

From This Moment On

The night air was cooler than Samuel had expected it to be when he'd begun his watch.

The gruff, older wolf rubbed his paws vigorously together as he looked up into the sky, ears tilted back. His brilliant white-and-gold armor creaked with the effort — the thick plates were not designed with mobility in mind — and searched the midnight sky for the full moon. The convergence had begun, and it took little time for the justicar to spot the reddening sphere in the heavens. "Gods all, look at that," he muttered to himself as he nudged his companion with an elbow. "Color me damned. The adherents were right, Christoph. The moon bleeds."

Beside him in identical armor and with a more skeptically cocked eyebrow was a smaller, somewhat younger coyote. He grunted with the effort to look up; his armor was even tighter than Samuel's. "A sign, they said," he muttered with a shiver. "You can feel it, can't you? The divines are distant tonight. The Lord of Justice does not whisper." His eyes dropped as he scanned the surrounding area.

The plains that lay to their west were just as quiet and dark as they'd been since they'd begun their watch. Their temple, that grand spire that rose as a testament to the spear-point of their god's Justice, shimmered in the reddening light of the full moon to the east. Their charge was safe. The town in the south slept, ignorant of the show above. "Is it time?" Christoph asked, his voice little more than a hiss.

Samuel cast a glance to the north as he felt his heart began to race. Since the adherents had mentioned the blood-moon and its implications to him, he'd wondered. The forest was just as quiet as ever, but perhaps the adherents had been right about everything. Christoph was certainly right; the whispers of the Lord of Justice heard by every initiated justicar were oddly silent. Their lord could not hear them, nor be heard by them. "It must be," he said after a moment as he allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

Though the bulky defensive gear severely hampered his motion in exchange for its brilliant protection — justice, after all, did not give an inch or budge in the face of adversity — Samuel could feel an extra tightness in his chest. Nervousness was something new for him. That had been trained out of him at a young age in the cloister. "Are you sure about this?" he asked as he turned to his companion. His face was stony, but his tone betrayed real concern.

Christoph simply cocked his other eyebrow as he regarded his fellow justicar. "I have followed you into dozens of battles that could have taken either of our lives. I have fought beside you against the greatest odds. I have *always* stood at your side. Why would I waver now?"

"Because if we are wrong, it will be the end of us," Samuel replied. His voice lowered as he glanced around again. No one was in earshot, of course, but it never paid to be careless.

Christoph, perhaps intent on proving that he'd shed his fear, instead leaned up to plant a kiss on the side of Samuel's muzzle. "Then we end together," he whispered into the wolf's ear.

There was no bolt from the heavens that came to strike them down, and no surprised gasp. Neither pair of perked ears detected the sounds of any around them, surprised or revolted by the display. They were indeed alone. Protected by the blood-moon. "Then, I suppose, follow me," Samuel replied at last. For the barest hint of a moment, there was almost a smile on his near-grumpy visage as he turned and briskly made for the trees. Christoph followed, with both of their armor clanking in the darkness as they left their route. As they left the light of the temple, the power inlaid into their armor began to glow softly to light their way.

It had begun years earlier — almost a full decade, in fact — when the pair had been first assigned together. The Lord of Justice decreed that there would always be two justicars that traveled together. One alone, and justice could be twisted by selfishness. More than two, and the voice of justice became dissident. Age and experience on one side, and youthful idealism on the other. Would that the high templar of Justice who had paired them together known about their secret perversion.

Shunned by all but the Mother Almighty were such as they. The scriptures flickered through Samuel's mind as he stalked through the trees with haste. He knew them. Christoph knew them. All who studied the ways of the Lord of Justice knew that there was no place for attachment save to one's duty, and only shame to be found in attachment to one of the same gender. It was no wonder the gods-fearing people who were so afflicted as they sought shelter in the Mother Almighty's forgiveness and acceptance. That was not enough for many; some even were hunted by the laws and nations of mortals.

So it had been for them. Set years ago on the path to hunt and capture one just like them, in the times before they had known of one another's true nature, they had found their quarry weeping before a shrine to the Mother Almighty. He had begged Her for protection as Samuel and Christoph had approached him. And then, when he saw the advance of the justicars, the mouse had begged Her that his lover know peace after he had left.

