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## Things Come Together

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THE sight of the Phoenix back from the dead was enough to drive Empress Emerita Anabella to her final madness, even without losing her youngest son. Prince Dion had fallen unconscious, and remained so. Emperor Olivier – the title now even more meaningless now that the seat of his power was largely destroyed – remained alive and well, as far as anyone knew, and no longer able to hide behind his mother’s skirts, all he could do was stand and await the fate the Rosfield brothers determined for him.

Clive’s vision of Dion’s memories had been sufficient for him to give into Joshua’s persuasion and consent to bring the prince back to the hideaway, but it was proving harder for Joshua to convince him that it would be right to let Olivier accompany them as well.

“He’s just a child,” said Joshua. “And he’s our brother. We can’t leave him here – he won’t last the day.”

“He isn’t our concern,” said Clive. “We’ve got enough to worry about.”

“Clive,” Joshua pleaded, and for the first time in eighteen years, Clive felt a long-buried but immediately familiar emotion: that mixed exasperation and love for his brother that made itself known any time Joshua insisted on doing something that was far too kind.

He turned to Jill. “What do you think?”

“I think we should stop arguing and get out of here,” said Jill. “But it might be a good idea for us to take a hostage – one less powerful than Bahamut’s Dominant.”

Jill was immensely practical, as always, and Clive capitulated partly because of the value of what she had suggested and partly because he couldn’t bear to disagree with the two people who meant the most to him. With all three decided, it was Joshua who stepped forward and extended a hand to Olivier, just as he had tried to do to their mother.

“Come on,” he said. “It’s not safe here.”

And as he reached out to take Olivier by the arm, something strange happened: the manifestation of Ultima that Joshua had long since sealed within himself came into contact with the one that had taken possession of the child. One free, wilful Ultima and one subdued, imprisoned one: they could not exist together. They met, and they clashed, and the bonds that the Phoenix had created were too strong to allow his captive to escape and meld with its mirror image that lurked

in Olivier; and so it was the latter that faltered and died. Blue light sparked between them, and Joshua stepped back and bent over in a fit of coughs, and Olivier was suddenly nothing but a human child.

“What have you done to my brother?” Clive demanded, stepping forward before Jill could think to stop him, but Joshua flung out an arm to ward him off.

“It’s all right,” he gasped, even though blood was trickling onto his chin. “Wasn’t his fault. I’ll explain later.”

They made their way outside; Joshua’s steps were slow and laboured. Jill had taken over the duty of shepherding Olivier along with them, grasping him tightly by the shoulders; neither of them spoke. Clive was barely aware of Dion’s weight slung over his shoulder: he was overjoyed to have found Joshua again, and yet deeply concerned for his brother’s health. Even during Joshua’s seemingly interminable bouts of childhood fever, he had never seemed as weak as this.

“We’ll have to stop for Goetz,” he said to distract himself. “He’ll be in the city somewhere.”

“Of course,” said Joshua. “Alert me when you see him.”

“Are you sure you can prime?” Clive asked.

“The more time passes, the less sure I am,” Joshua admitted. “So we must act quickly if we’re to get out of here.”

And so, soon afterwards, the Phoenix shone in the skies over Twinside once again.



They arrived on the dock at the hideaway, making a rough and undignified landing; Joshua was back in his human form immediately, and then, almost immediately again, he was sprawled across the boards, just as unresponsive as Dion. Clive and Goetz hauled the two of them to Tarja's; she took them in readily, having learnt long since that there was no point in asking questions; and then, having been assured he would be no use to his brother by standing at his bedside fretting, Clive returned to the dock, where Jill had wisely elected to stay with Olivier rather than bring him inside and let him face their allies' curious eyes.

"Perhaps it wasn't very sensible of me to say we should bring him here," she said.

"No, no, Jill, of course it was sensible," said Clive distractedly. "You're always sensible. We've plenty of children here." His gaze flickered over Olivier. "Although I suppose not many of them are imperial princes."

"Ah," said Jill. "But – Clive, didn't you hear? Just a few moons ago: his father handed over the throne. He's not a prince – he's the emperor."

"Oh," said Clive.

"Never mind what I am," said Olivier, speaking for the first time. "I'm *hungry*. Have you anything to eat?"



It was Clive who ended up taking Olivier to the Tub and Crown and asking Molly for a plate of something filling; he had assumed the boy would disapprove of the sort of fare served at the hideaway, surely a far cry from what he had been used to at the imperial palace. He didn't seem put off, though, and ate with enthusiasm as Clive pondered what to do with him. The final decision, he supposed, would require more consultation with Jill, and it would no doubt be prudent to involve Gav and Otto as well – to say nothing of Dorys, and Tarja. Even with as many as six of them, that group would contain nobody from Sanbreque, which seemed an omission given the circumstances. Clive wondered if he might persuade a suitable representative of the empire to join them. He had heard rumours that Harpocrates had once lived in Oriflamme ...

