had actually listened, as his wrists were released and he was yanked away from the wall—but then he was turned and shoved right back against it, pinned once more.

Then lips, unfairly soft and warm, pressed against his, forcing his mouth open before it was taken in a hungry, consuming kiss that tasted like blood and the subtle tang of magic. Ilkay tried to jerk back, twist free, but Dalibor wasn’t having it.

And some small, infinitely stupid part of Ilkay didn’t really want to break free anyway.

Since fighting wasn’t getting him anywhere, Ilkay chose surrender. Drawing back slightly, he bit down hard on Dalibor’s bottom lip, drawing blood and eliciting a pleased chuckle before Dalibor surged into the kiss again, taking his mouth like a man possessed. Or a demon determined to possess. He licked and bit at Ilkay’s lips, sucked on his tongue, touched every dip and curve of his mouth as though mapping it, tearing away only when their chests were heaving with a need for proper breath.

Dalibor licked his throat, similar to when he’d licked blood from Ilkay’s face hours ago, and yet nothing at all like that. Before Ilkay could say anything, those sharp fangs he’d just explored with his tongue plunged through his skin like it was paper. Ilkay cried out, shudders wracking his body, cock hardening further.

Moon damn him, why was this stupid bastard so *much*. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*,” Ilkay gasped out, writhing uselessly in Dalibor’s grip, more turned on by that than he would ever admit, even to the Moon herself. He was the bigger and taller of the

two of them, but you wouldn't know it from how easily Dalibor pinned him, controlled him.

Dalibor shifted to hold both his wrists in one hand, withdrawing his fangs as he got Ilkay's pants open and pulled out his cock, stroking it quick and rough. "Is this what you want, little pup?"

"What— What do you care—fuck—what I want?" Ilkay gasped out.

"I'm a minor demon. All I care about is what people want and how to use it," Dalibor said with a throaty chuckle that affected Ilkay's cock as surely as his hand. "I can read you like an open book." He licked Ilkay's cheek. "You want to breed your woman and watch your little fawning boy ride you and then get on all fours for me."

Ilkay moaned because now that it had been said, that was most definitely what he wanted. What did that say about him? He didn't know. He couldn't think. Couldn't do anything but writhe and scream and come apart in Dalibor's unrelenting grasp.

When Dalibor abruptly released him, Ilkay sank to the ground, spent and exhausted, chest heaving with the effort to draw a proper breath, but every gasp tasted like blood and demon and sex, leaving him hot and dizzy.

Somewhere above him, Dalibor snarled and withdrew, and a moment later Ilkay listened as he brought himself off. Why hadn't...

Whatever. Didn't matter. Bracing himself against the wall, Ilkay heaved back to his feet and righted his clothes. "I don't suppose, if you're done losing your shit, Your Highness, that you'd guide me back to my bed? How do you see in this? There's no light source to draw from."

"I'm a demon," Dalibor replied in his normal, husky voice, that sibilant tone from before vanished. "I don't see the way the rest of you do, so light is irrelevant. Are you all right?"

Ilkay snorted. "You think I can't handle a little rough play? I'm not as fragile as you seem to think. Though some warning next time would be nice."

It was only as Dalibor laughed that the full weight of his own words struck him. “Next time?” Dalibor asked, a hint of that sibilance returning, sliding down Ilkay’s spine like fire and ice.

“Why are you acting so strange?” Ilkay said. “Is there something I can do—other than let you throw me around and jerk me off?”

Dalibor laughed again, and then suddenly he was back in Ilkay’s space, wrapping one hand around his arm and pulling him along. A moment later Ilkay was pushed down on his bedroll. “This place gets to me, eats away at my humanity and control. It was easier to manage when I had the priests to help.”

Ilkay had known that, but he hadn’t realized the true depth of the matter. What would happen if something happened to him, and Dalibor was left down here all alone?

“You help, though, little pup,” Dalibor said. “Not human, but still delightfully mortal, with all their wants and needs and desires. It’s grounding. Pity your blood can’t sustain me, because you’re quite delicious.”

Ilkay’s face burned. He’d been called many things over the years, but not *delicious*. “Well if pinning me to walls and bringing me off is what keeps you from going completely demon, far be it for me to complain.”

Dalibor’s husky chuckle washed over his ear. “No, you didn’t complain one bit, did you? Because that’s what you like, isn’t it, Moonrise? Being at my mercy.”

The words made him shiver, but Ilkay only reached up, covered Dalibor’s face with his hand, and tried to shove him away. “What I like is getting some rest, you insufferable ass. Make yourself useful and light a new fire so I don’t freeze to death down here.” Giving up on pushing Dalibor away, he turned over to mitigate the effects of that overwhelming presence and get some rest.

Thankfully, Dalibor moved away, and Ilkay drifted off listening to the sounds of him starting a fire.



When he woke again, the fire was crackling away cheerfully, and the camp was wreathed in balls of red light that cast everything in an eerie glow.

His nostrils caught the smell of roasting fish, making his stomach rumble. Sitting up, pushing aside the cloak he was draped in despite not having been before falling asleep, Ilkay stared at the fire, where sure enough, a large fish was roasting. “Where did you find fresh fish?”

“Went exploring, found a spring full of them, and the water is drinkable,” Dalibor said. He sat on the far side of the camp, against one of the rock walls. Was it the one—

Ilkay swallowed and looked away. “Thanks.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Dalibor asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be feeling all right?” Ilkay asked, looking at him again, but jerking away immediately, flustered for no good reason. “I’m fine. Is this about last night? Earlier? Whatever the hell time it was. I told you I can handle it a little rough. I’m not even sure that qualified as rough.”

Across the fire, that strange, low growl emanated, shaking Ilkay’s bones, vibrating in his chest. Still, Dalibor only said, “That doesn’t equate to permission to just take what I want.”

“Is that why you’re acting so weird? I think we both know I was a willing participant, you stupid demon. If I really hadn’t wanted you touching me, all I had to do was shift and tear your throat out. You’re the most annoying person I’ve ever met, and I would love to have a good reason to punch you in the face, but we can both smell I wanted you, and there’s little point in denying it now.” He moved closer to the fire and examined the fish. “Is this ready to eat?”

“Yes,” Dalibor replied, expression pensive, eyes never leaving Ilkay as he took down the fish and tore it to pieces

before eating with relish.

When he'd eaten a sizeable portion of it, he licked his fingers and glanced at Dalibor. "So did it help? Last night? With this place making your demonic nature worse or whatever. You said I couldn't, because I wasn't human, but..."

Dalibor rolled forward and to his feet, so graceful that watching him left an ache in Ilkay's chest. Stepping around the fire, he sat next to Ilkay, sank a hand into his hair, and dragged him into another of those heated, hungry kisses, all teeth and tongue and spit, leaving Ilkay struggling to breathe and licking his own sore lips.

Letting him go, Dalibor said, "You're human enough. Demons don't... we don't have the same capacities for things that people do. Lust. Love. Affection. Friendship. Those are tools, how humans can be manipulated to obey—or forced."

"You act like you are a demon and not just someone with demon blood."

"They call us half demons, but the truth is that we're more like minor demons," Dalibor said, adding more wood to the fire. "Without the spells put in place when we are created, we'd be more dangerous than the monsters we kill as part of the Legion. There is some humanity left in me, but it's small and often hard to find. Especially down here, surrounded by demonic presence, practically swimming in everyone's fear. Nothing tastes as delicious as fear and wrath, the way they take control, drown out everything else, drive humans to do terrible, delightful things to each—"

Ilkay kissed him again, shoving aside his remaining food and pushing Dalibor to the ground before straddling him. He tasted like the thrill of the hunt, the hot satisfaction of bringing down prey, wild and bloody and *his*.

Dalibor growled, hands gripping Ilkay's ass, grinding them together as he bit and sucked at Ilkay's mouth, leaving his lips throbbing.

Then the world shifted, and Ilkay oofed as he was tumbled onto his bedroll, Dalibor looming over him, an eerie mix of dark and light in the flickering flames and those glowing

red orbs. Like this was some strange dream, and Ilkay would wake up sweaty and hard and utterly mortified by his dreaming desires.

Dalibor dragged his tongue across Ilkay's sore lips. "Pretty little wolf, with eyes like demon fire. You stare like you wanted to eat me, and then glare like you wanted to slit my throat."

"A good throat slitting would do you some good," Ilkay retorted, twisting uselessly in Dalibor's grasp, cock twitching, filling. Dalibor kissed him again, wet and filthy, leaving Ilkay whimpering into his mouth, pulling at the hold on his wrists until there were certain to be bruises.

"They tried that a couple of times," Dalibor said, trailing kisses along Ilkay's jaw and down his throat, releasing his wrists only to shove fur and fabric out of the way. "Telmé did it during training just to be an ass, and then a fucking morbid serpent got me. I don't recommend it, and if you try it, I'll be cranky because healing from that is a bitch."

Ilkay laughed, but it turned into a groan as Dalibor dragged his too-sharp teeth along his collarbone. With his hands free, at least for the moment, he took advantage of the chance to do some touching of his own, pushing his hands up beneath Dalibor's layers to touch skin, smooth and slightly cooler than his own.

Dalibor drew back, yellow eyes glowing, and made short work of his clothes, leaving Ilkay to do the same. This was the worst possible time to be doing this, but Ilkay was long past caring. *Kin at the very least.* Well, he certainly wouldn't be doing this with any of his relatives.

"You're so pale," Ilkay said as Dalibor returned, settling between his spread thighs and picking up right where he'd left off trailing hungry, biting kisses down Ilkay's body, like he would not be sated until he'd tasted every part of him. In the strange red lights, his skin practically glowed, though nothing was brighter than those feral yellow eyes.

Dalibor did not lack for muscle, though he was surprisingly hairless, save for the dark hair on his head and crowning his cock. Ilkay had not gotten to see any of him

before, only felt and heard. Reaching out, he wrapped his fingers around Dalibor's cock and stroked it, running his thumb over the tip.

At least until Dalibor tore his hands away and pushed them down. "Hold still, little pup."

"Why? I want to touch too, you bastard."

Dalibor looked up at him, his smile as feral as his eyes. "In good time." Before Ilkay could ask what in the world that was supposed to mean, Dalibor swallowed his cock. Ilkay shouted, swore, hips jerking, thrusting him deeper into Dalibor's hot, slick mouth, touching his throat. Dalibor took it easily, mouth and tongue working as he licked and swallowed.

Whatever he'd expected of this fireside tryst, it wasn't Dalibor sucking his cock with such skillful abandon.

How in the world had he gotten to this point? Ilkay couldn't make his brain work long enough to figure out an answer. All he could do was writhe on his bedroll, hips thrusting shamelessly, driving his cock as deep as it could go into Dalibor's eager mouth.

He came with a ragged cry, chest heaving as he gulped for air, sweat making his skin itch.

Dalibor didn't give him time to recover, only shoved something under his hips and put his mouth to work further down, working Ilkay open with his tongue, fingers tight on his thighs. It was too much, too much, too fucking much, but Ilkay moaned and begged for more anyway.

Trailing kisses over whatever bits of skin he could reach, Dalibor said, "You're good at taking my fingers, little pup. Bet you'll take my cock even better."

"Can't be any more difficult than taking a fake one," Ilkay said. "Get to it, demon."

Instead, Dalibor withdrew, eyes entirely too pensive for Ilkay's liking. "Has no one ever fucked you before?"

"Do I look like the kind of person people fuck?" Ilkay said. "I'm not an innocent who needs gentle handling, so don't

even try it. Show me what you can do or move out of the way so I can tend the matter myself.”