It had been a moment's hesitation that the pair of justicars had shared. They had stayed their hand for a moment, unable or unwilling to strike. Their eyes had met in the moments that followed, and a truth was shared between them. A shared pain and burden. They shared the fate of the little mouse they had been sent to cut down, if they had ever been discovered.

They could not hold back Justice forever, though. Not even the vulpine missionary that had taken the mouse into his arms and embraced him tightly could stop it, as he well knew. But, he had said, the Mother Almighty could spare the mouse if the justicars were willing to show mercy. And so, in violation of their holy duty and sworn vows, they had given it.

The mouse had been allowed to flee to the nearest temple to the Mother Almighty, and the missionary had sat with them for a time. Bread and water was shared. He queried the justicars, and honor demanded the truth be told. To whom could they be so honest, but a missionary of the goddess who alone of all the divines would not condemn them?

That day had revealed their true nature to one another. That day had revealed a mutual attraction that had been kept silent and wanting in the darkest recesses of their minds and hearts. There, with the missionary and his goddess providing the barest shield against the eyes of their Lord, the two justicars had finally been able to speak honestly with one another. Words and a kiss had been all that they could share. Both had wanted more. Both had desperately grasped for more.

But this was not Samuel's path. It was not Christoph's path. They were bound by holy rite to the will of the Lord of Justice, and He would never allow them to stray from his path. The Mother Almighty could not shield them from him every moment of every day without shirking Her own divine duties. And so, as the missionary had bid them farewell and safe travels, love had once again been subsumed.

But since that day, they had known it. They had felt it. Since they had met, they had been forced by duty and the ever-present eye of adherents, templar, fellow justicars and even the Lord of Justice Himself to stay at arm's length. They had learned well to keep hidden that which would condemn them, but it was not a thing that either could cast off. It was not a disease to be cured or an imperfection to be remedied. It simply was, and so were they, and no volume of threat or risk was enough to make them act on their desires.

Until the blood-moon rose high, and granted them the barest reprieve.

Once they were deep enough in the forest that they knew they would not be bothered, Samuel raised a paw to call a halt to their travel. In the sudden silence of a night unburdened

by the ringing of their armor, they could hear the unnatural quiet of the world around them. Under the blood-moon, even nature was stalled. "Here," he announced at last. "Here is where it will be done. This is the place."

Christoph nodded and, with effort, turned his gaze upward again. There, through the canopy of the trees, he could see the blood-moon high in the night sky. It was wreathed in stars that seemed all the brighter for the dim, red light that the moon gave off. "And you know how to conduct the ceremony?" he asked, even as he began to hastily shed his armor.

"I would not have suggested this if I didn't," Samuel countered. His tone was jovial, and there was that almost-smile on his muzzle again as he reprimanded his partner. "Honestly, when I told you about the blood-moon and what it implied, I didn't think you'd want... well, *this*."

"That's because you thought yourself too old for a bonding ceremony," countered Christoph with a smirk of his own. Despite his haste, each piece of his armor was placed on the ground with the utmost reverence.

Samuel chuckled as he too unstrapped his armor. "Not just too old, but unsuited to it," he corrected Christoph. He breathed a sigh of relief as he tipped his ears back. The tightness of his armor was a beautiful thing when bathed in the brilliance of the Lord of Justice, but in His absence it was merely *heavy*. "Who ever heard of two males being bonded so? It is heresy."

"Is the union even blessed if the divines are concealed?" Christoph wondered as he stood tall, naked as the day he was born. Bathed in the dim red light of the blood moon, he looked like a wholly different person. Samuel had seen him naked many times, and decades of training had given him the control necessary not to gawk.

It was as if the light highlighted every fur. It was like it shone through Christoph, almost divine in its own way. Samuel felt his breath catch in his throat at the sight, and he had to shake his head to clear it. "Does it need to be blessed in the eyes of those who would condemn us, divine or no?" he countered as he straightened himself up tall, equally nude.

The thickening of Christoph's bare sheath did not escape Samuel's notice, and Christoph could only offer a sheepish smile before he shrugged slowly. "We are hidden. Do not begrudge me the joy of this sight for a moment."