Olivier's own thoughts were somewhat more muddled. Freed from his long possession by Ultima and finally separated from his mother, the fact that he was no longer able to depend on either of them was something he felt should have worried him, but it felt more as if he was waking from a long, disturbed sleep. There were strange gaps in his memories; there were things he knew to be objectively true, but remained puzzling when he tried reconciling them with what he believed he had experienced. Anabella was dead, he thought with a strange lack of emotion. And Sylvestre too – he knew that somehow,

and he knew he had been present at the scene. He had been deep in Ultima's clutches at the time, but even that had failed to prevent him from noticing that his own face had become spattered with Sylvestre's blood, and that his father had lain twisted on the floor, pierced with something long and silvery.

He moved his plate aside, and Clive said warily, "Have you finished?"

"Yes," said Olivier. "You may take it away."

Clive raised an eyebrow at Olivier's attitude; the inhabitants of the hideaway were apt to be equally demanding of their beloved Cid, but that was the result of five years of shared struggles and the infallible bonds of friendship they had forged. He had no such attachment to Olivier, but he stood and took the dish back to Molly anyway. The child was no doubt distressed by his parents' deaths, he considered.

In fact, Ultima's grip on Olivier had been so strong that Olivier had never had much chance to form an emotional attachment to his parents at all, and so his reaction to their demise consisted merely of slight confusion about how everything had deteriorated so rapidly. Even though he had always seemed to be glued to his mother, that had been more an effect of Ultima's presence than an indication that the boy himself really felt anything for her. He sat there quietly, wondering about his father's blood, remembering the clanging sound of his mother's dagger hitting the floor after she used it to slit her throat.

Clive returned, having decided how to occupy Olivier for the time being. "I'm going to introduce you to the other children," he said. "You can get to know them until we work out what to do with you."

He took Olivier up to the deck near Mid's workshop, where Arthur and his friends usually hung about. They were there as usual, discussing something that caused them to look particularly sheepish when Clive approached; he doubted it was anything he needed to worry about.

"These are some of our, er, younger residents," he said to Olivier; "Arthur, Aimee, Josselin. And this is –" He wondered briefly whether he should conceal Olivier's identity, and then decided that even though the children were Sanbrequois, they had lived at the hideaway so long that they were unlikely to know the name of the recently installed emperor. "Olivier," he concluded, gritting his teeth a little as he said it: the fact that he was having to politely introduce the child his own mother had produced with the emperor of Sanbreque was somewhat galling.

"I can count on you to keep him out of trouble, can't I?" he said, forcing the thought aside.

"Us?" said Josselin.

"Come on, Cid," said Arthur, "what do you take us for? We always stay out of trouble, don't we?"

Their demeanour made Clive smile, as it often did; maybe, he thought, spending some time at the hideaway would be a

useful lesson in humility for the young emperor. “All right,” he said. “Be good.”

“So where did Cid pick you up?” said Josselin to Olivier, once Clive had gone.

“Cid?” Olivier asked. “I thought his name was Clive. That’s what his wife called him.”

“His wife!” Aimee exclaimed, and the three young Bearers started laughing.

It was an odd experience for Olivier, who was unaccustomed to having others laugh at him, at least not when he could see it. “Sorry,” Aimee added a moment later. “Just ... she’s not his wife.”

“They’re just friends,” Arthur said, and then he laughed again. “Clive’s his real name, but everyone here calls him Cid, cos ... cos there was another Cid here, before, but he died. So now we’ve got our Cid instead.”

“Do you remember the old Cid?” Aimee asked him. “We were only little when he was around,” she explained to Olivier.

“I remember him,” said Josselin. “He died when they attacked the old hideaway, didn’t he?”

“No, that’s not right,” said Arthur. “Cid wasn’t there – that’s why the Men of the Rock got in.”

“How did he die, then?” Josselin demanded.

Olivier watched while they debated the chronology of Cid’s death; he didn’t find it particularly interesting. At last,



when there was a gap in the conversation, he said, “Why do you have those marks on your faces?”

He had never seen a Bearer before; Anabella had always taken care to keep her son away from those she considered unworthy of falling under his gaze.

“Because we can do magic!” said Josselin.

“Oh,” said Olivier – that made him think of Dion. They had never had a particularly close relationship; Dion’s visits to the castle in Oriflamme and then to the new palace in Twinside had always been brief, and of late, Ultima’s presence within Olivier had always seemed to flare up when his brother was nearby, preventing Olivier from perceiving Dion much at all. But he had heard the stories the people in his service told about Dion: his strength, his loyalty to the empire. How his priming into Bahamut inspired hope in all the men of the imperial army. Olivier had often wished he himself could be a Dominant: it would surely be a more exciting life than having to attend diplomatic meetings and learn the tedious details of Sanbrequois history. As far as Olivier knew, most of Dion’s life was spent on the battlefield, defending the empire against those who wished it ill.

“My brother can do magic,” he said.

“But he doesn’t have the Brand?” said Aimee.

Olivier shook his head.

“He must be unbranded,” said Arthur. “Lucky! Is it aspected?”

“What does that mean?” said Olivier.

“He means does it have an element,” said Aimee. “My magic’s water, and the boys’ is thunder.”

“Yeah, like the old Cid!” said Josselin eagerly.

“Oh,” said Olivier again. “I know that one – it’s light.”