That got him bitten, deep and hard, Dalibor’s fangs slicing into his throat as easily as they had the first time. Ilkay was still reeling from that shock of pain when Dalibor pushed inside him, the stretch abrupt, not quite painful—or not painful enough to matter.

“What was it you said back at camp?” Dalibor asked. “The people you fuck tend to enjoy marking you?”

“Less talking, more fucking, demon,” Ilkay bit out—and then almost howled as Dalibor obeyed, withdrawing nearly all the way and slamming back in, repeating the motion over and over, pinning Ilkay to the ground with his body, hips working as he drove deep, taking Ilkay apart one thrust at a time.

“Scream for me, little pup,” Dalibor said, his voice full of power, full of demon. “Let me know how much a Wolf of the Moon thrills at being claimed by a Prince of the Blood.”

Ilkay snarled, jerked his hands free, wrapping his arms around Dalibor’s beautifully muscled back and raking his claws down them. Dalibor just somehow fucked him harder, pounding with such force Ilkay was dizzily surprised the ground didn’t crack beneath them.

Then Dalibor kissed him, hard and biting, and Ilkay came again, the release taking him by surprise, his shout fed into Dalibor’s hungry mouth. Dalibor continued to fuck him a few times more, pulling away to groan into the hollow of Ilkay’s throat as he finally came.

He was ridiculously heavy, despite being smaller, when he finally collapsed, but Ilkay couldn’t be troubled by the weight. He was too fucked out and exhausted to care about much of anything.

Eventually Dalibor pulled out of him, making Ilkay hiss, and shifted to lay pressed against his side. “Your mouth might be sharp, and my back says your claws are as well, but the rest of you is warm and pliant.”

“I’ll show you pliant,” Ilkay muttered without any heat. “I hope you’re feeling less inclined to be demonic, or whatever,

because I'm not going to be able to help like that again for a few hours." Or days, the way his ass was feeling, but he wasn't going to admit that, even if threatened with another giant spider.

Dalibor laughed and kissed his throat. "I'm plenty in control for now, wolfling. Fucking you is definitely a delight of humanity. Be even sweeter to fuck you in front of your sweet little beloveds before they use your cock for their own pleasure and leave our precious Moonrise unable to move. Like that image, don't you? Who knew the next leader of the Wolves of the Moon would be such an insatiable little slut."

"I'm not the one spinning all these fantasies," Ilkay said on a groan, even though he was most definitely spinning them *now*. "Or the one who took priests away to drink and fuck while the body of another was still cooling."

Dalibor nipped his throat right where he'd kissed it, making Ilkay hiss and jerk away. "Blood is a need, and it is deeply intertwined with fucking for various reasons. It doesn't mean we weren't mourning our fallen."

"I know," Ilkay said with a sigh. "Maybe don't call me a slut, though."

"But it's so much fun," Dalibor said in that soft, husky tone that had Ilkay's well-spent cock trying to rise again. "My little wolfling, who needs his mate, and his bodyguard, and a demon to keep him satisfied. The hungry, virile alpha leading his pack, helping it grow bigger and stronger. No wonder your eyes burn the very red of demon fire." He rolled Ilkay, moaning and shivering, onto his side, and slid back inside him.

Ilkay whimpered at the stretch and burn, of being stuffed full again already, his body sore and aching from just minutes ago. He couldn't be bothered to truly mind though, just held fast to the arms that wrapped around him as Dalibor fucked him in slow, deep strokes. His cock was far too spent to rise again, but that didn't keep a third climax from shuddering through him just minutes later.

"We have a mission to carry out," he managed as Dalibor pulled out of him again. "I have to be able to walk, you Moon-damned demon."

Dalibor chuckled, the sound dripping smug satisfaction as he pushed a finger into Ilkay's body. Leaning in, he nipped the shell of Ilkay's ear before saying in that sinfully husky voice, "When I want you unable to walk, little pup, you'll know it." He pushed away and rolled to his feet, and in moments was dressed. He piled Ilkay's clothes nearby. "Come on, I'll show you the spring, and you can clean up while I catch you more food."

Ilkay flushed as he pulled on his clothes. Not from the comment about walking, but the food catching. He'd been so hungry and distracted earlier it hadn't even registered. Dalibor had hunted for him. Would hunt for him again.

That was a courting ritual among the Wolves. Which Dalibor couldn't know, so it didn't mean anything. He was clearly just doing it because it needed to be done and he could see in ways Ilkay couldn't.

His cheeks burned all the same as he followed Dalibor away from camp to the promised spring.



Destruction

They went back to the creepy mansion to further explore, and together they were able to get up to the second floor, despite the fallen staircase.

Rather than the various rooms he'd expected, there was only two: one that had clearly been a washroom, and another wide-open space that seemed to have been bedroom, office, and more all rolled into one. It looked like maybe a curtain or something had once hidden the bed from view, to judge from rotted scraps of fabric and the hooks driven into the ceiling.

"I shudder to think what went on here," Ilkay said.

“Shudder? If you could smell what I smell, you’d be tossing up your breakfast.”

“Then please don’t share, because throwing up fish is a special hell I never want to repeat.”

Dalibor laughed, the sound rolling along Ilkay’s spine like a touch.

“How do you smell things that happened decades ago at least?”

Dalibor shrugged one shoulder. “Smell isn’t exactly the right word, but there’s nothing closer. It’s more about impressions, shadows of what was, memories left like stains, something the demon in me can feel in a way not easily explained to mortals. So we just say smell.” His eyes swept the room. “Violence. Blood. Come. Pain. Screams filled with rage, then broken into agony.” His lips curled. “Youth. Far too youthful to be swept up in this.”

“There was a wolf who liked children once,” Ilkay said quietly. “Before my time, maybe three generations back now. He hid his tracks well, knew how to keep the children from talking, but eventually he was found out. The Chief, my great-grandfather, prevented him from being able to shift. They dragged him out into the woods and tore him literally to pieces, then buried them deep in the earth so he would never return to the sky.”

“Should have buried him alive.”

“Then the children and their parents wouldn’t have gotten to listen to his screams of terror and see him dead for themselves.”

Dalibor grunted but didn’t say anything further. He wandered over to where the remains of a desk lay in a dusty heap. “There is a great deal of blood here, and pain sharply undercut with shock.” He kicked lightly at the pile, and a couple of small bones, or parts of bones, rattled across the stone floor. “Whoever died here, they were not expecting it, and they died miserably.”

“Good.” That got him one of Dalibor’s toothy grins that he was stupidly coming to like, damn the bastard. Ilkay knelt in

front of the mess and carefully rifled through the detritus. He eventually came across something that snagged his attention. “Look at this book, or whatever it was. Looks like that journal we found. Hard to tell for certain, but it looks like the exact same cover and everything. Maybe there were multiple journals? Records our poor, unfortunate suicide victim retained as proof he hoped someone would discover? Or didn’t get to share as he intended, before he felt forced to die?”

“Impossible to say, but...” Dalibor tilted his head side to side as he thought. “It wouldn’t surprise me, with everything I smell in here. Someone who kept a record of his own nasty deeds, or records kept by someone who hoped to use them against him someday. So many possibilities, each one delightfully appalling and inspiring of lovely violence.”

“Or maybe the journals were a cheap kind that were commonly used by the entire cult and there’s no significance to any of them,” Ilkay said with a sigh, letting the tattered remains fall back into the pile, and brushing his hands off as he rose. “Wish we knew what really happened down here.”

“If I had to guess, which I obviously do,” Dalibor said with a small laugh, “I would say the cult fell apart. They usually do, eventually. That kind of power can’t be held forever. It’s tenuous and built on fear and lies and absolute, unbending control. Eventually, there will be cracks, and one crack is all it takes to wake up from the nightmare.” He waved a hand at the desk. “Presuming it was our dear leader who sat here, and I can’t think who else would in this monstrosity of a building, then someone he trusted murdered him. Maybe they stabbed him. Slit his throat. Probably that, from the amount of blood I can still smell. After that... I’m not sure. Perhaps he had coconspirators who all turned on each other. Perhaps they were party to this and he killed them after killing their master. Only the gods know the truth at this point.”

Ilkay turned that over. The dead man at the desk. The cages in the basement. The murdered figures and the man who’d killed them then killed by his own hand. “Whatever happened, it’s clear only violence reigned that day. I wonder if the poor bastards in the basement were dissenters.”

“Highly possible. Right now, though, we need to focus on getting to the demon. It lurks, waits, plays with me.”

“Samil. Do you still think that’s the demon we’re facing?”

“Yes, I do, for no other could cause so much trouble while being locked inside the earth,” Dalibor said. “Samil, demon of destruction and death, the great serpent, with scales like a fresh wound and wings that can blot out the sun.” He bared his teeth. “I’m interested to see how close the truth is to the stories.”

Ilkay snorted. “Yes, I can’t wait to see what happens when a demon of destruction crosses swords with a demon of wrath.”

Dalibor grinned over his shoulder as he headed back to the broken stairs. “Now you’re getting it.”

“I’m getting really tired of posturing demons,” Ilkay muttered as he followed Dalibor back to the first floor and out of that Moon-forsaken house. “Onward, then?”

Dalibor grunted in agreement and took the lead as they left the horrible house behind once and for all. At their campsite, they packed up what little they had and carried onward, traveling through endless darkness, a silence so deep that even their softest breaths echoed.

“I never did thank you,” Ilkay said into it, flinching slightly at the echo. “For saving me from those falling stalactites.”

Dalibor came to a stop and turned, drew Ilkay in close when he stopped just in time to avoid a collision. He dragged a kiss across Ilkay’s mouth that burned hotter than any fire. “It is the duty of the Legion to serve and protect the people. Also, I would hate for anything to happen to your pretty face, Moonrise.”

Ilkay rolled his eyes and nudged him away. “Why do I ever bother being nice to you.”

“I think this is the first time you *have* been nice,” Dalibor retorted with his damnable grin.

Ilkay had the sinking feeling that was true. “Whatever. You’re still an ass.”

Chuckling, Dalibor playfully patted the side of his cheek before turning away to resume walking.

Several minutes later, they came out of a narrow section of cavern—and nearly right off a cliff.

“Fuck this place,” Ilkay said through gritted teeth as he pressed against the wall of the cave. He’d never been afraid of heights, but that was rapidly changing. “If I actually live through this, I am never going underground ever again, and fuck anyone who tries to make me.”

“Honestly, I can’t even make fun of you for that, much as I’d love to. Fuck this shit,” Dalibor replied. “Come on, I think I see a bridge that way, just edge along carefully please. I don’t know how far of a fall it is, and even demons have limits on what we can recover from, especially since there’s no one to adequately feed me.”

“Do not talk about falling right now.” Ilkay glared at him. “Let’s get this over with.”

Dalibor, for once, simply obeyed, edging along the *very* narrow scrap of space between the wall behind them and the deadly fall in front of them. Ilkay followed him, close enough to help if, Moon protect them, something went wrong, but not so close they’d get tangled up in each other and *cause* the problem.

By the time they reached the sad excuse of rock that passed for a bridge, Ilkay was ready to throw up. “I’m moving to a goddamn meadow at the base of the mountain after this.”

Dalibor laughed but stopped at the way the sound echoed up and down and all around them, as though they were mocked by the ghosts of every other dumbass who’d come down here.

“You go first,” Dalibor said, edging along until he was past the bridge, so Ilkay had room. “If it crumbles, I stand a better chance of making the jump.”