Samuel's eyes rolled as he reached out to grasp tightly at the coyote's paw. He felt Christoph squeeze back at him as they sank as one down to their knees in the dirt. "You know we have no time. Not if we wish to complete the ceremony." He felt a pang of regret. They would have to engage in the shorter version of the ceremony he had in mind, creatively altered to suit the needs of two males. The fully ceremony involved the temple, half the gathered village, both of their families, all of their compatriots, several hours of ritual and a straight week of... well, consummation.

They didn't have that sort of time, and Christoph knew it as well as Samuel. He nodded and gave the wolf's paw another squeeze as he tilted his head up. "What must I do?" he asked as his ears twitched. There was new nervousness in his voice.

"Take up your knife," Samuel instructed. As Christoph reached over to their armor and weapons to grasp at the ugly — yet highly functional — dagger, Samuel unclasped his paw from the coyote's and flipped it over so his palm faced skyward. "For all our lives, we have been two beings. Two bodies. Two souls. Tonight, we break down this barrier." He nodded to his paw. "Cut. Spill blood, but please leave the hand functional."

Christoph hesitated again, but the acceptance in Samuel's face was enough to set his mind at least somewhat at ease. He pressed the tip of the dagger to the center of the wolf's palm and sliced quickly down, and Samuel didn't even wince with pain as his flesh was opened. Blood began to slowly pool there as he lifted his other paw. "Now, I do the same to you."

The coyote handed the blade over as he steeled himself for what was to come. Samuel's bleeding paw lifted to stroke a pair of fingers down along Christoph's wrist, and he smiled at his partner before he made a similar cut. Christoph remained silent, but still winced as blood began to flow. "And now?"

Samuel's answer came as his bloody paw came up to clasp tightly at Christoph's. "We opened our hearts to one another, and now we are of one soul," he said, reciting the words from memory. "We have opened our flesh to one another, and now we are of one blood. I was Samuel. You were Christoph. Now we are both and we are neither. Two have become one." He bowed his head as Christoph did the same, and their foreheads touched as they squeezed each other's bloody paw tight. "To you I give my love and my life, so I swear by all the gods."

Christoph began to tremble as he cast the briefest glance up toward the heavens. He only took in the stars for a moment before his cheek was cupped in Samuel's paw. The warmth of the simple little touch was enough to calm his nerves a little, and he gave a small smile as he bowed his head again. "And in turn, I offer my all," he replied at last. "I leave off nothing and give all of myself, so I swear by all the gods."

The older wolf's smile mirrored the younger coyote's as he listened to Christoph's pledge. He lifted his head to press a small kiss to his partner's forehead, and watched as the coyote's ears twitched for a second. "Then in this place, we are so pledged. I am yours from here to eternity, from this moment on."

A shiver wound through Christoph as his tightly-squeezed shut eyes began to leak with his tears. "And I am yours," he repeated, nosing up along Samuel's muzzle as he quietly spoke the words. "From here to eternity, from this moment on."

Samuel's muzzle tilted back down slightly, and at last he allowed himself to sink into Christoph's kiss. Between the pain of their cuts, their hearts beat as one as their blood and bodies intermingled. Tongues danced between their muzzles as Samuel leaned further into his bonded partner's embrace, and they tumbled to the ground as Christoph's free arm wrapped around the wolf's shoulders to hold him close.

Freed from the gaze of their fellow justicars, or the hateful villagers, or even the gods themselves, there was no need for either male to restrain themselves. They fell into one another with a vigor and a passion that they had never dared to express with one another before. As they tumbled across the grass, their blooded paws never released their vice-like grip on one another.

When the kiss finally broke, Christoph was on his back with Samuel above him. They both panted heavily for breath as they glanced down between them, where both of their shafts stood at full attention. Free of their sheaths, both lengths of hard flesh ground against one another with the slightest motion. Pleasure sparked from the friction, and neither justicar could keep themselves wholly silent. Moans rose from both the younger, more energetic male and the older, more reserved canine.

There wasn't time, of course. The blood-moon would only last for a couple of hours, and nearly a quarter of it was already spent. They moved as one body as each guided the other to where they needed to be. A shuffle of limbs and a gripping of ears helped to guide the wolf's shaft to Christoph's waiting muzzle, and a deep sigh rolled out of both as contact was made and flesh was taken in. Justicars took no vow of chastity, but it had been years since Samuel had last felt the tongue of another tease and taste his malehood.