“Really?” said Aimee. “That’s rare!”

“An unbranded light-aspected Bearer,” said Josselin, wide-eyed. “Does he just go around the Twins casting magicks, then? Without anyone stopping him?”

“I should think so,” said Olivier. “Everyone’s always talking about what an asset to the empire he is.”

“But he’s not anyone’s slave?” said Arthur.

“Why would he be?” said Olivier.

“He’s unbranded, remember?” said Aimee. “People probably don’t even know he’s a Bearer.”

“But if he has magic,” Arthur pointed out, “people would find out, wouldn’t they?” He turned back to Olivier. “I think you’re lying. Your brother’s not really a Bearer. You didn’t even know what a Bearer was until just now.”

Having his words openly disputed was also a new experience for Olivier. “I’m not lying,” he said. “My brother really can do magic. If you don’t believe me, you can ask him; he’s here too.”

“Fine,” said Arthur, “I will.”

“Where is he, then?” Aimee asked.

That, Olivier didn’t know.

“Tomes will tell us,” said Aimee. “He knows everything.”



When the four of them arrived at the shelves, Harpocrates stood to get a better look at his diminutive visitors; having read many descriptions of the new Holy Emperor and found much to worry about within them, he recognised Olivier immediately. Walking forward with caution, he inclined his head politely, and murmured, “If I’m not mistaken – it is an honour, Your Radiance.”

“Your what?” Josselin yelped.

“Finally,” said Olivier, “someone who addresses me by my title! You three are Sanbrequois, aren’t you? You should show me the respect I deserve.”

“I should be most interested in talking with you, Your Radiance,” said Harpocrates, thinking it best to change the subject. “Perhaps your friends would like to wait outside?”

“We’re not his friends,” said Arthur. “He’s a liar, and he didn’t know what a Branded was.”

“Then you’ll be happy to leave us be, I’m sure,” said Harpocrates pleasantly.

Unable to fault his logic, they did; Harpocrates walked back towards his desk, gesturing to Olivier to follow, and then drew up a chair for the boy.

“Master Clive was just in to see me,” he said, not quite look-

ing Olivier in the eye. “He told me about what happened in Twinside. My condolences to you, Your Radiance. I had dealings with the late emperor emeritus once upon a time, and I always found him to be mindful of the empire’s interests.”

“So he’s definitely dead, then,” said Olivier.

“My apologies,” said Harpocrates. “I had heard you were present at the time. I should have broken the news more gently if I –”

Olivier shook his head. “I was there. I thought he had died, but I wasn’t sure about it. I don’t remember everything.”

He was reluctant to go into more detail in front of someone he had only just met, as non-threatening as Harpocrates seemed. It was difficult to explain, now that he was fully in control of his own mind, how Ultima’s presence had gradually come to overwhelm him and left him feeling as if his own life was some kind of dream, unfolding before him as if obscured by a veil, leaving him largely unable to act of his own accord. In recent times, he had spent long stretches with the ability to witness what happened before him without truly perceiving it.

Harpocrates was peering at Olivier more keenly now: the boy’s admission had suddenly given him a new understanding of the events Clive had recounted. Clive had described how his brother reached for the child, and some strange reaction had occurred, as if something inside Olivier had been drawn out by the gesture. There had been signs in Harpocrates’ own research that a malevolent force had been making itself known

across the Twins. It was probable, he thought, that at least one manifestation of that force had been present in Twinside – especially with four Dominants all gathered in the same place.

“Is that the only thing you don’t remember?” he asked.

Olivier shrugged.

“Your Radiance,” said Harpocrates, “it is important that you tell me. I have come to believe of late that the realm is in great danger – if you would share your recent experiences with me, we might succeed in learning more about this terrible threat. It is for the sake of Sanbreque,” he added carefully, “and of all our great nations.”

“Well, in that case,” said Olivier – and he began his tale.



Olivier had never understood what was happening to him as Ultima’s grip had tightened around his soul; but everything he said made perfect sense to Harpocrates. There was more to the story, he realised: the strange way in which Olivier had reacted to Joshua’s outstretched hand meant that the younger Rosfield brother was also somehow connected to the wicked deity. But if he had been taken over unwillingly, he would hardly have retained mastery of his own free will, that force that Ultima despised the most; the only explanation was that Joshua had for some reason made the conscious decision to draw on his Eikon’s powers to imprison Ultima inside himself.

He would have to speak to Joshua when possible, he decided; but for now, it was more important to try explaining the situation to Olivier, and, he hoped, make things a little less confusing for the young emperor. “I thank you for the information you have given me,” he said. “It has opened my mind to a great many things. You see, it is quite clear to me now that the terrible evil that would destroy the realm made its home inside you, for a time.”

“Inside me?” Olivier echoed. “Whatever are you talking about?”

“It is nothing to be ashamed of,” said Harpocrates. “Few would have the power to resist so fearsome a foe – even among our Dominants. There must be memories and events from the last few moons or years about which you are very confused. But I hope knowing that you spent that time under this malevolent influence can give you a little more explanation of why you feel this way.”

“So I was possessed,” said Olivier.