Ilkay growled but obeyed, just wanting this whole stupid nightmare over with. Taking a deep breath, he stepped out onto

the bridge, heart seizing at every echoing scrape and chip of rock that dislodged and plummeted.

When it felt like something shifted, he froze, terror turning his blood to ice.

“Keeping going!” Dalibor hissed.

Ilkay wasn't all that certain his body would listen to him, but after a moment and a few more deep breaths, he did start to slowly, stiffly move again. When he finally reached the other side a hundred years later, he sank to his knees in relief, too weak and trembling to even think about remaining upright.

The scuff of boots shot him back to his feet, however, and he turned to watch anxiously as Dalibor made the crossing. If Dalibor fell... and he was left here all alone... in the absolute dark... Ilkay would lose his ever-fucking mind, and that was no exaggeration.

Halfway across, a heart-seizing crack boomed through the cavernous dark. “Dalibor!”

Dalibor didn't waste time replying, simply braced himself and lunged with all his might, landing awkwardly on his feet right next to Ilkay, stumbling forward and catching himself on a pillar where a stalactite and stalagmite had long ago fused.

Ilkay watched as the bridge cracked in half and then, in large pieces, fell bit by bit into the abyss. “I'm really getting tired of this whole ‘no way back’ thing.”

“On the slightly brighter side, I can *taste* that demon now.”

“Why is it all the way back here? How did they get it here? Did the demon take itself here?”

“I'm sure that's just one of many questions we'll soon have answers for, whether we want them or not.”

They walked along the latest cliff wall, which thankfully had much more of a ledge in front of it, though not enough that Ilkay could avoid looking at the abyss. “A meadow, and I'm not even climbing the fucking roof,” he muttered.

Dalibor laughed.

Eventually, after entirely too long, they came to a crack in the wall wide enough for them to pass. It ended in a wide-open space that stank of blood, magic, and the sulfurous stench of demon. “We should have smelled it sooner.”

“Warding, I think. Whoever sealed this demon up, they did it fifty times over just to be safe.”

“And it still wasn’t enough,” Ilkay said softly, and if he’d thought he was afraid before...

He stared across the open space they’d entered. Roughly circular, and all around the edge was a lower stone wall... almost like a ring of benches. “What was this place? Why was it all the way back here? How much of this cavern complex did they take over?”

“I think this is older than the cult,” Dalibor said thoughtfully. “Beneath the demon rot, I smell magic that does not match up with the rest.” He looked up, eyes glowing. “I think this place had a separate entrance, that it was destroyed naturally over time, and this place lost as well. You’d have to ask one of the castle historians to be sure, of course, but I think that would mesh with the known history of this place. The cult must have found it exploring, and our intrepid betrayer sealed the demon away all the way out here, then trekked back to cult grounds and committed a few murders.”

Ilkay made a face. “Including his own, Moon grant them peace. Can you really take down this demon?”

“Only one way to find out,” Dalibor said, his tone completely serious for once. “Telmé trusted it to me, so I’ll certainly do whatever it takes to stop her.”

That wasn’t the ringing promise of victory Ilkay had been hoping for, but it was honest, and he respected that. “If you lose to a demon that’s been trapped in a glorified tomb for decades, I’m never letting you fuck me again.”

Dalibor laughed, and then Ilkay was predictably pressed up against the rock wall, Dalibor taking his mouth like he owned it, kissing Ilkay until his mouth ached. “And if I succeed? What’s my prize?” His eyes glowed like stars as he

brushed his thumb over Ilkay's bottom lip, his fangs just visible in the red lights hovering around them.

"You can live out your little fantasy of fucking me in front of the other two."

A deep, smug and knowing chuckle thrummed through Ilkay's body, making him shiver. Brushing his lips against Ilkay's ear, he said, "My little fantasy, is it?"

"It certainly wasn't in my mind until you put it there."

Dalibor kissed him again. "With that kind of encouragement, how could I possibly fail?" He pushed away, leaving Ilkay momentarily bereft before he gathered himself and they continued on with their quest.

They hadn't gone many more steps though, Dalibor's kisses still lingering on his lips, when a pain like he'd never felt before sliced through him. Like being stabbed in the heart. In the gut. In the head. All at once, over and over again.

Ilkay screamed as the agony spread, knives and fire and biting cold all at once, like he was being filled with boiling oil and plunged into a freezing lake. He dropped to his hands and knees, struggling to breathe even as he continued to scream. The world faded around him, reduced to pain and someone calling his name.

As the pain finally faded minutes later, Ilkay came to lying on the ground with his head in Dalibor's lap and his hands pinned to his chest by Dalibor's firm grip. Every breath hurt, and tears streamed from his eyes, and he had the feeling from the stinging on his face and arms that he'd clawed himself badly trying to stop the pain.

"Are you all right?"

"No," Ilkay said. "I think— I think—" He twisted free, sat up on his knees, bent over as he trembled, tears falling to the cavern floor. "My father is dead. It was violent, sudden. There wasn't time to properly transfer the chief's power to me. It's... He always told me... but it's so much..." His voice broke on a sob. "I thought I'd get to say goodbye. Something's wrong. If my father was killed so brutally, then my people are in danger."

His father was dead. Probably murdered. He'd already been dying. Who would take his last months of life from him? Why? It was so unbearably cruel.

Ilkay was an orphan now. No father. No mother. No siblings. The last of his line, who had led the Wolves of the Moon for countless generations. His wolves were in danger. Dying. While still struggling with the earthquake and the destruction of their homes. They needed him, and he was trapped here in the Moon-forsaken cave from hell about to face a demon.

If he died down here...

Well, his power would pass to Müge, which was something. She'd be a good chief. An excellent one. He would hold on to that.

It was all he had.

"Come on, let's get this over with so you can return to your people." Dalibor hauled him to his feet, holding fast to his hands when they were up. "I am sorry for your loss. I only knew your father for a moment, but he seemed a truly good and honorable man."

"Thank you," Ilkay said, voice hoarse.

"So tell me why this transfer of power is so devastating. I don't think I screamed that much when I underwent the awakening of my demon blood, and I can tell you that's not a pain I ever want to feel again. Even getting limbs ripped off is not as bad as that was."

Ilkay gave a weak laugh. "I never thought about it, but I guess the transformation into a minor demon

would be neither easy nor pleasant. As to the Wolves of the Moon..." He drew a shuddery breath, releasing it slowly. "I can feel out each member of my pack when I choose to; I can force or prevent shifting; I can force them to listen to me, though that takes a great deal of energy and isn't really good for anything but emergencies, and a strong enough will can resist. I can also call down the power of the Moon Herself, though again, that requires a great expenditure of energy on my part and isn't to be

done lightly.” He looked up into the endless dark. “Not that it would matter down here, where even She can’t reach us.”

He pulled his hands free and wiped at his face. “We have no time for my anguish. Let’s kill this fucking demon and get out of here so I can help my people.”

Dalibor grasped his chin and tilted his head up, and kissed him firmly but gently, then withdrew and turned to resume walking.

The stench of demon and old blood grew stronger with every step, until it was like trying to breathe through smoke it was so heavy and all-consuming. Ilkay’s mind filled with images of his wolves dead. Of fire and destruction and the gaping maws of earth that had once been his home.

He cried out when Dalibor abruptly grabbed him, slammed him into the wall, and kissed him again.

Ilkay keened, pressing into the touch, fumbling to grip whatever he could of Dalibor, fingers finally tangling in the front of his tunic. A hand curled around the back of his neck, the press of Dalibor’s fingers firm, anchoring, the way his thumb rubbed almost affectionately grounding. “What—”

Dalibor bit his lips and kissed him again before finally drawing back and saying, “Samil is getting to you. Remember that death and destruction are her domain, the same as wrath is mine. Your people need you; do not let her consume you.”

“Thank you,” Ilkay said. “You’d better fucking kill her.”

“I will.”

Dalibor withdrew, and Ilkay followed behind him, this time making an effort to control his thoughts, focusing on happy things, fond memories. Whenever they tried to turn down darker paths, he switched to something else. It was exhausting, but better than falling into the despair that had nearly gotten him before Dalibor helped him.

They stopped as he struggled not to throw up from the overwhelming stench.

The first thing he noticed was yet another abyss.

The second was the bridge, broken in places so that it looked like a series of deadly stepping stones.

The third was the mass in the middle of a round platform in the center of the enormous chasm. All around the edge of the circle were glowing runes, a cage of magic—save for one tiny sliver that he might not have seen if he hadn't been looking for it. That was how the minions must have gotten out, but it was too small a break for the demon.

As they stood there, Dalibor making a sound remarkably close to a growl, the mass moved. Unwound.

It was a snake, precisely as Dalibor had said. It was even more alarming than the giant spiders, its head bigger than his entire body, with fangs nearly as ominous. In the light of the runes and Dalibor's orbs, its scales were the color of a fresh wound, the pulsing red of sliced muscle and spilling blood. Partway down its back, six enormous wings unfurled and spread out to consume the space around the snake, as black as the darkness their meager lights could not reach. Its eyes glowed that same feral yellow as Dalibor's, but where Dalibor's somehow drew him in, these eyes made him flinch, made him want to run.

Samil hissed, the sound loud enough that rocks trembled around them and some stalactites went tumbling down into the abyss below, the echoes of their shattering reverberating up like broken whispers.

Its voice, when it spoke, was like a thousand dying screams. *A wolf-child and the watered-down get of Zamael, how entertaining. After centuries of stewing, I get this pathetic show. You will not even last long enough to alleviate my boredom.*

"I'm here to get rid of you," Dalibor replied.

Samil laughed, and it sounded the way being torn apart felt. *"You reek of fear, you're half-starved, and you're more concerned about your little wolf bitch than you are yourself. Distracted. Weak. Pathetic. Come and kill me then, little descendent of Zamael, who I once called friend, murdered by pathetic humans after they no longer found him useful."*

Dalibor didn't reply, simply made his way across the treacherous stepping stones with sword drawn. It was a stupid, reckless move, but Ilkay didn't waste time or breath trying to tell Dalibor that.

What did the demon mean *you're more concerned about your little wolf bitch*. Why would Dalibor be concerned about him? They barely knew each other, no matter how thoroughly they'd fucked.

Instead of dwelling on that, he examined their surroundings again. With the additional light of the runes, he could see far better than usual. How could there be so many enormous canyons inside a single mountain? It felt like the entire mountain itself could fit inside some of them, and even if logically he knew why that made sense, it also made no fucking sense at all.

Beyond Samil there seemed to be another split in the rocks, though whether it led anywhere or simply was a crack that ended a few paces in, he couldn't tell from his current position.

A snarling hiss snapped his attention back to Samil and Dalibor, who'd reached the center and thrown himself into the fight.

He always appeared so large and fierce, but right then he looked small and fragile, dodging every fang strike and flying smack of the tail, leaping and weaving about the confined space. If he made one mistake, he would be killed by Samil or by the fall.

Liquid, thick and viscous, flew from Samil's fangs as it lunged again for Dalibor. The liquid hissed as it struck the rocks instead, foul-smelling smoke rising up in small, pale curls. What in the hell was that? Venom didn't do that, not that Ilkay had ever seen.

Dalibor jumped, twisted and flipped, and as he came back down sliced off three of Samil's wings in a single devastating blow. Samil screamed so loudly the world trembled ominously, though thankfully it didn't turn into a full blow earthquake.

At that, why didn't Samil just cause an earthquake? Hadn't it caused the last two?