And never with such vigor and determination. Christoph's muzzle moved as though possessed, twisting and bobbing its way slowly further and further down along that spear of hot flesh. His tongue explored each and every inch, questing across the shaft's surface with single-minded determination as, above him, training failed Samuel and he moaned to the blood-moon above.

No gods looked down to condemn them; the sound was given without care of shame. Pre spilled from his tip and was quickly slathered along his length by that ever-moving tongue. It slicked him and teased him and tempted him and begged him to squeeze those ears and buck his hips, but he held himself back. Instinct ran hot, but he was a justicar. He was master of instinct. He was master of his body.

But that body was now Christoph's as well, and the coyote didn't seem interested in relenting just yet. Drunk of the forbidden taste of his partner, he gulped down more of the watery pre-seed that Samuel provided him. He wriggled his head in his lover's grip, helping to encourage him as he leaned forward until his lips kissed the base of the wolf's sheath. His throat bulged as he swallowed around it, his own length hard as stone as it was neglected.

Samuel almost tried to force Christoph back up and off him — how would the over-eager fool breathe? — but the pleasure sparkling through his malehood and up his spine stole the thought from his mind. His grip tightened but it refused to hold the coyote there. He could pull back any time he wanted from the length of flesh that drooled down his throat. Any second. Any moment.

When at last he did retreat, he pulled entirely off of the wolf's length with a loud cough. He quickly clapped a paw over his muzzle and doubled forward, coughing more quietly into it as his eyes lifted to glance through the darkness around them. "I..." he managed after a moment, before he was forced to stifle another cough. "I... sorry..."

"Never... ever apologize for that," Samuel panted as he ran one paw through his lover's headfur. "Where did you... how did you know to..."

The coy grin that he was given as a reply told Samuel nothing, but it was nothing that he needed to know. As the coyote leaned back beneath him and spread his legs wide, Samuel could see Christoph's tail splayed to the side in the dirt. The younger canine's hips lifted, and the shaft that rolled across his belly was already knotted and drooling through his fur.

It was the most obvious of invitation, clearly designed to keep Samuel from querying his partner too much. His queries vanished at the sight of his goal, laying just barely hidden between Christoph's taut rump cheeks. Paws reached down to grasp them, squeezing and kneading them firmly as he slipped down between the coyote's legs. "Should I expect you to turn into some sort of harlot now that we are bonded?" he asked. He tried to ignore the twitch of his shaft at the thought. Would that they could...

Christoph's smile only grew wider as he flicked an ear. "That depends on whether or not you intend to treat me like one," he replied as he planted his paws in the dirt and braced himself. "I slicked you. Now... the hard part."

"Yes, very hard." Samuel smirked at the roll of Christoph's eyes as he shuffled closer and allowed the tip of his length to drift down over the base of the coyote's knotted length. It ran down over his furry orbs, trailed a sticky line of pre between his cheeks and finally launched a warm spurt of the stuff against Christoph's bared tailring. He watched the shudder of anticipation run through his partner's body, but *feeling* it through their contact was something else. "You're ready?"

For all of his coy bluster, Christoph looked genuinely concerned as he felt the tip of the wolf's shaft prodding at his entrance. He nodded nonetheless as his paws nervously scratched at the dirt. "As I can be," he replied.

That was all Samuel needed to hear, and he began to ease his hips forward. He could feel the resistance of Christoph's body, honed and trained for years to give not an inch. Even now, after having given himself over as completely as was possible to do so, his body still resisted Samuel's forward motion. The wolf kept his pressure steady and even as he held his breath. Pain was unacceptable for the bonding ceremony, even though it was a necessary thing in most cases.

But then, finally, Christoph took control of his body and allowed Samuel in, and everything changed.

Rightness. That was the feeling that overtook the both of them. It happened suddenly and in a manner that brought more than a little pain for Christoph, but the way that Samuel's shaft sank right down to the hilt inside him was so filled with sublime, perfect *rightness* that it barely elicited a gasp. As Samuel moaned softly above him, eyes squeezed shut in pleasure, both of the coyote's trembling arms rose to wrap around his lover's middle and pull him closer. Samuel was inside. They were together, and in a way neither had ever dreamed possible. It felt *right*.