“I’m afraid so, Your Radiance,” said Harpocrates solemnly. “Although fortunately, your contact with Joshua Rosfield appears to have ridded you of the spectre.”

“Oh,” said Olivier. “Why did it possess *me*? Was it because I’m emperor? Father always told me I had special responsibilities.”

Harpocrates shook his head slowly. “Based on what has happened over the last few years,” he said, “I suspect that Ul-

tima means to goad our poor Dominants, although to what end, I am not entirely sure. I may be mistaken, but I believe his presence within you was at least partly a ruse with the aim of –” He couldn’t help grimacing slightly. “Of driving your brother to madness, and of summoning Master Clive to the scene.”

Olivier said nothing, but the explanation seemed to make enough sense. It lined up with what he remembered of the events in the imperial audience chamber: he could somehow remember urging Dion to do something, although the details of exactly *what* were unclear, and he was certain that he hadn’t given the command of his own volition.

“Your Radiance,” said Harpocrates, “might I ask one small indulgence?”

Olivier was used to this sort of question. “It depends,” he said prudently.

“If you can give me any indication of where your brother could be,” said Harpocrates, “I should very much like to know.”

“But don’t *you* know?” Olivier exclaimed. “That’s what I came to ask you about!”

“Why should I know?” asked Harpocrates, perplexed.

“The others said you knew everything about this place,” said Olivier. “I thought you would tell me where they took him.”

“Where they took him,” Harpocrates echoed. “You ... you don’t mean he’s here, in the hideaway? Did Clive bring him here with you?”

“Of course he did, you daft old man,” said Olivier.

Harpocrates masterfully ignored the insult, and said, “I see. Master Clive neglected to relate that part of the story to me. Of course – he would be unaware of ... well, never mind that. If he’s here, I daresay he would be in the infirmary, after what happened.”

“The infirmary? You’re certain?” said Olivier.

“I cannot be certain,” said Harpocrates, “but it seems the most likely place.”

“All right,” said Olivier, and without another word, he stood and hurried out.



“My brother *is* here,” he told the other children as soon as he had returned to the upper deck. “The old man said he’s in the infirmary. I’ll introduce you to him, and then you’ll see he can do magic, even though he doesn’t have one of those awful marks on his face.”

“We still don’t believe you,” said Aimee; the three of them had discussed the situation while Olivier was talking to Harpocrates and come to the conclusion that irrefutable proof was required to demonstrate his integrity.

“Take me to the infirmary, then, and I’ll prove it,” said Olivier.

The three young Bearers led the way there. As a group, the



four of them had no chance of entering discreetly; the noise of their approach alerted Tarja's assistant Rodrigue, and he turned to see what they could want.

"Good Greagor," he said when he saw Olivier. "It can't be ..."

"It is," said Olivier, who was used to this sort of reception. "Where's my brother?"

"He's in our second chamber," said Rodrigue, "but I can't let you all in to see him. He and our, um, other patient aren't in a good way – Tarja's seeing to them now."

"You'll obey your emperor," said Olivier.

"His what?!" said Arthur behind him.

"Well," said Rodrigue, very apologetically, "actually, Your Radiance, you'll find that you have no jurisdiction here. It's, um, a principle of the hideaway that we Bearers aren't required to follow orders – no matter who issues them. Besides, Cid and Tarja would be furious if I let you all in there. I'd rather not take my chances on that, begging your pardon, Your Radiance."

"Fine," said Olivier; he had been taught that fruitless argument was unbecoming of an emperor. "But he is in there, isn't he?"

"Prince Dion?" said Rodrigue. "Yes, he is, Your Radiance."

"See?" said Olivier to the other children, before turning back to the older Bearer. "And he can cast magic, can't he?"

"Well, I should think so," said Rodrigue, baffled. "Unless you mean in his current condition –"

Olivier had lost interest in what Rodrigue had to say; he faced the others again, and said, “Well, do you believe me now?”

“I suppose so,” said Arthur crossly.



They reached a sort of truce after that, but only after the three young Bearers had cornered Olivier and demanded he explain to them whether he really was the Holy Emperor. He confirmed it to be true; they were surprised and puzzled by his presence among them, but having spent most of their lives in the hideaway, lacked the instinctive need to show deference that Rodrigue had, and so their difference in status failed to have much effect on the way they interacted with him from that point. The only thing left to do was show him around the hideaway and provide some explanation of the various characters to be found in its nooks and crannies. The Sanbrequois adults they came across were all slightly unnerved to find themselves in the company of their young emperor, but like Rodrigue, consciously forbade themselves from giving any indication of subservience. The other inhabitants, lacking Harpocrates' manners, mostly ignored the new arrival.

After a quick bowl of Molly's brown for dinner, they took Olivier down to the bunks and found him somewhere to sleep before eagerly taking their leave of him – his constant supercil-

ious remarks were starting to become wearing. As for Olivier himself, who was unused to the noise of others snoring and whimpering around him as he tried to sleep, he found himself lying awake under his scratchy, utilitarian blanket for a long time. He occupied himself by considering his situation: he now had proof that his father was dead, and was sure enough that his mother was gone as well. He himself had been under the influence of some evil spirit, for moons or even years if the old man was correct; now he was in full control of his own actions at last. The man called Clive or Cid had brought him to this place, and had brought Dion too.