Perhaps they no longer had enough strength left for it. Though from the viciousness of the fight, they weren't yet weak either.

Dalibor managed to get one of the remaining wings, but then the tip of Samil's tail sent him flying—and smacking into a wall that wasn't there.

Stones dropped into Ilkay's stomach. The circle. Dalibor wasn't in danger of falling like he'd thought because he was now trapped in the circle with Samil. How? Because he was partly demon? Must be. How was he going to get free, then?

Dalibor struggled to his feet, and it was only then that Ilkay saw his left arm was dangling at his side in a way that said it'd been dislocated.

Fuck this, he wasn't going to just stand around like some helpless pup who still had his baby teeth. He didn't care if he was outmatched. Even if he was now Moon.

Stripping his clothes, letting them fall where they landed, Ilkay threw himself into his shift as he ran for the broken bridge. In wolf form the leaps were easy to make, and the pair within the ring were so focused on each other that neither seemed to notice him.

Reaching the edge, just outside the ring, Ilkay lunged into the air with all his strength and landed on Samil's back right behind and below their head, sinking his teeth in and tearing with all his might—and when Samil threw him off, taking huge chunks of scale and flesh with him.

Unlike the other two, the barrier didn't hold him, and he only just barely kept himself from going over the edge, claws scrabbling, raking across the stone.

“Get back you stupid bastard!” Dalibor bellowed right before a screaming Samil came heaving toward him. Dalibor ducked, dodged, and then came thrusting up with his sword into the upper portion of Samil's mouth, ripping outward with a cry, taking the snout and one whole fang out in the process.

Samil shrieked loudly, setting off rockfalls and landslides around them, including what remained of the fucking bridge. Great.

Ilkay spat out the chunk of snake he still gripped and braced for another go—and barely moved out of the way of the tail that came swooshing toward him.

Then it abruptly went up and back down, slamming on top of him harder than any falling rock could, and Ilkay yelped as the pain tore through him. If every bone in his body wasn't broken...

He coughed up blood, tried to regain his feet, but only collapsed once more.

“Ilkay!” Dalibor bellowed—and then he screamed in pain too, Samil landing a blow with her remaining fang, pinning him against the barrier.

Ilkay whined. It couldn't end like this. It *wouldn't*. If he could do nothing else, he could see to it Dalibor survived, got a second chance to finish this and get the fuck out.

If it worked. It was all he had left, and he'd never been properly trained to do it.

Moving so he was sitting upright, nearly blacking out from the pain, he threw his head back and howled, pouring all his focus, all his remaining life, all his fear and hope and desperation into it. Into Crying for the Moon.

He howled until he couldn't, until the pain was too great, and he was choking on his own blood.

At first there was nothing. He'd failed. The Moon could not reach them here.

Then everything seemed to go still. Quiet. Samil hissed, its enormous head rearing up, Dalibor sliding off its fang and dropping to the ground with a pained cry.

Slivers of silver light cut through the dark, slicing through Samil and making it scream. More light, wider than the initial slivers. More and more, growing ever larger, until the entire circle was filled with blinding, searing light.

Samil screamed, writhing and flailing blindly.

Ilkay heaved to his feet, shock rippling through him that he was able to do so—and stay on his feet. Blood no longer dribbled from his mouth. The light? He'd never heard of healing properties.

Samil seemed to fall even further into panic, as though overcome with fear and rage. Dalibor.

As though provoked to action by Ilkay's thoughts, Dalibor threw himself back into the fight, dodging and weaving, slicing and stabbing, finally sinking his sword into the gaping wound left by Ilkay's teeth and finishing the job, taking Samil's head clean off as the silvery light slowly faded.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," Dalibor said as Samil's death throes finally ceased. He sheathed his sword, unaware or uncaring it was still filthy, and limped stiffly over to Ilkay. "You're a stupid fucking bastard, but you made all the difference. Hold tight, I'll get us out of here."

Ilkay tried to speak. Say something. Anything. But despite the Moon's healing, he was exhausted and in pain and helpless against the darkness that came rushing up to consume him.



Tragedy

Ilkay woke up feeling like he'd been run face first into a wall multiple times. He dragged his eyes open and stared uncomprehending at his surroundings, trying to figure out what was wrong with them. He'd been in this forest a thousand times. It looked right. Smelled right. Even felt—

A flash of red at the corner of his sight startled him, and he leapt to his feet, hackles rising, growling... at Dalibor, who knelt several paces away from him, hands held up in surrender. "You're finally awake."

Dalibor. Samil. The cave. Outside.

Ilkay relaxed and sank back down as all the pain in his body registered, whimpering softly. They were *outside*. No longer in that fucking cave. Mustering what energy he had, Ilkay shifted. “Where— How—” He groaned, sinking to his knees and holding his aching head in one hand. “Maybe shouldn’t have done that yet.”

“I caught you some rabbits,” Dalibor said. “Hopefully once you’re rested enough, you can figure out where we are and the quickest way back to your home.”

“You can’t just smell it out?”

“I’m weak. I need blood. I can’t even fully heal all my wounds right now. I can smell things, yes, but not enough to even guess at the best way to get through this forest.”

Ilkay nodded. “Where are the rabbits?”

“There. I was about to start on a fire when I saw you were finally awake.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Hard to say, but it was dark when I finally got us out of those Three-forsaken caves, and the sun is high now. Perhaps twelve hours?”

Ilkay grunted, mustered what little energy he had left, and shifted back into his wolf form. Going to the rabbits, he made quick, efficient work of them before padding back to Dalibor’s side and promptly passing out again.



The next time he woke was to moonlight, soft and soothing, silver cascading across the snow. There was a weight across his waist, warmth at his back, a familiar scent in his nose. “Dalibor.”

Silence at first, then a soft grunt and the lovely warmth vanished. “You’re awake.”

“Hopefully I’ll stay that way this time. When did I shift back?”

“About an hour or so ago. Feeling better?”

“Much. There’s blood on the wind, faint but fresh. We need to move.” He rolled to all fours as he shifted, shaking out his fur as he settled.

Dalibor grunted. “Lead the way then, Moon.”

The formal address twisted through Ilkay, filling him with anguish and pride. Too much. Too much had happened all at once, but there was nothing he could do except keep going. So he did, springing forward and settling into a fast pace he could maintain, weaving and wending through the dense forest, panting breaths misting, snow falling gently, the wind occasionally kicking it up into a flurry.

The moon was high, and Ilkay was hungry. For home. For justice. For blood.

When they burst from the woods sometime later, it was to the stench of blood and death. The ruins of the camps they had made by the lake.

Bodies. So many bodies everywhere. Ilkay snarled and threw himself back into motion, wending through the carnage, following its trail...

To the center of the lake, still frozen solid but cracked and straight up broken through in many places, smeared with so much blood the air stank of it.

Out in the middle of the lake, a bitter fight rang with screams of rage and pain. Ilkay could see the members of the Legion they’d been separated from, scattered amongst several of his wolves. He paused to throw out a long howl, drawing the attention of the fighters—and revealing their opponent.

Müge. No. That couldn’t be. Why were they fighting Müge? Snarling, Ilkay resumed running, throwing himself into the middle of the stalled fight, driving Müge out of the circle to figure out what was going on, why his second in command and promised mate was covered in blood and stank of sulfur, rancid and burning.

Rancid and burning... where had he heard those words?

As Müge lunged at him, clearly trying for his throat, the memory came to him. Dalibor.

“You smell of pleasure, little pup, but there’s another smell lingering on you, something rancid and burning.”

And later in those goddess-forsaken caves, he’d thought the same thing.

Müge’s eyes were a feral yellow, nothing at all like her usual eyes... and everything like Dalibor’s, except darker, slightly more orange than gold.

Ilkay threw himself out of the way as an enraged, seemingly mindless Müge made another try for his throat, then turned sharply and slammed into her side, sending her sliding across the blood-soaked ice. He snarled at the others, warning them back. Nobody but him would deal with Müge. It was the very least he owed her. She was his Moonshadow; they were in this together, one way or another.

Regaining her feet, Müge bared her teeth in a snarl and ran at him. Ilkay braced himself, feinting right and going left, whipping around to catch her by the back of the neck and slam her to the ice. He kept tight hold of her scruff, tasting her blood, hot and sweet, until she went still.

Ilkay relaxed slightly—and went flying back with a whimper, the breath knocked right out of him. Right, then. No more playing nice. He regained his footing right as she reached him, barely dodging the teeth bound for his throat, sliding under her and tossing up, then whipping around and racing toward where she’d landed and skidded across the ice again.

After that, it was all teeth and blood. Biting, clawing, fresh blood joining the already-frozen mess soaking the ice. New cracks appeared, growing increasingly, ominously loud. The snow was falling heavily, the wind kicking it in all directions.

Ilkay barely noticed, his eyes only for his prey. Müge snarled as they circled, both of them dripping blood, claws scraping through it. When she finally broke and lunged, he went down, under her, then whipped around and—

Red lightning crashed down, searing his eyes, making him yelp in pain and surprise, a noise echoed by Müge and several others.

Vision still a mess of black spots, body aching and weak from blood loss, Ilkay dragged himself back to his feet anyway. He would end this. He was Moon. This mess was his responsibility, even if it was not his fault.

Before he could throw himself back into the fight, though, he was tackled to the ground and pinned there by something that would not move.

“Ilkay! Ilkay! Stop it, little pup. It’s over. She’s down. The fight is done.”

Slowly, one syllable at a time, the voice penetrated the blinding haze of his rage. Ilkay went lax, huffing at Dalibor, and settled into panting, hot breaths clouding in the frigid air. As Dalibor climbed off him, Ilkay tried to stand—and promptly collapsed. His vision, recently cleared from that bolt of red lightning, went black.



Ilkay woke with a gasp, sitting up with a shout—and froze. The caves. The demon. No, they’d gotten out. Hadn’t they? He pressed a hand to his aching head as he tried to get his memories in order.

A soft moan snapped his gaze to his left, where a battered and bruised Müge lay fast asleep, whimpering softly at whatever tormented her dreams.

Everything came flooding back, leaving Ilkay feeling like he’d taken a blow to the gut. Several blows. His breath hitched, and it felt like knives in his lungs.

His father was dead. He was Moon. His wolves had been attacked—by Müge. Why? Müge was faithful and loving, his strong and capable Moonshadow. She’d never betray them.

He needed to see to his wolves. Ilkay braced himself and pushed to his feet—or tried to, anyway, but he'd barely started when the world tilted sharply, nauseatingly beneath his feet and he was right back where he'd started, except chilly now. Yanking the blankets and furs back up, he sighed heavily, the sound briefly filling the large, quiet tent.

His father's tent, that Ilkay had shared with him and now shared with no one. His tent, then. A New Moon with no family left.

Breath hitching again, his chest feeling full of thorns, he reached out to gently stroke Müge's cheek, then bent to kiss it, though even that small movement made him dizzy.

The tent flap opened as he sat up, and he stared as Göksu slipped inside—and nearly dropped the tray he was holding. “Moon! You're awake!”

“Use my name,” Ilkay said gruffly. “You protected me. Kissed me. I'm not going to tolerate formality from you except in ceremonies.”

Göksu smiled faintly, though it didn't banish the sadness and worry in his eyes. “I'm glad you're finally awake. Here, I brought some soup and more tonic. If I'd known you'd be awake, I've have brought a better meal.”

“This is fine. How long have I been unconscious? What's happened? What was wrong with Müge? Is Prince Dalibor still here? Did I imagine there was red lightning or—” He broke off as Göksu laughed and set the tray on his lap.