The wolf forced his hips to still as his shaft throbbed hard against the clenching insides of his lover, so hot and tight around him that it felt Christoph might wrench his malehood completely off. One shaking paw drifted up to cup the coyote's cheek, and their eyes met for a single moment. Samuel said nothing; his expression told Christoph all that it needed to. Concern. Worry.

It found love. Acceptance. Happiness. When it did, the wolf's expression shifted and began to mirror Christoph's. The coyote nuzzled gently into that reassuring paw as he wriggled his hips back and up against his lupine lover, helping to shift that pulsing length against his walls. Reassurance. Desire.

The pain lingered when Samuel began to tentatively move his hips again. It was so different to the females that he had bedded in the distant past, but he felt no filth or shame at the act. *Defilement* was what would others would call the gentle love that was showing his partner with those first, tentative thrusts. *Blasphemy* is what they would say, confronted so with Christoph's arched back and lolling tongue.

But as the pain faded to a dull ache and left Christoph with pleasure in excess, neither could understand how their act was evil. There was no evil. There was no good. Each time the tip of Samuel's length rubbed up and along Christoph's prostate, he'd clench down in sudden pleasure and find his muscles pulling the wolf back down deep into him again. Again and again. No morality. No gods. No doctrine or law or judgment. Only two bodies, moving as one.

Despite their limited time, there was no rush to either canine's motions. Samuel was slow, determined in the way he pulled back from his lover's body. Christoph was hungry, wanting in the way he squeezed and tugged the wolf back into him. Each action brought a powerful reaction, that brought another and another. They built upon one another, with every moment spent entwined in one another's bodies.

Each slippery spurt of pre helped to ease Samuel's motions. His heat sank through Christoph's walls and soothed the aches of his passage even as the pleasure of their act washed the remnants away. The wolf's free paw teased and stroked at the coyote's length, drifting along it in time with his every thrust and coaxing little yips and quiet, breathy moans from his lover's muzzle. The sounds nearly approached words, their meaning clear even if they themselves were less than coherent.

They were silenced as Samuel's knot finished swelling. Too large to press into the coyote's body, it was instead mashed against that stretched tailring. In spite of its size, the wrapping of Christoph's legs around Samuel's middle served as encouragement, begging him to push that little bit harder and lock it inside him. He didn't feel like he was concerned with the pain, or the length of time that their bodies would be bound together. For those moments, it felt like Christoph wanted nothing than to be so tied for all of time.

It was a prospect that stoked the fires of need inside Samuel, even though he knew that they didn't have time to spend locked together so. His back arched as he ground in hard, feeling that relenting ring of muscle begin to stretch against his knot as he cast his eyes to the heavens. The blood-moon stared back without a care for the world below it. Perhaps it cared.

Perhaps it wanted to give them this reprieve. Perhaps it approved. Perhaps their love was wanted by more than just them.

The squeeze of Christoph's hips only served to further drive Samuel's need. They helped to leverage his every thrust, guiding him down deep and long with each stroke of his hips. Not a single inch before the knot was allowed to leave his body for long, and the coyote even began to buck himself back up along the wolf's spear of flesh.

He didn't care about being caught, by either villagers or gods. Mortals or divines had no sway as he felt the peak of his pleasure begin to rush up to meet him. Desperation overcame him in a way it never had before, or at least in a way that he had never allowed before. It wasn't a desperation for his pleasure or his peak; that was coming, one way or another. The desperation was for the body above his. It was for the shaft buried again and again beneath his tail, plumbing his depths in a way that set every nerve on fire. It was desperation for his lover. It was desperation for his lover's seed.

A breeding was impossible; both males knew that. However, with the blood-moon above them and not a soul around for a good distance, it didn't matter. Samuel felt his body tense as he prepared to fill the tight passage wrapped around his shaft. His body ached for release. It begged him to surrender; to let go and flood the male beneath him with his seed. He couldn't fight. He didn't *want* to fight. He gave in.

His thrusts hardened and quickened as he allowed Christoph to beg him on. The yips and grunts from the coyote increased in volume as they mingled in the air with the moans and gasps of pleasure that flowed from Samuel's muzzle. Musk and rut and sex filled the air around them, hot and heavy and still but for that which was disturbed by the vigorous pounding of lupine hips, racing to the finish as they pressed against the coyote's rump. His knot squelched against that battered tailing once, twice, thrice-

In.