Perhaps, he thought, he would be able to spend some time with his brother now that they were both in this strange place. Dion's life had always sounded very exciting. Olivier could just about remember that Anabella had always told him not to be jealous of Dion's being a Dominant, because she was sure he would awaken as the Phoenix one day, but leading the imperial dragoons seemed like it would be a lot of fun quite apart from that. He had always wanted to hear about it. He was familiar with the stories told in the imperial palaces about how brave and wise and chivalrous his brother was, and had seen the way everyone in his father's household seemed to become buoyed when Dion was paying them one of his infrequent visits. He really did seem like one of the noble knights from the stories Olivier's maidservants had told him when he was younger. Olivier was desperate to learn about Dion's ex-

plots: travelling around the realm and engaging in warfare in the empire's name had always seemed much more interesting to him than what he himself was increasingly required to do at the palace, attend meetings and make various incomprehensible pronouncements under his mother's direction.

He would try to visit Dion in the infirmary again, he decided. Without the other children accompanying him, perhaps he would have more success in being admitted. Then he would be able to speak to his brother properly – perhaps for the first time ever.



“Oh, hells,” said Tarja when Olivier turned up at the infirmary the next morning. “I know who you are. You want to see Prince Dion, don't you?”

“Correct,” said Olivier.

“Well, I'm sure you're worried about him,” said Tarja, “but he's still asleep, and he really shouldn't be disturbed.”

“Still asleep?” said Olivier. “Since yesterday? Why hasn't he woken up?”

“Dominants have an unusual constitution,” said Tarja. “Their bodies sometimes go into a sort of stasis when –”

“Haven't you been treating him?” said Olivier, uninterested in the scientific explanation. “You're the head physicker, aren't you?”

"I'm doing what I can," said Tarja sternly. "Would you just have some patience."

"I will if you let me see him," said Olivier, taking the opportunity to make an attempt at bargaining. "I'll be ever so quiet. I've a lot of practice in making sure I behave myself."

Tarja sighed; she already felt guilty about keeping the child away from his brother, particularly when she knew his position would hardly have allowed him to have a normal childhood. Tarja had never borne children herself, and had never particularly wanted to be a mother, but she had a great affection for all the young people who made the hideaway their home, and she suspected that in some ways Olivier had suffered even more than they had.

"All right," she said. "I'll let you see him, as long as you don't try waking him up, or do anything else to disturb him. Do you promise?"

"Of course," said Olivier solemnly.

She led him into the infirmary, and then to the back room, which seemed even more still and quiet than the main chamber. It was dark, too; Olivier's eyes took a moment to adjust, and then he saw Dion in the further of the two occupied beds, his spear leaning against the wall behind him.

It was odd to see the lance of the commander of the Holy Knights Dragoon separated from its owner. Olivier was accustomed to seeing Dion without his weapon, but the inverse was more unusual. Without Dion's fist securely gripping the cen-

tre of its shaft, the spear looked strangely foreboding. As for Dion – he seemed unusually small, mostly covered by the thick grey blanket.

After a moment, Olivier noticed the young man in the bed beside Dion's, and remembered the way they had made contact in Twinside. He thought back to Harpocrates' words: this was Joshua Rosfield. He too had a fragment of Ultima inside him, but had managed to retain control of his own actions nonetheless. As Olivier considered, he remembered what had happened more clearly: he could picture the events, just about. The swift twitch of Anabella's blade, the line of red blood that first appeared at her neck, the muted thud as she crumpled to the ground. Before that, Joshua reaching for her, imploring her to take his hand. *Mother*, he had called her.

He turned back to Tarja, and said, "He's my brother too, isn't he?"

Tarja frowned; explaining the complex alliances of the realm's ruling families to an eleven-year-old child who happened to be the product of one of those very same alliances didn't seem hugely appealing. Rodrigue would have done it better, if the child had been anyone but his emperor.

"Did your mother never tell you she had other sons?" she ventured.

"One other," said Olivier, looking back at Joshua. "But she said he was long dead."

"He wasn't," said Tarja bluntly. "The empress thought so –

so did we all. But you're looking at him now." She folded her arms and looked down at Joshua herself. "That's him – the Phoenix."

"Mother said I was to be the Phoenix," said Olivier. "She said I wasn't to tell anyone."

Tarja shook her head; it was difficult to respond to that.

Olivier made his way back to Dion's side. "You are taking care of him, aren't you?" he said. "You know he's Sanbreque's only Dominant. Father always said he was very important to us. He should be looked after." His mother, on the other hand, had never said anything of the kind, but Olivier had never spotted that discrepancy.

"I'm doing my best," said Tarja. "We've a lot to do in here, you know – the Cursebreakers have been keeping us very busy recently, and Rodrigue and I are the only trained physickers in the place." A idea came to her then, one that Rodrigue would undoubtedly have found sacrilegious. "Perhaps you'd like to help us?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Olivier.

"If you help us look after your brother, we might speed up his recovery," she explained.