“Eat, Ilkay. I'll tell you everything I know.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly but didn't start speaking until Ilkay had dutifully begun to sip at the soup. “His Highness is still here, along with Prince Telmé. He's the one who sent that red lightning, which you didn't imagine.” He gave a fleeting crooked smile. “They say that Müge and several others were poisoned by demonic residue. I didn't fully understand their explanation, but they think someone, maybe one of the guards on duty, got infected somehow and then spread it around the village. It took time for the infection to reach a point where it... overtook her and the other infected.” He peered at Ilkay. “Prince

Telmé says that given your relationship with her, he was surprised the infection did not take you as well.”

Ilkay frowned. *Rancid and burning*. “I think... I think perhaps she tried. Before I went underground with the others. I don’t know why it didn’t work. Perhaps because I was Moonrise. How many are dead?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Their names.”

He listened with eyes closed, tears dripping, as Göksu recited the names of the dead, and of course the very first one was his father. Of course they’d gone for his father first. Which one of them had done the killing? He wasn’t certain he wanted to know.

Combined with those lost in the earthquake... The Wolves had lost eighty-seven people. They were not a large group, perhaps just shy of a thousand in total. They’d now lost nearly a tenth of that and may yet lose more if some of the injured did not recover or more danger came their way.

When Göksu had finished, he said, “I need to get up.”

“You need to rest,” Göksu said, pressing a hand to his chest and pushing. “Please. Müge needs you too. Initially we had you in different tents, for your own safety, but she wouldn’t stop screaming in her sleep for you until we finally brought her here.”

“I see,” Ilkay said softly, not really seeing at all, except that Müge needed him even more than he’d realized. He’d thought he was going to have to kill her, back on the lake, that he could at least honor her by being the one to do it. “How is she?”

“Hasn’t woken, but thanks to the Legion priests her wounds are mostly healed, and she’s also been purified of the demon infection that drove her and the others to attack the pack. Prince Telmé assures us that she will more than likely be all right, but it will take her a few days to wake after all she suffered.”

Ilkay trapped Göksu's hand against his chest when he started to pull it away. "How are *you*, my devoted protector?"

Göksu flushed but looked pleased by the words. "I'm fine. Tired, but fine. My only duty right now is to watch over the two of you. Prince Telmé and Prince Dalibor are planning to return to the caverns to make absolutely certain the demon is dead. Once they return, the geomancers are going to seal everything off for good." He hesitated, hand tensing beneath Ilkay's.

"What is it?" Ilkay asked softly.

"He—Prince Telmé I mean—says it's not safe to stay on the mountain. But where are we supposed to go? We're the Wolves of the Moon. This mountain is our home."

"Home is not a place, but people. We'll figure it out. Leave the worrying to me, little protector." Ilkay set his tray aside and leaned over to nuzzle against Göksu's cheek, breathing in the scent of him, cinnamon and woodsmoke.

"Ilkay..."

Chuckling, Ilkay kissed him. A soft kiss, much like the one they'd shared in the caves. Göksu moaned and seemed to melt against him, as though all the tension holding him together had fallen away. Ilkay threaded his hand through his hair, curling his fingers tight at the nape, and pressed the kiss deeper. Taking. Claiming. Enjoying one right thing amidst so many wrong.

How had he never noticed that Göksu was right there? Drawing back, he pressed their foreheads together, slowly letting the hand in Göksu's hair slide free. "Were you ever going to say anything?"

"I wanted to, but I could never work up the courage. Like I said, why would you choose me?"

Ilkay sighed and kissed him again. "Why *wouldn't* I choose you? We are friends, closer than brothers. You fought your fear of those caves, of the earthquakes, even giant spiders, to protect me. I would be a fucking fool not to choose you, Göksu. I'm done being stupid. Will you be one of mine?"

“You know I will,” Göksu whispered. “I’ve always been yours, Ilkay.”

“Stupid,” Ilkay whispered, and drew back to cup Göksu’s face in both his hands before kissing him again, feeding hungrily at his mouth, which was warm and sweet, so eager and earnest.

Göksu whined, clinging to him until they finally drew apart panting, his face flushed, his hair a mess, and Ilkay desperately wished they were in a time and place where he could drag Göksu to bed and make up for all the time he’d inadvertently wasted by not noticing one of his closest friends was in love with him.

He rubbed Göksu’s lips with his thumb before finally dropping his hand. “I will enjoy sharing further kisses and more when all is well again.”

Göksu grinned fleetingly, then retrieved the tray and rose. “I’ll be back, and let the others know you’re awake. The Princes of the Blood have been wanting to speak with you.” His momentary happiness slipped away. “What’s left of the council does too, but they can keep waiting so far as I’m concerned.”

Before Ilkay could ask what that meant, because he’d never seen Göksu more than mildly frustrated with the council, he was gone. Ilkay lay back down, abruptly exhausted, and turned on his side to stare at Müge. Kissing one lover while another slept in the aftermath of something that would traumatize her the rest of her life. What did that make him?

He reached out to stroke the lines of her face, brush back a stray lock of hair. Her chest rose and fell evenly, so at least she seemed to be getting real rest. How had all of them missed the demon residue or whatever Göksu had called it? How had *Dalibor*.

Ilkay couldn’t bring himself to feel angry, though. What good would anger do? *Dalibor* was dangerously arrogant, but he wasn’t lazy or sloppy. If he’d missed it, if all the Legion had missed it, then they were probably lucky more people weren’t dead.

Movement came from the tent entrance, and Ilkay turned his attention to his visitors, who proved to be Telmé and Dalibor. He sat up slowly, ignoring the persistent dizziness. “Göksu told me a little bit of what happened. Residue? Infection?”

Dalibor sat closest to him, face grim. “I must apologize, Moon. I should have noticed the demonic residue. I smelled sulfur and rot, so did those who accompanied me, but we found no other traces of demon, and the smell was so faint, we decided it was leftover from when you and the others first ventured into the cavern. For the remains of a demon’s minion to leave residue capable of... not possession, exactly, but a sort of rabid madness... is incredibly rare. Still, I am a Prince of the Blood and should have realized.”

“We are sorry that the Legion failed you and your people, Moon,” Telmé said quietly.

Ilkay stared at them, emotions a raging storm in his chest. Lashing out would be easy. Some would even say more than fair. That wouldn’t bring his wolves back. His father would not have raged. “Humility doesn’t suit you, Prince Dalibor. You told me she smelled rancid and burning. Instead of asking what that meant, continuing a conversation that might have alerted us both that danger might be among us, I lashed out and stormed off. We’ve all made mistakes. Is everyone safe now?”

“Yes,” Telmé said, relaxing slightly. “One of the Shadowmarch flew back to Guldbrandsen to tell me you and Dalibor were trapped in the caverns, and I flew here myself with additional priests and geomancers. Unfortunately, we arrived too late, only just in time to save Müge. Barely. I hope she will be all right.”

“I hope so too,” Ilkay said softly.

“The journal you found has been handed off to experts in Guldbrandsen. It will take them time to learn the full extent of what it says, but at a glance they tell me it does seem to discuss betrayal and murder, someone trying to do the right thing. An excellent find, Moon, whatever knowledge it provides will be invaluable to filling gaps in Tria Noor’s sordid history.”

“I’m glad we found something so important, though I don’t think it was worth the lives lost.”

“Agreed,” Telmé said softly.

Dalibor shifted, drawing Ilkay’s eyes back to him. Müge. Göksu. Now Dalibor. He’d started this strange, sad adventure with one lover, and now had three. *Was* Dalibor his lover? Or was that behind them now they were free of the caves? Probably it was over. Dalibor had to return to the Legion, after all, and Ilkay had to figure out where to take his wolves, how to build them a new life, while also mourning their fallen, managing his grief over his father.

“There is much we still need to talk about,” Telmé said, and Ilkay jerked his eyes away from the bottomless feral gold of Dalibor’s. “You need more rest though. Please do so knowing your people are safe and there will be no further threats. They all pray for your full recovery. The ceremonies for your dead are to take place in three days.”

“Thank you.”

Telmé smiled ever so faintly. “I will leave the two of you to talk, then. I wish you and Müge a speedy recovery.” He left quietly, a cold breeze snapping through the tent before the flap closed once more.

Ilkay swallowed and looked at Dalibor, once more absorbed in his eyes. “Are you all right? I don’t remember much. The fight with the demon. It nearly killed you. The moon responded to me, though it shouldn’t have that far into the dark.”

“That wasn’t moonlight,” Dalibor said. “It was holy power. Not the kind I see High Priest Korin use, but something I suspect is unique to the Wolves. Hell, maybe it is moonlight after a fashion. What do I know? Except that it fucking hurt, and I need to remember to never truly piss you off.”

“You saved my life, that gets you out of trouble for a little while,” Ilkay said, but couldn’t quite smile. “When do you have to leave?”

“Soon,” Dalibor said. “Telmé and I are going back into the caverns tomorrow to ensure that demon is well and truly

gone, and taking some priests to purify as much as they can. When we're done, the geomancers will seal the mountain up again, hopefully for good this time. Or at least so well it'll be another several centuries before anyone has to deal with it again."

Ilkay nodded.

"You could come with us."

He jerked his head up. "What?"

"The Legion could use the Wolves of the Moon. It's not safe for you to remain here on this mountain, and after all the trauma your people have endured..." Dalibor hesitated, started to speak, but ultimately lapsed into silence.

Ilkay's heart pounded against his ribcage. "I'd have to speak with the council, get their agreement on such an enormous decision. I still have a debt to pay, though, to the Legion for how they saved me. How they have rescued the Wolves of the Moon twice now."

Dalibor frowned. "The Legion exists to protect and serve the people. I don't want you to come because of a stupid debt that only exists in your head. I want you to come because it would be a fresh start for your people. Because it's what the Wolves *want* to do." He laughed sourly. "Though life in the Legion is often violent and thankless, and your people might not welcome a life that brings still more death."

"Everything brings death, even a hunt along paths you've traveled a thousand time," Ilkay said softly, the words his father's. "Is that the only reason you want me to come live in that ridiculous castle full of noisy people who make snide remarks instead of answering simple questions? Because we'd be useful?"

That familiar cocky grin returned, and Ilkay nearly slumped in relief to see it. "There is that whole promise you made, to let me fuck you through the mattress while your mate and protector watched." He leaned in close, cheek pressed to Ilkay's as he spoke huskily into his ear. "I've also been told we're apparently courting, and it would be the height of offensive to suddenly withdraw. Maybe now we're out of those

caves, and safe again, I can bring you better than fish and thin rabbits.”

Ilkay’s face went hot. “Who told you about that?”

“Practically the entire village, after I related everything that happened after you and I were cut off from the rest.” That smirk. “Well, almost everything. I didn’t think you’d want me detailing how thoroughly I fucked you down there in the dark, how sweetly you moaned and surrendered, the talent of that hungry mouth of yours.”

Ilkay shoved him so hard he toppled. “Why did I think I wanted to see you again?”

Dalibor laughed as he sat up—and kept going, braced on his hands as he leaned in to kiss Ilkay, hard and deep, all sharp teeth and demon greed. “You taste like your sweet little guardian.”

“His name is Göksu,” Ilkay said, tugging at Dalibor’s hair before kissing him again.

When they drew apart, Dalibor lapped at his lips before withdrawing completely. “Her heartbeat has changed; she’ll be waking up any moment. I’ll see to it you’re left alone the rest of the day.”