Howls came in unison. Pain, sudden and intense, lanced through Christoph's body only to be washed away in the tide of his climax. His legs tightened like a vice around the wolf's middle as he felt Samuel join him in the culmination of their pleasure. He held tight, unable and unwilling to let go as his seed splattered his lover's chest, even as his body drank with the greatest greed of the wolf's offering. Two pairs of eyes squeezed shut. Two bodies convulsed in deepest pleasure. Limbs tangled. Emotions flared. For a few glorious moments, they were one in mind, body and soul as they teetered on the edge of something ascendant.

Gasps for breath came through the silence that briefly overtook their little corner of the forest. They melted back into their bodies as they ground together, the last of their pleasure draining through them and into each other as they shuddered, desperate to remain close as they fought for air. It was done. They were bonded. They might not have been bonded in the temple, which would have burned them for their heresy. They might not have been bonded in the eyes of their god, who would have cast them into the eternal darkness for their sin. Theirs was a bond shared only between the two of them. Between the *one* of them.

The paw that cupped the coyote's cheek had never given up its contact, and it began to move and stroke gently through Christoph's fur as he sprawled out below Samuel. Samuel could only watch the contentment on his lover's face and marvel. Without lust to cloud his judgment, he was finally able to see Christoph in their post-coital haze for what he was. He was *beautiful*.

And when Christoph's eyes turned up to meet Samuel's, the wolf knew that the coyote was seeing the same thing. They paused for a moment, and it felt as if the whole of the world stood still with them. Time had no meaning, frozen beneath the glow of the blood-moon as they were lost in one another's eyes. Rightness.

Then Christoph's eyes flicked to glance behind Samuel. They widened for the barest moment as dread took hold of the wolf. He knew the look of horror on Christoph's face.

They had been discovered.

Faster than the wolf would have thought possible, Christoph used his grip on Samuel's body to roll the pair of them to the side. The next moment found a spear impaling the dirt where they had lain not a moment before. As Christoph reached out to grab the spear and wrench it from its owner's grip, Samuel was able to take stock of their attacker.

All he could make out was a tall figure in the darkness, covered head to tail in black and red armor. The figure struggled to pull his spear back as Christoph held doggedly to it, and Samuel lashed out with one footpaw to land a kick square in the warrior's gut.

It barely drew a reaction, and Samuel knew that there was no time to lose. He offered a momentary, silent prayer for Christoph before he tugged back with his hips as hard as he could. Christoph lost his grip on the spear as his backside was forcefully unstuck from the knot that bound the couple together. With his new freedom of motion however, Samuel was able to rise quickly and bat the weapon to the side before it could be used again.

He thrust up with a single paw to jab two fingers up under the figure's helm. A scaley hide met his fingertips as they jabbed deep into their assailant's throat, and he withdrew the paw before he spun and landed another kick to the warrior's chest.

That time the warrior fell back, clutching at his throat and gasping for air. His crushed windpipe allowed him none though, and Samuel snatched up the warrior's spear and turned back in time to see another two charging toward them. Samuel grit his teeth as his eyes fell on his armor and his sword, far too far away. Instead he set his footpaws in the dirt and raised the spear he'd taken up as they closed.

One of the attackers missed him as he feinted to the side, and Samuel's spear jabbed forward and caught between the plates of his armor. It wrenched the spear from his grip as the warrior impaled himself, but Samuel was unable to press the attack as the other spear ran through his side.

It emerged from his back red, but Samuel grit his teeth and wrenched himself forward along the shaft of the weapon. Both paws lifted to rip the helm off the warrior that had struck him, and a snarling, red-scaled draconic visage greeted him as he began to land a barrage of fist blows upon it. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see still more of the warriors emerging from the shadows around them. To his right, one readied his spear and began to charge forward.

Another spear swept up under the attacker's weapon as Christoph stepped into Samuel's view. He twisted around and twirled the spear he'd taken up like a staff and sliced the edge of the tip up under his target's helm. The coyote swept in with vicious grace, sweeping the dragon's legs out from beneath him with the next stroke and ramming the base of the spear into his armored face with the next.