Olivier frowned. "I'm not a servant. I expect you to do everything you can to assist him, and if he hasn't woken soon, I shall inform my court." As he said it, the destruction of Twinside briefly came back to him, and he wondered fleetingly whether he even had a court anymore.



Olivier spent the next few days at the hideaway in a state of increasing boredom. Once or twice, he tried joining the others' lessons with Miss Shirleigh, only to find that they were covering topics he had already been thoroughly drilled on: the calibre of the hideaway's educational programme was nothing compared with the imperial tutors of Sanbreque, all specialists in their fields with diplomas from Kanver, and even though Olivier had rarely found his lessons interesting or enjoyable, most of what he had learnt had somehow stuck. The idea of visiting Harpocrates and learning more about Ultima was too frightening to entertain, so he found himself spending most of his time wandering around the decks, trying to convince himself that there was no need to get involved in the tasks that everyone else in the hideaway spent so much time busying themselves with. Even the children, he had noticed, played their part in the cleaning and mending and organising. In Olivier's experience, those tasks were for servants alone, and it was thought deeply wrong to go about things in any other way. At the imperial court, there had been two types of people: those who were too important to concern themselves with menial duties, and those whose lives were too insignificant to be involved in anything but. Here, that distinction was absent. It should have made for anarchy, Olivier was sure, but somehow, everything kept going. It wasn't that there weren't any



leaders at all: Clive was clearly one of them, and there was a short-tempered, bearded man, and a friendly younger blond-haired man who was missing an eye, and a stern and quiet woman who wore armour. But even these people seemed to take part in the kind of tasks that a Sanbrequois noble would have found utterly debasing. Even more peculiarly, they did it with a smile.

A few days in, Olivier was bored enough to have a go at fetching his own broth from Molly instead of waiting for someone else to bring it to him. Nobody batted an eyelid, not even the hideaway's Sanbrequois residents: they were so used to living in this spirit of egalitarianism that even the sight of their emperor picking up his own lunch seemed normal to them, now that they had recovered from the initial shock of his presence. He mulled it over as he worked his way through the unappetising dish. If he could do this, he surmised, perhaps he would be able to do other things for himself without attracting any terrible consequences. Maybe he could do a few things in service of Dion's recovery after all, and hope that his brother might awake sooner. Then he would finally be able to learn all about the things Dion got up to with the dragoons. Until then, helping to look after him would be something to do, and it might stop people giving him the odd, piteous looks he had begun to notice.

The next morning, he went back to the infirmary.

"Here to see your brother, are you?" said Tarja, barely

glancing at him as she saw to another patient. “Well, you remember what I said, I’m sure. There’s no use just standing around – you’ll only get in everyone’s way. If you want to come in here as you please, you’ll have to agree to help us out.”

“All right, then,” said Olivier. “You’ll have to show me what to do. I’ve never done healing before.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Tarja.



After that, Olivier began to spend more of his waking hours in the infirmary than anywhere else. Under Tarja’s instruction, he began to perform some of the simpler duties associated with Dion’s care: washing his skin, administering Tarja’s herbal concoctions to his tongue, changing his bedsheets and even his bandages. The wounds beneath were dark and unsettling: they glistened like gemstones, but the smell of them was more like the meat that was served at court banquets.

“Greagor preserve him,” Olivier muttered, and he was vaguely disappointed to find that there was no immediate consequence. He was Greagor’s word made flesh, after all; if there was someone to whose entreaties she ought to respond, that person was surely him.

But no answer to his prayers made itself known, and so he continued to see to Dion in the ways Tarja instructed him. A

few times he asked her how long it would be until his brother awoke, reminding her of his critical importance to the empire and the fact that now Olivier himself was involved in his care, there was really no reason for him not to be getting better. Tarja merely became increasingly short-tempered each time Olivier brought it up, and so he gradually got out of the habit of asking.

One morning, upon arrival at the infirmary, he was greeted by an excitable Rodrigue.

“Your Radiance,” said the latter; he had been unable to give up the habit of addressing Olivier that way, despite Tarja’s encouragement. “You came at a fortuitous time. Your brother is awake.”

Olivier smiled; his work had paid off. At last, he thought, he would be able to hear all the stories about Bahamut and his knights. He hurried into the back room of the infirmary, eager to see the proof – and found Dion just as still and silent as ever, and Joshua Rosfield sitting up in his own bed, his blue eyes open to meet Olivier’s own.

“Oh,” he said, before turning back to Rodrigue. “You meant him. I thought you meant Dion.”

“You’re right, I should have been clearer,” said Rodrigue contritely. “I’m terribly sorry. Do forgive me, my lord.” He sank into a half-bow before backing out of the room at great speed.

“I’m glad to see you well, Olivier,” said Joshua, his voice a

little weak after spending a while unconscious. “I didn’t know how things would go after we met in Twinside. I’m sure you have questions about what happened.”

“I know what happened,” said Olivier, still resentful that Joshua had woken first. Bahamut was the strongest Eikon, Dion the strongest Dominant, and Sanbreque the mightiest nation – he had heard all that enough times. That surely meant Dion should have been the first to awake.

