

Song of Moonrise Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: About six months after the epilogue

Otto

Otto gripped his riding gloves in one hand, absentmindedly smacking them against his other palm as he glanced around the room.

The space was empty, even the furniture cleared away. The only exception was a large set of shelves that was affixed to the wall. Otto strode over to the attached desk that broke up the lower shelves, running a hand along the rim of the lockable drawer that stood open, the key lying on the shelf above. Ready for the secrets of the next owner.

He turned away with a sigh, his gaze passing one last time over the empty room.

“Otto?” The familiar voice of his friend made Otto look up, to see a sandy-haired young man hovering in the doorway.

“Monty,” he said, coming out of his reverie. “Is it time to leave?”

The young lord nodded. “The group is waiting. We’re the last ones.”

“Let’s go, then,” said Otto, crossing the room in a few swift steps.

“Why did you want to come back to Leonhard’s study again?” his friend asked, glancing behind him curiously as they left the room. “I thought you were involved in the initial investigation of Leonhard’s activities, and that the residence had been cleared for sale.”

“I was, and it has,” Otto confirmed. “Any evidence to be found here is long since gone. I just wanted to remind myself, I guess.”

“Of what?” Lord Montague pressed.

Otto grimaced. “Of how important it is to pay attention, even to the little things.” He paused. “Especially to the little things. There were so many signs I missed, now I look back on it all. I mean, I never felt warmly toward the man, but I didn’t suspect anything like this. I can still hardly believe he seemed so normal and collected when he was plotting such violence and insanity all along.”

“You can’t beat yourself up about that,” said Monty reasonably, as they exited the building into the cool light of the morning. “You were hardly the only one. No one else noticed, either.”

“Rosa did,” Otto said, coming to a stop. One of his guards waited nearby with his horse, the rest of the group having gathered on the cobblestone streets behind. “Not the full extent of it, but she could tell something was off with him well before I realized. And she almost paid for our blindness with her life.”

“But she didn’t,” Monty said firmly. “And that’s another thing you shouldn’t beat yourself up about.”

Otto made a face. His friend knew him well. “I’m sure if she was here she’d tell me I’m being arrogant to claim it was up to me to protect her. But I can’t help blaming myself, Monty. Imagine if she’d been ripped to shreds because, like a fool, I left her to her own devices in a crisis. I should have known she’d run off to the forest in the middle of the night, with savage magical wolves roaming about. It’s absolutely her usual practice.”

Monty laughed at the irritation in his friend’s voice, clapping Otto on the back.

“Ah well, it all worked out in the end,” Monty said, moving toward his own horse. “She didn’t just survive the wolf, she secured a marriage proposal from it.”

Otto chuckled as he swung himself up into his saddle. “Speaking of which, we’d better get moving if we want to be in Port Dulla for the wedding.”

He was speaking lightheartedly, of course. They were due to arrive in the Medullan capital several days before Rosa’s wedding to Crown Prince Emmett, and there was no real rush. But he felt the desire to be moving, and the open road beyond the city wall beckoned.

“How do you feel about Rosa marrying the Medullan prince?” Monty asked him about an hour later. “I know you two are close—you’ll miss her.”

Otto glanced over at his friend. They’d cleared Terenford and reached a stretch of road where they could easily ride side by side. Otto was grateful that Monty had been invited to join the delegation to attend the royal wedding. It would have been a dull journey otherwise, with the rest of his family having left a week earlier by carriage.

“I will miss her,” he told Monty. “She only left a week ago, and I already miss her. But I’m happy for them both. Emmett is a good match for her, and I’m sure they’ll be happy.”

“It will be your turn next, I suppose,” grinned Monty. “With her daughter married, the queen will have only one target left to focus on.”

Otto laughed. “You wouldn’t believe how many people have said that to me since Rosa got betrothed. Not the part about Mama,” he clarified. “Most people are far too respectful to say that, you graceless scamp.” He reached across the distance between their mounts and gave his friend a playful shove. “But the part about how it must be my turn now.” He shook his head. “Honestly, everyone seems to think it’s a great joke that will rile me up, but it sounds wonderful to me.”

Monty gave a comical groan. “You’ve always been a hopeless romantic, Otto.”

“Another thing everyone says as if it’s an insult,” Otto pointed out. “I’ll just have to trust that when I eventually find myself a wife, *she* will appreciate my romantic side, even if no one else does.”

His friend let out a guffaw. “If not, it would be a terrible waste,” he agreed. “When you *eventually* find a wife. Honestly, Otto, anyone would think you were forty instead of twenty.”