Even as Samuel beat the dragon that had impaled him into the ground and sank down with him, his eyes never left Christoph. Three more armored dragons stepped into view as Samuel struggled for breath, but Christoph merely planted his footpaws in the dirt. Unarmored, unclothed, he twirled the spear in his hands and set himself in place between them and his partner. His stare was hard as he dared them to step forward.

They charged instead as one, all three with their spears lowered to skewer the coyote. None landed a blow. Christoph twisted to his side as they darted forward, narrowing his profile as two spear tips narrowly missed his flesh. The third was battered aside as Christoph stepped into the strike, and he brought his other paw down in an open-palm strike that shattered the spear's shaft. He twisted and twirled in a deadly dance, the peace and passion of his immediate past gone in the face of a threat that brought his justicar instincts to life. He was magnificent. He was divine.

Samuel's fists were bloody by the time the dragon that had struck him fell still, and he groaned as he reached down to take the shaft of the spear stuck in his body in both paws. He

began to pull it through his torn torso, teeth bloody and gritted as he watched Christoph fighting off his three targets. Then his four. Then his six. Seven. Nine. His lover was a blur, a twirling dervish in the dark that batted away all of the strikes aimed for his body. He couldn't cull their numbers, but even combined they could not find a killing blow. He moved too fast, blocked too cleanly, twisted just out of the way in time. He was grace born into a warrior's body; fire and light and rage and purpose given invincible form.

Until one spear tip nicked his leg.

The recoil was instant. He lost his balance and stumbled forward just a little too far. Samuel could only watch, horrified, as one strike became two. The swing of a spear caught his back and traced a line of red through his fur. Another was hurled from the tree line; it passed by the dragons and buried itself in the coyote's other leg. Christoph stumbled, blocked two more blows, and planted the base of the spear in the ground as he spat in the face of the warrior before him. Samuel's breath caught in his throat.

That warrior pulled a dagger and drove it into the coyote's neck.

Time stood still once more, but the night under the blood-moon suddenly felt dark and cold to Samuel. He watched the helmed visage of the dragon twist the knife in his lover's neck before he pulled it free. The coyote slumped to the ground, a crumpled, bloody mess.

Samuel tried to rise. He fought with all his strength to lift from the ground and move toward Christoph's body as the dragons were joined by more of their kin. They watched him pull his body toward the coyote's, a large pool of blood left in his wake. He almost made it before strength failed him, and he fell back to the ground just out of arm's reach of the canine he loved. "No..." he whispered against the cool of the ground as the warriors stepped past him and began to make their way toward the village. Toward his temple.

Still more warriors charged bravely forward and past Christoph's body; they seemed without number. A single tear rolled down Samuel's face as he watched the horror frozen on his partner's features. For a moment he almost reached out to try and take a hold of his love's paw; to squeeze it tight in his own grip. The beauty he'd seen mere moments ago in Christoph's face was gone, replaced with blood and death. For a moment it felt like to touch his paw would be enough to save him. To save them both. He reached out as far as he could and tried to push just that little bit further. Just a couple more inches. Just a bit more...

But the distance was just too great, and any strength Samuel had left simply pooled out beneath him with his blood. A shadow fell over his body as his eyes rolled upward, to the sight of the tall, armored figure raising his spear for a final, killing strike. In his free hand, a blood dagger. Christoph's murderer. Samuel stared him down as the figure tilted its head to the side, and brought the spear down.

It never struck. The blow was stalled out by a gauntleted hand wrapped around the spear's shaft. Samuel looked down as he grunted in pain, and saw a taller figure, built strong and thick and with brilliant red and black armor that was edged with gleaming platinum. Higher rank? Samuel didn't know. Samuel didn't care. "I will attend to this one," the figure growled. "Go. Rejoin the front lines. Remind our brothers that the temple is our target. Do not harm the villagers unless they strike first. They are innocent in this."

"Of course, commander" was the cool response from the soldier that had been about to impale Samuel. The spear vanished from his sight, and a second later so too did the warrior who had held it. He was dimly aware of the other soldiers moving around him, but his fully attention was fixed on the commander.

That commander simply stared as he knelt down beside the justicar, before he heaved a tired sigh and glanced over at Christoph. "My sympathies," he whispered, in the last words Samuel would have expected to hear.

He might have laughed if he wasn't in the throes of coughing blood. His lips were stained with the same red that ran across his furry chin as he snarled back at the helmed

visage of his 'savior.' "I see through your falsehoods," he bit back. Anger and despair gave him new strength, enough to lurch forward again.