“You know of Ultima?” said Joshua.

“The evil spirit?” said Olivier.

Joshua frowned. “Not a spirit, exactly – but evil, without doubt. You were under his possession. But I had previously trapped a fragment of Ultima inside me, and when we made contact, there was some sort of disturbance.”

“Yes, the old man told me all that,” said Olivier impatiently. “Do you know when Dion’s going to wake up?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Joshua. “I’m sure he’ll be all right. We Dominants have very resilient bodies. A long rest is really all we need.”

The veracity of his words was suddenly thrown into doubt as he bent over to cough violently. Olivier watched him, unimpressed.

“But it may be a few days before I can call on the firebird’s flame,” Joshua admitted hoarsely.



Joshua's awakening brought more activity to the infirmary; Tarja insisted that he not leave at least until Clive returned from his latest expedition, and he was still too weak to mount a suitable counterargument, so he spent his days taking notes on his latest findings and the events in Twinside. Jote, who had somehow found her way to the hideaway during her master's convalescence, was in and out of the infirmary as often as she dared, bringing him books from the shelves under Tarja's largely disapproving eye and checking there was nothing else he required. She and Olivier said little to each other, although Joshua tried to engage his younger brother in conversation a few times, with varying success.

"Do you like reading, Olivier?" he tried on one occasion, noticing that Olivier was looking cautiously at his books.

"Only about knights and battles," said Olivier. "But Father always wanted me to read about the politics of the realm. It was dreadfully dull."

"Some books can be less appealing than others, I suppose," said Joshua.

"What are yours about?" Olivier asked him.

Joshua glanced down at his papers. "I'm learning about the evil being who would see the world bent to his will. The one who possessed you – Ultima."

Olivier was familiar enough with the name by now. It provoked a strange resonance within him, too: for a time, he now knew, he had *been* Ultima. As the reality around him had faded,

he had seen the world more through Ultima's eyes than his own. It had been easy enough to develop a disdain for all humanity when he had already been taught that most of it was beneath him. Perhaps that was why Ultima had chosen him as the target of his possession.

Now, with Ultima gone, he didn't quite know what to think of his fellow humans. Being in the hideaway was starting to show him that people were sometimes kind to each other without any sort of ulterior motive.



Clive and Jill hurried to the infirmary as soon as they returned from their latest expedition and were informed of Joshua's awakening. After Clive exchanged a long, relieved embrace with his brother, he noticed an unwelcome presence perched on the end of Dion's bed.

"Why is he here?" he snarled.

"He's worried about his brother," said Joshua. "Surely you understand that, Clive."

Clive said no more about it, but he cast Olivier a number of suspicious looks during the ensuing conversation, especially when Joshua offered his findings on Ultima's nature. He was especially put out by the fact that Joshua insisted on showing kindness to the boy. As far as Clive was concerned, the spawn of Anabella and the late emperor deserved no mercy.

Olivier was glad when Clive hurried away to hear the news of Kanver's siege, and more glad still when it was determined that Joshua would travel there with him. He was relieved to find the infirmary quiet and still again: that seemed more conducive to Dion's recovery. Over the next few days, he continued to see to his brother while Joshua's words echoed in his mind: Olivier was worried about Dion, Joshua had said. Yes, Olivier supposed, he was concerned for his brother's health. It was not merely that he wanted the chance to talk to Dion properly for the first time in his life, and hear all his stories of the battlefield, but he also hoped Dion would wake and be well.

And one morning, when the sun had barely begun to rise, his prayers to Greagor were at long last answered. Olivier was at Dion's side; he had taken to coming to the infirmary before dawn as a way of avoiding the early-morning chatter of the bunks. He watched as Dion's eyes slowly opened; as he grimaced with pain, and struggled into a sitting position; as his gaze slowly came to rest on Olivier, and he assumed an expression of shock and disgust.

"You!" he rasped, before starting to twist around in agitation, trying to locate his spear. "Still haunting me – I'll put an end to it – I'll kill you!"

"No!" Olivier yelped, springing back.

Dion stilled. His brother's voice somehow seemed more animated in that one word than he had ever heard it before. For the first time, he sounded like nothing more than a frightened

child. But he remembered the way Ultima had spoken through Olivier before; he remembered the chilling, unearthly glow in his brother's eyes. He had to stop Ultima's influence spreading further.

"I'm not possessed anymore," said Olivier, still panicked. "Don't hurt me, Dion, don't hurt me!"

"And why should I believe that?" Dion demanded.

"Joshua took it out of me," said Olivier, unsure of how he might explain it any better. "He took my hand, and then Ultima wasn't inside me anymore. I promise!"

"Joshua?" said Dion. His thoughts were muddled. He remembered Ultima's goading; he remembered what had happened immediately prior to that, although the thought of it was too unbearable to dwell on. He remembered something of becoming Bahamut, and of fighting another Eikon, of light and fire clashing in the sky.