“Thank you.” Ilkay stroked his cheek, heart tripping when Dalibor kissed his fingers, such an uncharacteristically sweet gesture, before withdrawing.

He drew a shuddery breath and let it out slowly, then turned in the bed to face Müge, who sure enough opened her eyes a moment later. She drew a breath, but Ilkay covered her mouth gently before the scream could escape. She jerked her head in his direction and stared, then burst into tears.

Ilkay hauled her into his lap, holding tightly as she buried her face in the hollow of his throat and cried like she’d lost her entire world. Which she had, in a manner of speaking. The village destroyed, loved ones dead, and then she’d been taken by demonic residue and killed still more. She’d been alone and tortured from practically the beginning and no one had fucking known it.

She was his mate, his future wife, he should have known something was wrong, damn it.

He held her until the tears were spent, then made her drink some water from a pitcher someone had left nearby. Probably Göksu. “It’s not your fault, Müge.”

“I should have fought it harder— Should have tried harder to tell—”

“Even the Wolves of the Moon are no match for demons. Nobody blames you, and if they dare to, they will suffer my wrath. It’s not your fault.”

“But I did it all the same,” Müge said, crying again briefly, despite how sore her eyes must be. “How many are dead because of me?”

“There was more than one of you consumed by the residue. The only ones to blame here are the demon and the fucking fools who summoned it in the first place.”

“How many!”

Ilkay sighed. “Twenty-three.”

Müge moaned as though in physical pain and curled into a ball. “How can you even stand to look at me?”

“I love you. That hasn’t changed. You think I don’t hold myself responsible for failing to notice you needed my help? I promised to be there for you always, and when you needed me most, I didn’t even realize it. You shouldn’t want to look at me.”

That drew her head up, and she wiped absently at the fresh tears trailing down her cheeks. “You aren’t responsible for not being able to see a problem you didn’t even know could exist.”

Ilkay pulled her into his lap again, stroking her back.

“The others will want me cast out.”

“The others can go fuck themselves,” Ilkay said. “Anyway, I don’t believe that for a second. You weren’t the only one overtaken, and I’m not casting out anyone who was— was possessed, or whatever you want to call it. Any one of us could have fallen victim. It’s a wonder I didn’t.”

“It tried,” Müge whispered. “I remember. It compelled me to take you into the woods. The scratches on your back should have gotten it into your blood. But it didn’t. Why?”

“I don’t know,” Ilkay replied just as softly.

She looked up at him, her evergreen eyes heavily rimmed in red, raw and swollen from her tears. “I’m glad it didn’t work. The Wolves would be truly lost without you, Moon.”

Ilkay swallowed, then forced out the question he least wanted the answer to. “Did you... Who got to my father?”

“Not me,” Müge said. “I don’t recall who did. We were all after him because he was the greatest threat, but I wasn’t the one who reached him.”

Well, that was something. Ilkay wouldn’t blame her, he wasn’t blaming anyone, but knowing Müge had been the one to kill his father still would have been difficult to take.

Müge lay her head against his shoulder, all her weight pressed against him, as though she didn’t have the strength to carry it herself. That was fine. Ilkay would carry her as long as she needed and be there when she was ready to stand again. “I need something happy, Ilkay. Tell me why you smell as though Göksu and Prince Dalibor have rubbed all over you.”

Smiling, Ilkay rested his chin on top of her head and told her about them—the moment in the cave with Göksu, brief but sweet, and the far more dramatic moments with Dalibor.

“Leave it to you to wind up with two additional lovers in the midst of all this. I’m glad Göksu finally said something. I was going to tell you about him myself if he didn’t speak up soon.” There was a faint smile in her voice as she added, “Anyone with half a brain could see the sexual tension between you and Prince Dalibor. You sound like the legend.”

“The legend? No! I do not! That’s fireside nonsense,” Ilkay said. “The Wolves have always done multiple lovers and spouses.”

She sat up, expression intent as she met his gaze. “Maybe so, but none of them was you, born under a great moon,

with eyes the color of a blood moon.” She stroked his hair. “There’s more silver in your hair now. A sky scattered with stars. Every piece of you speaks to Our Most Holy Light. Now you have your Hearth, your Protector, and your Fighter. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong,” Ilkay said, voice harsh and rasping. “I’m no legend come to life. I’m a wolf too young to be Moon, with a pack that is one more tragedy away from completely falling apart. I failed you, I’m failing them, and failing my father by—”

“By not being perfect? Stop it. You’re smarter than this.”

Ilkay kissed the finger she’d pressed to his lips. “So are you, but I bet you’re still punishing yourself for what a demon forced you to do.”

“Oh, shut up,” Müge said with a sigh. “It’s not even the same thing.”

“It is.” He started to say more but stopped as she yawned and seemed to slump. After getting her to drink more water, he lay back in bed and pulled the blankets up. Kissing her temple, he said, “Sleep, Moonshadow. Whatever happens next, I need you with me.”

She fell asleep sighing his name, and Ilkay settled down next to her as exhaustion finally got the better of him too. He needed to be up, speaking with the council, helping and reassuring his wolves, but the need for rest pressed on him like an immovable weight. Reaching out, he found Müge’s hand and tangled their fingers together before joining her in the momentary peace of sleep.



New Moon

The day began with the burning of bodies.

His father body was in the middle, set above the rest in a place of honor. Ordinarily, the dead would be left there on the Cliff of Bones for time and scavengers to attend, freeing their spirits to return to the embrace of the Holy Moon.

Right now, though, there were too many bodies, and it was far too cold. If someone died in winter, often they could be left here to wait for warmer weather, but not with this many.

So they were carefully arranged, covered in wrappings that would aid the burning, along with winter greens and blooms. For those who had been lost to the dark caverns below,

they had gathered animal bones, bound together with sinew, decorated with greens and blooms and personal tokens. Offering enough, hopefully, for the Moon to find their souls and bring them home. There was no precedent for such a thing, so Ilkay would have to hope this new tradition was enough.

When all was ready, he stood in front of the enormous arrangement of pyres and sang the first mourning song, the wind carrying his voice across the mountaintop. As he finished the first, the council joined him and blended it effortlessly into the next song.

As the third song began, sung by everyone who had lost someone, Ilkay accepted the waiting torch from Müge and lit the pyres. The heat scorched his face before he could back away entirely, but his skin cooled easily beneath the onslaught of the bitter winds ever present on the cliff. Müge slid her arm though his right one, and Göksu clasped his left hand.

Standing apart was the Legion, Telmé and Dalibor almost violently striking in their red tunics and red-lined cloaks, with their eerily pale skin that nearly blended into the snow around them.

As the bodies burned, everyone present sang the final mourning song, calling upon the Moon to take her children home. When the last strains of the song had been carried off by the wind, up up into the sky, where they might be heard by the Moon, people approached the pyres to cast their final offerings and tokens, then in ones and twos made their way back down the cliff along rough-hewn stairs carved so long ago no one could recall who had done the work.

Eventually, only Ilkay, Müge, Göksu, and Dalibor remained.

Folding his arms across his chest, Dalibor regarded the three of them and said, "I am sorry for the deep losses you have suffered, and for my failures that led to many of them."

"No more blaming," Ilkay said. "It helps nothing. That earthquake set off a chain of tragic events. I was the one who insisted on exploring that cave, showing very little care for all the risks we were taking. I am Moon. The blame begins and

ends with me, and I say no more. We've all suffered enough, and the scars we bear will last the rest of our lives."

Müge curled against his side, trembling faintly. Ilkay kissed her brow and held her tightly, his other hand still twined with Göksu's. "I must go speak with the council soon. I would like you and Prince Telmé to attend it with me, if you are willing."

Dalibor's mouth curved. "Telmé was going to attend no matter what, but it's always nice to be invited."

"Trouble wherever you go," Ilkay said with a small laugh before he turned somber once more. "I would like the Wolves to accept your offer, to join you in Guldbrandsen and join the Legion. It is not a decision I can make alone, though, so I am hoping the two of you can help me persuade the council."

Müge looked up, then kept looking up, staring at where the smoke faded into the sky. "Before all this happened, I would have been furious at such a betrayal, moving the Wolves of the Moon out of Dragon Claw Mountain." She dropped her gaze to the pyres. "Now I can't wait to never see this place again. Disconcerting, how quickly life can truly change. I thought I understood, but... there is still much to learn, and Moon alone knows how much more still."

"We'll learn it together, all three of us." He looked at Dalibor, the hope in his heart causing an ache. "All four of us?"

Dalibor's eyes gleamed. "Did you think you would get rid of me so easily, wolfling?"

"I didn't know what your obligations back home were."

"I am a barely leashed half-demon. My biggest obligation, outside of serving the Legion and the people, is to marry someone who will remind me of what it's like to be human and why being human is a good thing. Knowing how these negotiations work, I will probably be offered up on a crystal salver. I'm sure Telmé has already settled on a date for the ceremony. If you three are willing, of course. I'll not bind myself where I am not wanted wholly."

Göksu laughed. "I think I'm the one who doesn't fit. Müge is as fierce as they come. Everyone knew she'd always be

Moonshadow, and no one could do it better. You're like the dark to Ilkay's light. I'm just... me."

Ilkay gave him a look, letting go of his hand to cup the side of his head, stroke his cheek with his thumb. "There's nothing 'just' about you, and I order you to stop saying such stupid things."

"Agreed," Müge said. "You're the Frost Heart."

"Not this again," Ilkay said with a groan.

Müge drew back and planted her fists on her hips. "Don't you 'not this again' me, Ilkay Thrace. You are a New Moon with the eyes of a sacred Great Blood Moon—"

"I'm not the only Wolf to have ever had red eyes!"

"—and you have a Frost Heart, Fire Heart, and Blood Heart. You're going to lead us to a new home! Don't tell me you're not the legend we've been waiting on!" Müge finished relentlessly.

Dalibor laughed, the sound carrying across the Cliff of Bones, into the sky with the smoke and ashes of the dead. "Well, when she puts it that way, I'm hard-pressed to argue."

"Oh, shut up," Ilkay said and groaned. "I'm not a legend. I'm just too young and overwhelmed and certain I'll make everything worse."

Reaching out to curl a finger under his chin, Dalibor urged him close and dropped a hard kiss on his mouth. "You called down the Moon Herself to save us from the demon of death and destruction, down in the dark where light should not have been able to reach. You cannot tell Göksu to stop putting himself down and then do the very same yourself."

"Oh, shut up," Ilkay repeated, but got no further as Dalibor withdrew and Müge kissed him, followed by Göksu. "If you're trying to distract me from protesting all this stupid legend nonsense... it might be working. Though I really don't think we should continue this in front of the deceased." He drew back. "So all parties are happy with this arrangement?"

Müge walked her fingers playfully up his chest. "Rumor has it you've already promised to let Dalibor fuck you while we

watch. I'm not about to miss that.”

Ilkay narrowed his eyes at Dalibor, who only grinned his evil grin. “When exactly did you run your mouth to these two about that?”

“While you were still asleep this morning,” Müge said.

“I don't know why I thought it was a good idea to let the three of you be around each other,” Ilkay said with a sigh. “Göksu, I thought you'd be the well-behaved one.”

“You'd like to know how well I can behave.”

Ilkay threw his hands up and walked off as the other two roared with laughter, Göksu grinning at his own daring.

They caught up to him at the base of the stairs, Göksu latching on to him, Müge and Dalibor walking arm in arm and speaking in furtive whispers that made the back of Ilkay's neck itch.