Otto grinned good-naturedly. “I’ll just have to hope I find someone willing to do for me what Rosa’s done for Emmett, and give up whatever life they’d planned in order to be future queen. It’s a lot to ask, really.”

“Something tells me that won’t be a problem,” said Monty cynically. “The bigger issue will be figuring out which girls actually like you instead of the crown.”

“True,” said Otto gloomily. “Depressing and true. But my point is a good one as well. Rosa’s had to leave her family to go and live with Emmett. I’d be asking the same if I marry someone from

outside Terenford. And to be honest, I've met the eligible girls of Terenford, and I'm not especially interested." He cocked his head, thinking. "Although it might be possible to move the family here as well."

"Not a good idea," said Monty, shaking his head. "You don't want your in-laws underfoot. Maybe you should find someone with no family. Then they're not giving up much, and you don't have any baggage coming along with them. Or someone who just doesn't like their family," he added as a helpful afterthought.

"No." Otto was adamant. "I know what it's like to lose family, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone. I also know how much it's worth to have family you love and value, even if you've had to work hard for it. Especially if you've had to work hard for it."

He paused for a moment, remembering when his father had married his stepmother when he and Rosa were fifteen, and how long it had taken him to draw Rosa out and convince her to give him a chance as a brother. Having a sister these last five years had been worth all the effort, even though he was now losing his closest friend to another kingdom.

"Anyway, I can't imagine having much in common with someone who didn't like or value her family."

He gave his head a shake, ready to change the topic. "But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Before we can think about my wedding to this mystery girl, we've got to get through Rosa's wedding. Speaking of which, thanks for waiting back with me, Monty."

"Of course," said his friend comfortably. "I don't mind missing some of the festivities. I'd rather travel with you. We'll have plenty of time to explore Port Dulla. I can't wait to see the castle! Is it true it's built right at the water's edge?"

"Pretty close to," Otto confirmed. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to explore it for yourself. I, sadly, will likely be stuck in formal functions the whole time."

"Trials of being royal," said Monty cheerfully. "Was the extra week worth it? I heard you met with the Frossian ambassador."

Otto nodded. "That's the main reason Father asked me to stay back. And it was very worthwhile. Now that Prince—I mean, King Herleif has reappeared, we're very eager to re-establish good relations with him. He may be king now, but he's still my contemporary. I was glad to hear he'd received my message so kindly."

"It's unbelievable, isn't it?" Monty asked. "About his curse and all that. I can't believe he's been alive all this time, and that he was trapped as a giant bear! Not entirely unlike Prince Emmett, really."

"Yes, it's remarkable," said Otto. "I can't imagine how overjoyed Queen Sylvi must have been to discover her son was alive after all." He chuckled. "Whether she was as excited to have him reappear already married is a different question. I don't know her well enough to hazard a guess."

"Married without any of the fuss...there's a lot to be said for it," Monty replied. "Probably your dream come true, right Otto?"

Otto rolled his eyes at his friend's grinning reference to the romantic tendencies that had so often left the prince open to mockery. "No, actually," he informed Monty loftily. "I want all the fuss and bother."

He stared unseeingly at the backs of the guards riding just in front of them.

“It is amazing about King Herleif, though. I might even plan a visit to Sunniva when I’m at liberty to do so. Which won’t be for a while, I guess, given I’m leaving for the trip deeper into Ilgal soon after returning from the wedding. I really have no idea how long I’ll be gone.”

“I was meaning to ask you about that,” said Monty, shifting in the saddle. “Would you consider letting me join the team? That is, if you’re in a position to do so.”

Otto looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t know you were interested! I’d love you to join. And yes, I can make that decision. Father is giving me full oversight of the expedition.”

“Thank you,” said Monty, beaming. “I feel the need for a change of scenery. And I would like to help reclaim the forest from the wild magic. I haven’t spent much time in Ilgal, but I grew up at its doorstep, like you did. It wouldn’t be right if the forest was cut off from the rest of the kingdom.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Otto agreed. “Are you sure you’re up for it, though? We’re planning to go deep into the forest. Obviously Father insists on sending a lot of guards, but I can’t promise absolute safety. I’m also expecting that the pressure from the wild magic will be worse deeper in.” He gestured at his chest. “It’s not going to be a comfortable trip.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Monty brightly. “I’ve had a lifetime of being comfortable. I’m ready for something different.”

Otto laughed, feeling lighter as he turned his eyes back to the road. It would be nice to have a friend by his side on his next venture. “Well, I’m very partial to being comfortable, if I’m honest. But I know what you mean. I think I’m ready for a new adventure myself.”