"The words aren't falsehoods," the commander insisted. He sighed again as he reached up to remove his helm, and in the firelight of the torches born by his brothers Samuel could finally see the sheen of the black dragon's scaled face. While he'd seen few dragons, this young one seemed... well, *tired*. "He fought for you with more than I have seen from any justicar. I see it in your eyes. I... understand your pain."

Samuel's eyes drifted down to the dragon's armor and fought the urge to spit on it. Dignity in death. That was a justicar's way. "You would condemn us as surely as my brothers and sisters would," he replied, his voice weaker than he'd intended. It was coming. His life was slipping away. "I wish..." He sighed. "I wish."

Then, with surprising tenderness, the dragon reached down and pressed his gauntlet-clad hand to the wolf's heart. "I do not condemn you, justicar, for your love," he said, and Samuel almost thought he saw, through his wavering, darkening vision, a small smile on the dragon's face. "You were bonded?"

"We were." The words came with more difficulty than Samuel had hoped. Tears welled in his eyes began to spill again. "We were," he repeated as his eyes closed.

"I know your ways, justicar," whispered the dragon. "A gift from a dear friend helped me to learn them. If you will allow me, I will speak the words and perform the rites for you both... as a bonded pair." He pressed a little harder down against the disbelieving, drifting justicar's chest. "You will pass together, as one blood. You will close your eyes, as he has done, and open them together once more in the end of all ends... from here to eternity, from this moment on."

Samuel's muzzle twitched as the words sank in, and his body fell slack. There was the barest nod as his eyelids fluttered one last time. They didn't reopen. His chest fell still. The heartbeat under the dragon's hand was quenched, and the dragon stood tall again. He stared down at the broken body of the justicar. Even with his last breath, he'd reached out to touch the paw of his lover. He'd made it, with the last of his strength. Their fingers closed against one another, barely connected by curled tips. They had lived together, been bonded as one... and fallen as one. They had earned the funerary rites of their faith, even if his fellows would challenge him if they saw it done.

A figure strode up behind the dragon and pressed his fist to his chest in salute. "Commander. Scouts have secured the village perimeter and your forces are prepared to move in. The temple sleeps still, and no alarm has gone up. The blood-moon shields us from the Lord of Justice's gaze. They are unaware of our march."

"Good. Raze the temple. Destroy the heretics within." His features hardened like rock as he stared through the forest. There was a mission to attend to.

As the soldier moved off, he paused at the sight of the justicars. The dragon could imagine the scaled face under that helm twisting with revulsion. "They were truly lost, were they not?" he asked, as he nodded at the pair's clasped paws. "Despicable. *Vile*."

The commander took a deep breath as he glared at his subordinate. "I will attend to their desecration personally. Perhaps you should focus yourself on the Lord of War's mission if *this* is enough to turn your stomach, else I might have to reassign you."

The soldier immediately stiffened to attention and tilted his head up. "No, Commander Ain! I will see to the front lines personally. I will spill much blood in His name tonight!"

Ain watched as the soldier left. There was a spring in his step as he eagerly went to battle. It took every ounce of training-given discipline to keep his expression steady and his behavior in check. He allowed a single hand to reach up to his breastplate and pull it tighter against his chest. There, beneath the armor, he could feel the amulet he had been given. The protection he'd had, that this poor pair had not.

The dragon knelt down and began to gather the bodies of the justicars up. There was little time. The blood-moon would not last, and he would not be able to perform the funerary rites for them as a bonded couple if the Lord of Justice could see them... or if the Lord of War could see *him*. And if any of his soldiers found out, well... he'd be lucky to share their fate. He couldn't. He knew it. He'd *felt* it. His fate was different from that of his brothers. His fate was still to fight in the war to come, but how... how, he still didn't know.

As he strode deeper into the forest with Samuel and Christoph's bodies resting on his shoulders, the temple to the Lord of Justice began to burn. The brothers of the Lord of War marched to the bloody battle that their victim's god could not even see. They marched to the beginning of the grandest war ever to grace the world.

Perhaps they even marched to its last.

And half a world away, as he felt every single self-loathing thought that coursed through Ain's mind, a solitary fox knelt to the ground and wept for his love.