Unfortunately, the moment of levity couldn't last, and was immediately ended upon their return to the encampment, where the council all waited for him, and led a grim way to the center of camp, where a council circle had been set up.

He wasn't surprised that Telmé was already there. Dalibor cupped Ilkay's face in his hands and kissed him, sharp and quick, before going to stand beside Telmé. They were eerily still, luridly red, impossible to miss. Ilkay dragged his eyes away from the striking sight and took his seat, back to the Princes and his own tent. Müge sat on his right, Göksu on his left.

“These two are your intended spouses, then?” asked one of the councilors.

“These three,” Ilkay said. “Dalibor has sworn himself to us, and his vow has the support of the Legion.” Which meant, with Telmé right there not disagreeing, it had the support of the throne. Something the Wolves seldom had reason to care about, but they owed the Legion, and Telmé especially, a great debt. Two debts now, and Dalibor tied up in them.

So whatever negative thoughts some of the councilors had, they kept them contained save for a few sour expressions.

“We’re not here to discuss my relationships,” Ilkay said. “You have no say in those unless I bring in someone who is a threat to the Wolves—”

“Two of them are threats!” an elderly wolf burst out, slamming her hand on her knee. “Müge tried to kill us all, and *that one* is a demon who enjoys making all of us afraid.”

Ilkay stifled a sigh. “He’s a half-demon, and of course he enjoys it. He’s born of a demon of wrath. He can’t help it anymore than you can help enjoying the thrill of the hunt, Adalet, and everyone here knows you do. Dalibor knows how to control himself. As to Müge, I believe you had a cousin who was also affected by demon rot? How is he doing?”

“No family of mine,” Adalet hissed. “They should all be —”

“Killed?” Ilkay cut in. “No, absolutely not. They are not to blame for being *infected*. Not a single one of us has ever faced demons before. We did not know what we walked into when I led the way into the caves and down the stairs. I took the risk. I am responsible. Not those who were brave and loyal enough to follow me. To stand guard not knowing what might creep out of the dark and hurt them. No one is punishing people who were being tortured from the inside while being able to do *nothing* as their bodies and minds worked against them.”

“Agreed, Moon,” said another councilor, and around the circle the others slowly chimed in, save for the man who sat to the right of Adalet.

“You contest, Ertuğrul?”

“Possessed or not, they still killed many of their own. They killed your *father*, Moon. How can you sit there and say they deserve no punishment?”

“Is that what you said to your daughter-in-law before you came here to this meeting? That she deserves to suffer more than she already has for something that was not her fault? She is seventeen, still a child. She lost many in the earthquake, only to turn around and be compelled to terrible violence. What could I possibly do that would be a greater punishment than the pain and grief she must now live with? Have you no heart left,

Ertuğrul? Adalet? If my father was still alive, he would say the very same and you know it. Tell me I am wrong.”

“No,” Ertuğrul said heavily, staring at the fire in the center of the circle. “Egemen would have decreed the same. I wonder, though, how you will feel when you know the identity of the one who tore out his throat.”

“That’s enough!” another councilor, Halime said, her voice cracking like ice. “If you want to protest, then protest cleanly, Ertuğrul. Throwing his father in his face like that is crude, shameful.”

“My father was dying anyway,” Ilkay said, swallowing the knot in his throat. “I will not punish someone for speeding the inevitable. They may have even spared him the lingering, agonizing pain that comes with the wasting sickness that was killing him. Whoever struck the fatal blow should not be afraid I will punish them. There is nothing to punish. If this matter is closed, we should move on to the next topic.”

It was Cihan, his father’s oldest friend and the village healer, who said, “Where the Wolves are to live next.”

“We cannot stay on the mountain,” Ilkay said. “It’s become too unstable, too unpredictable. The Princes of the Blood have offered us a home in Guldbrandsen and with the King’s Legion.”

“You want us to join the Legion and kill the monsters we have nothing to do with, monsters we did not bring into this world, die for people who would never lift a finger to help us?” Ertuğrul demanded. It was always Ertuğrul, usually with Adalet right beside him.

Before Ilkay could reply, Telmé stepped forward and said, “Is that what you think? That the Wolves of the Moon are innocent in the war that nearly destroyed Tria Noor? We have historical accounts that prove the falsity of that claim, councilor. If you come to Guldbrandsen, I will happily show them to you. Moreover, you are citizens of Tria Noor. That means the Legion serves you, but in return, we also expect the citizens to help us, a duty that the Wolves of the Moon have always been permitted to evade because you kept yourselves so apart. Being apart is no longer helping, but hindering, you. You are not all required to

live at Guldbrandsen, only those actively a part of the Legion, and any family who wants to remain close. You cannot stay here, though, when we will likely never know what else lurks here that was sealed away until the earthquakes granted unexpected freedom.”

“I’ll not be lectured by a mere boy,” Adalet said.

“You will show respect to the Commander of the Legion,” Ilkay snapped, a growl in his words. “He was only a boy when he was forced to take command. Only a boy when he saved me and four other pups from *morbid serpents*. *Alone*. Fifteen years later he’s still alive, and the Legion is well on its way back to full strength. Until you can face all that he did in the aftermath of the Legion’s slaughter, shut your mouth.”

Adalet’s eyes were so huge it was almost painful, and the rest of the council regarded him with equal awe before there was a soft chorus of, “Yes, Moon.”

“You would also do well to remember that without the Legion, we would all be dead and the demon Samil likely would have escaped, and Tria Noor would be dealing with a far bigger, deadlier problem right now.”

“Yes, Moon.”

Fingers rested, briefly but firmly, on his shoulder, a silent thank you from Telmé before he withdrew to stand beside Dalibor again.

“We have two options,” Ilkay said into the silence. “We can move as one to Guldbrandsen. Or we can split in two, some to settle in Guldbrandsen, the others in a different location within the same Reach, so we’re never too far apart. Let the vote be cast. All as one?” Only three hands remained down. “Two groups?” Two hands went up. “Abstaining, Ertuğrul?”

“Refusing to condone any of this nonsense in any way. When it falls apart at your feet, Moon, do not cry to me to help you clean up the mess.”

Ilkay only replied, “The majority falls to moving together as one to Guldbrandsen. Spread the word, though I’ll make a formal announcement tonight at the banquet. Council is dismissed.”

They left slowly, trickling one by one into the rest of the camp, until only Cihan was left. Standing, brushing snow from her pants, she approached him with a soft smile. “You did well, Moon. Egemen would have been bursting with pride to see you leading the council so well—and putting those two little brats in their place. I suspect they believed they could intimidate you, but they should have known better.” Her eyes flicked to Dalibor, then back to him. “Is it true you have taken Prince Dalibor into your home?”

“Yes.”

She smirked, eyes going to Göksu and Müge. “Along with Göksu, and all the pups remain irritated you were the one to earn Müge’s favor,” Cihan said with a smile. “A wolf with red eyes and three—”

Ilkay drowned the words with a groan, even as beside him Müge laughed smugly. “Don’t you start.”

Cihan laughed, pulled him down to kiss his cheeks, then slapped one playfully. “The rumors are already running rampant. You may as well accept it and use it. That is my advice as councilor.”

“Yes, old mother,” Ilkay replied quietly.

She smacked his arm. “I’m not old, but the rare show of respect is nice.” She pinched his cheek, bid farewell to the others, and went on her way.

“I told you so,” Müge promptly said.

“Ugh,” Ilkay retorted, and fled into his tent.

Unfortunately, all three of his lovers followed him inside, though he couldn’t really complain when Göksu sealed up the tent and went about adding more wood to the stove and getting a pot of tea going. “I hope you don’t think we’re going to fuck where the entirety of the camp will be able to hear us, and possible see us depending on how lights and shadows fall at this hour.”

“Delightful as that would be, as we’d no doubt accrue an audience,” Dalibor drawled, “no, that was not my plan. You

three are still exhausted, and you probably want to be well-rested for the banquet tonight.”

“I do,” Ilkay said, before succumbing to a yawn. Removing his boots and leaving them on the mat by the door, he shucked his outer layers before going to sprawl on the bedding that took up a good portion of the tent now. No longer two of them, one for him, one for his father, but one large one that could accommodate additional bodies, though all four of them at once would still be a snug fit.

He grunted as Müge dropped her head onto his chest, hair smacking him in the face. “Watch it!” He shoved the heavy strands out of the way, then idly stroked her back, tracing the lines of her spine up and down, smiling faintly as she slowly relaxed.

Dalibor sat on a low stool nearby, sword belt on the table behind him, long legs stretched out in front of him, a vibrant splash of red amongst all the browns and grays and blues.

Göksu poured tea for three of them, Dalibor shaking his head at a silent query, then sat down right in front of Dalibor, who took the tea, dragged Göksu to settle between his legs so his head was on Dalibor’s chest, then returned the tea. Göksu’s face was bright red, but not from the heat of the tea.

Ilkay smiled, lazily imagining all the things the four of them could do. He finished his tea, uncaring he’d burned his tongue in his haste, and smiled at Dalibor. When Dalibor’s brows rose in silent query, he said, “Trying to figure out when I went from loathing you to deciding you’re tolerable.”

“Tolerable?” Dalibor said with a laugh. “I think you found me more than tolerable in the caves, little pup. Shall I describe in detail how you sounded—”

“Nevermind, I still loathe you.”

“Is that why you’re flirting terribly?” Müge asked.

“I’m not flirting.”

“Yes, you are, the same way all dumb boys flirt. Flirting as awkward as that stupid cavern is deep.”

Ilkay kissed her, dragging her up to sit properly in his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist. When they drew apart, he nipped playfully at her nose. “You’re the one who chose me, awkward flirting and all.”

“Yes, well, ruthless ambitions and all that,” Müge said loftily, nevermind she didn’t have an ambitious bone in her body. Not for power, anyway. “When *did* you two stop poking each other with sticks?”

Dalibor shrugged one shoulder. “He bloodied his hands for me.”

Ilkay’s hands were long healed now from that incident, but the phantom pains throbbed at the reminder. “That? That was nothing special. Nothing like saving me from a stalactite by letting it hit you instead.”

“You two are adorable,” Müge said, making them both grunt and look away.

Göksu laughed, stretching one arm up as he tilted his head back to look at Dalibor. “The demon prince is not so impenetrable after all.”

Dalibor bared his fangs.

“Do not make the stupid comment about penetration that I know you’re about to,” Ilkay said.

“Always ruining my fun,” Dalibor said, even as he clasped Göksu’s wrist and dragged his fangs teasingly along the inside of it, drawing up drops of blood that he licked away. Göksu shivered visibly.

“I’m sure we’ll all get to have fun later,” Ilkay said, resting back against the pillows again, Müge sliding off his lap to curl against his side. He’d just closed his eyes when he felt Göksu settle on his other side, and opened his eyes again to meet the glowing yellow ones he could almost feel like a touch. Dalibor still sat on his stool, watching them intently, but with a softness to his face Ilkay had never seen before. “You don’t want to join us?”

“I don’t need the rest. I’d rather watch over you, until your little frost heart there can take his protective duties back.”

Ilkay sighed, but only said, “As you like, blood heart.” He yawned and closed his eyes again, lulled to sleep by the steady breathing on either side of him and the soothing weight of Dalibor’s gaze.



Epilogue

Several years later

Ilkay shook off the worst of the snow before striding into the keep, making his way quickly to his chambers located in the second tier, a rare set of four rooms, two of them with windows looking out over the northern end of Guldbrandsen.

He'd barely stepped through the door when arms were thrown around his neck and Göksu dragged him into a ravenous kiss. Ilkay grunted and returned it gladly, hands cupping Göksu's very fine ass, lifting him and carrying him easily into the adjoining bedroom.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss and stepping back, Ilkay set to work on his clothes. “That was enthusiastic.”

Göksu laughed. “When are we not? Anyway, we haven’t seen you for three whole days.”

“Where is Müge?” Ilkay cast his clothes aside layer by layer, making quick work of them.

“Here,” Müge said from the doorway. “I was getting us food, since I doubt we’ll feel like eating in the great hall this evening.”

Ilkay grinned, all wolf. “No, definitely not.”

“Where is our missing piece?” Müge asked as she set to work on her own clothes, assisted by a naked Göksu, who distracted himself along the way with touches and kisses.

“He went to see Telmé, who’s still sitting with the new prince.”

Müge smiled. “So that poor, brave boy made it?”

“Yes, and apparently he got through the Bleeding standing the whole time. Even Dalibor didn’t manage that.”

Göksu and Müge laughed. “Bet that got his ire up.”

“Just a bit.” Ilkay climbed onto the bed and, when the other two joined him, dragged Göksu flush against him, returning his hands to that fine ass as he took greedy possession of Göksu’s mouth. Müge pressed up behind him, nails teasing along his torso, mouth trailing across his shoulders and nipping the back of his neck.

Ilkay moaned into the kiss before tearing away, reaching back to drag Müge around to his front. She immediately intertwined with Göksu, and Ilkay stroked his own cock watching them. Eventually, Göksu pushed Müge onto her back, kissed her again, and then trailed his mouth slowly down her body, biting at her throat, licking the hollow of her collarbone, dragging his tongue down the valley between her breasts as his hands stroked and pinched her nipples.

All the while Müge moaned and writhed beneath him, eyes dark with desire, hair fanned out above her. She reached out toward Ilkay, the light catching on the tattoo on the back of

her hand. Their marriage mark: a compass face with a crescent moon at the northern point, a rose at the western, a wolf head at the east, and the sigil for demon to the south.

Obedient as ever where his lovers were concerned, Ilkay bent to give Müge the requested kiss—and grunted when her questing hand wrapped around his cock. Rearing up, he shifted close enough she could take it into her mouth, suckling at the tip as Göksu spread her legs and put his tongue and lips to work in earnest. That got some delightful moaning around Ilkay’s cock, and he tangled his fingers in Müge’s hair to hold her head as he fucked into her mouth, careful but eager.

The sound of the door opening drew his gaze to where Dalibor now stood in the doorway, gold eyes gleaming, a familiar hungry smile curving his mouth. “I do love the days I come home to this sight.”

Ilkay started to laugh, but it turned into a groan as Müge redoubled her efforts. When she dug her nails into his thighs, he sank a hand into her hair, curling it around the back of her head, and fucked her mouth in earnest as requested, shoving deep into her throat, enjoying the moans she emitted, the way her skin flushed and her eyes watered. He withdrew enough for her to breathe, then went right back to it, thrusting in with abandon until he came with a cry, letting go of her as she drank down all of him and pulled slowly off his spent cock.

“Magnificent as always, my fire heart.”

Müge didn’t reply, completely gone on what Göksu was doing with *his* mouth. Ilkay swung off her, settling on her left side as Dalibor took her right, adding their own caresses and kisses to the rest of her body as Göksu continued to eat her out. She had her nails sunk into their arms as she screamed her release, looking utterly wrecked as her breathing slowly calmed.

Göksu sat back on his heels, cock so hard it must ache. It was Dalibor who dragged him close and swallowed him, pressing Göksu down onto the bed and pinning him there, licking and sucking, cheeks hollowing as he took Göksu deep, leaving him swearing and begging but unable to move past flailing his arms.

Ilkay would never be able to pick a favorite sight when it came to his lovers. There were too many options, each hot and delightful, headier than the finest brandy.

Göksu's groan filled the room as he came down Dalibor's throat. Dalibor pulled slowly off his cock, grinning as Göksu whimpered at the overstimulation. Kissing his way up Göksu's body, Dalibor eventually reached his mouth, taking it hard, sharing Göksu's own flavor with him, rubbing his hard cock against the soft skin of Göksu's stomach.

"Come here," Müge said when they finally parted. "I want your fingers in me while we watch our favorite part."

Eagerly obeying, Göksu climbed across the bed to settle against the pillows, pulling Müge to sit between his spread thighs so they could both watch while he finger-fucked her.

Ilkay rolled his eyes but went easily when Dalibor drew him close and kissed him ravenously, hands running possessively over his body, teasing his cock, already hardening again, with the softest, most fleeting touches, making Ilkay moan into the kiss.

Drawing back, Dalibor trailed his nose down Ilkay's throat, to the point low on it where he loved best to bite. His fangs pressed, teased, but drew nothing more than droplets.

Then Dalibor was drawing back, pushing Ilkay to his hands and knees facing the other two, shifting to kneel behind him. "Always so beautiful when you're spread for me, Moon."

"Always such a brat," Ilkay muttered, face going hot as Dalibor thrust two fingers into him and growled at finding him already slick.

Dalibor fisted a hand in his hair and pulled him up against his chest, mouth pressed to his ear as he said, "Always such a good little slut for us."

Ilkay turned to bite his nose. "I don't think *you* get to call anyone a slut."

Dalibor grinned as wolfishly as his companions. "Like to like, little pup." He shoved Ilkay back down, lined up his cock, grasped his hips tightly, and thrust inside with a single move.

Ilkay swore, fingers gripping the bedding, head dropping as Dalibor fucked him like all their lives depended on how loudly he could get Ilkay to scream. The sound of Müge's moans, Göksu's panting breaths, drew his head up, and he watched Göksu fuck her with long, skilled fingers as he rutted against her back, their gazes locked on where Dalibor was plowing into him over and over. Ilkay would feel it for days, he always did when Dalibor fucked him, and there would be bruises shaped like his fingertips on his hips.

"Come for me, little pup, scream for us, show us your pleasure," Dalibor growled out, slamming into him harder than ever. Sweat stung Ilkay's eyes, made his body slick, Dalibor's grip tighter than ever. His orgasm burst out of him, his shout filling the room, followed by Müge's breathy moan and Göksu's low growl as he bit her neck while spilling across her back.

Dalibor fucked into him one last time before bending over to hold him tightly as he came deep in Ilkay's body.

"Beautiful as always," Müge said with a grin, panting the words out as she slumped against Göksu, clearly unconcerned for the moment about the mess they'd made of each other. "I could watch that all day."

"There is something about Dalibor fucking our Moon that is addicting. We could probably make a fortune charging."

Ilkay rolled his eyes, wincing slightly as Dalibor pulled out of him. "I can't believe my spouses are discussing whoring me out."

Göksu and Müge laughed together as they pulled apart, Göksu sliding off the bed to attend to getting them bath water and food. Dalibor collapsed on the bed and dragged Müge to sprawl on top of him, her legs straddling one of his. Ilkay sprawled next to them on his stomach, more than happy to doze until it was his turn to bathe, the noise and chatter of the others a pleasant background to their rare quiet evening.

Hours later, he was dragged out of bed to face another busy morning, yawning and grumbling as he set about his day. Müge was already gone, and Göksu did not have to wake yet, so Ilkay kissed his cheek and pulled the blankets back up over him before following Dalibor from the room.

After a rather heated kiss in the hallway, they parted ways, Dalibor off to feed and Ilkay to get breakfast before they met back up to head out on their latest mission, though with all the hail that had fallen the previous night, Ilkay suspected they might be leaving later than planned.

When he reached the great hall, it was to be greeted with exactly that news: the hail had damaged their ship, and departure was delayed by about an hour. Ilkay couldn't be terribly upset by that. He was heading for the long row of sideboards when someone called his name.

Ilkay turned toward the voice, lifting a hand in greeting as he obeyed the eager beckoning. "Captain Morr , don't usually see you in the hall at this hour. Shouldn't you be freezing your balls off somewhere?"

"Soon, don't worry," Morr  drawled, and nodded to the other two men standing with him, Captain Alrin Wester of the Dragoons, and Captain Boris Karr of the Shadowmarch. "I came to speak with Alrin and Boris about some training exercises with the dragoons and shadowmarch later this month. Also to escape this damnable weather." His eyes widened at something behind Ilkay.

"Well, I'll be damned," Alrin said, dropping his folded arms. "The new princeling is up and about already."

Ilkay turned, watching with everyone else in the great hall as Telm  and the new Prince of the Blood walked through. Telm  smiled in his soft, wispy way when he saw them, and led the new Prince their way. What was his name? Raff , that was it. The only person in his rotten family who had any spine, unlike the quaking parents, the sniveling betrothed, and the craven brother who'd run away in the night. "Apparently he remained standing through the whole ceremony. Dalibor was more than a little miffed."

Alrin laughed. "I bet he was."

"Hail, Legion."

Morr  smiled. "Hail, Prince Telm . I see your princeling is up and about, and fair morning to you."

“Fair morning,” Raffé murmured. He had that wide-eyed look of everyone new to Guldbrandsen, though a lot of it was probably disbelief he was still alive. His piece of shit family certainly hadn’t thought he’d live. They hadn’t been able to leave fast enough, most of them, and good fucking riddance.

Telmé rested a hand on his shoulder and gestured to the four of them. “Captain Morré of the Royal Guard. Ilkay Thrace, though we all call him Moon. He is leader of the Wolves, recently come down from the mountains to join the Legion.” Telmé waved his hand in Ilkay’s direction. “I thought you and Dalibor were leaving this morning.”

Ilkay grinned. “Our ship suffered some damage in the night—all this damnable hail. We should be leaving within the hour, though.”

“You’re a Wolf of the Moon?” Raffé asked, surprise filling his face.

“Aye, Princeling,” Ilkay said with a wink. “My blood heart is right miffed because of you. Not often a slip of a thing like you shows him up.”

Raffé flushed.

Telmé snickered. “Serves him right.”

He pointed at Alrin, but before he could speak, Raffé blurted out, “You’re a dragon. I mean a dragoon.”

Ilkay and the others laughed, and Alrin swept a playful bow. His voice was unusually husky, even for a dragon, as he said, “Aye, Princeling. Captain Alrin Westor of His Majesty’s Dragoons. An honor to make your acquaintance, Princeling.”

“You weren’t kidding about me hearing that everywhere,” Raffé said, making a face.

Boris snickered and mimicked Alrin’s bow as Telmé said, “This is Captain Boris Karr of the Shadowmarch.”

“Come along, Princeling, before this lot starts trying to fill your ears with gossip,” Telmé said.

“Have fun, Princeling,” Morré said, and making the rest of them laugh and share a look, amusement over what Raffé

would be facing as the Legion welcomed him, in their playful fashion, to his new home.

No sooner had they vanished from sight than a familiar, deeply loved scent caught Ilkay's nose. He turned toward the door at the back of the great hall, lifting a hand in greeting as Dalibor strode into view.

Dalibor immediately made for him, grunting a greeting to the others as he rested a hand on the small of Ilkay's back. "I gather you heard of the delay then."

"I did." Ilkay grinned, bidding the others farewell as they laughed and drifted off to see to their own duties. "Want to go spend the rest of the hour doing something naughty in a dark corner, blood heart?"

Dalibor kissed him, a slow, tantalizing slide of lips, tongue just barely teasing. He tasted of fresh blood and smelled like winter, but was as warm and welcome as a campfire in a black cave. "As if you have to ask."

Fin