"He was here," said Olivier, pointing towards Joshua's bed. Dion looked, and saw the proof: a single phoenix feather lay on the sheets, its striking scarlet quite the contrast with the infirmary's drab furnishings. Joshua had been gone for a few days now, but the feather still remained; Tarja had permitted herself to give in to sentimentality and leave it there while she cleared away the rest of the evidence of Joshua's presence. It was a message of hope, after all.

Dion pressed a hand to his head. He had a monstrous headache, and nothing around him seemed to make any sense,



which was only making him feel worse. The events of the attempted coup were coming back to him out of order, with some parts clearer than others; there was a mostly empty span that coincided with the time he had spent primed. Everything he could remember was bad. He knew exactly who he had struck with his spear, on the other hand, and what the consequence had been, but the thought of that remained too terrible to contemplate. He was less sure about what had happened after that, and suddenly found himself overcome by an urgent need to return to Twinside and see it for himself.

“I have to leave,” he muttered, stumbling to his feet – the movement made him feel dizzy, and he clung to the bed waiting for it to pass. Now that he had cast off his blanket, he could see that he was dressed in nothing but his underclothes, but much of his body was wrapped in thick, ominous bandages. He should have expected it; everything hurt.

“Where are my clothes?” he asked. “My armour?”

Olivier stood, still not drawing close to Dion; he had a strong suspicion that his brother wanted to strike him. The clothes were being kept under the bed; he retrieved them cautiously. “I don’t know where the armour is,” he said.

The clothes alone would have to do, Dion decided. He pulled them over his bandaged body, gritting his teeth at the pain. He had been injured like this before, he reminded himself. He would go on, as he always had, for the sake of the empire.

He sat on the bed to put on his boots, and briefly wondered if he would ever muster the strength to get up again.

“Where are you going to go?” said Olivier. “I don’t think you’re fit to travel. You’ve been unconscious for ages.”

Dion had never expected such words to come from his brother’s mouth; trying to understand what had caused him to develop this apparent regard for other human beings made his head hurt even more, so he gave up and simply said, “I must return to Twinside. I need to see what I have done.”

“I don’t know if you should go all the way to Twinside,” said Olivier. “I think it’s quite a long way from here.”

“Is that an imperial decree?” Dion hissed.

“No,” said Olivier, confused.

Dion rose and took hold of his spear, suspecting he would be using it more as a crutch than as a weapon for some time. The familiar steel against his hand felt both comforting and chilling; he had used this very weapon for something he dared not think about.

He began to hobble towards the doorway.

Still fearful that Dion would lash out at him, Olivier nonetheless jumped to his feet. “Hold on!” he cried. “You can’t go now! I wanted to talk to you – I came here every day waiting for you to wake up so we could talk at last. You can’t just go.”

“I certainly can,” said Dion, nonetheless wondering whether he would make it out of the infirmary without

collapsing.

“Why did I spend all that time helping you, then?” said Olivier. “I did all those things for you, and you’re not even going to talk to me! What a rotten thing to do!”

His petulant behaviour was at least starting to convince Dion that he was no longer under Ultima’s influence: these were the words of a spoiled lordling, not an age-old malevolent deity. “Well, I’m dreadfully sorry, Your Radiance,” he shot back; it wasn’t at all like him to be sarcastic, but he felt terribly unwell.

Olivier watched Dion stumble towards the doorway, taking hold of the frame to steady himself, and a thought occurred to him: Dion wouldn’t get far on his own. The realisation made him more worried than he had expected. The empire needed Dion, and so he, as ruler of the same empire, ought not to be allowing him to put himself in danger. Olivier might not be able to stop him leaving, but if he accompanied him, he could at least continue to help, and he might even be able to ask Dion about the dragoons once he felt a bit better.

“I’m coming with you,” he announced.

“What?” Dion snarled.

“I can look after you,” Olivier explained. “Can’t I? You won’t get very far on your own. I should go back to the empire too, anyway – so I’ll come with you.”

“It won’t be the kind of travelling you’re used to,” Dion said. “You don’t know what it’s like to walk half a league, I’ll wager.

Do you really think you can get all the way to Twinside?"

"I've more chance of making it there than you have," said Olivier.

Dion seethed, but he knew Olivier had a point. If the boy really had been looking after him in the infirmary, he thought, perhaps he had picked up one or two things about medicine. Anything that could help him stay conscious was probably not worth turning down.

"Make haste, then," he grunted, leading the way out of the infirmary.



From the mess, Dion had spied the jetty where Obolus dispatched the boats, and he had left his gil purse with the man in exchange for a dinghy and a promise not to sound the alarm about his and Olivier's departure. Now began the long journey to the shore. Dion took up the oars and rowed rhythmically, each stroke sending new aches through his arms and back. He supposed it was what he deserved.

Olivier looked down at Dion's spear, carefully laid flat in the dinghy's hull. Now that it was in Dion's possession once again, he recalled a new memory from the uprising, something Ultima's presence had formerly obscured from him. The long, sharp object that had pierced his father's chest in the audience chamber, and had protruded from his corpse in ugly warning:

it was this very spear.

“Dion,” he said. “Did you kill Father?”

There it was: the very event that Dion had been trying not to think about. At first, the outward acknowledgement of it made him ferocious with rage. Olivier watched as Dion’s lip curled into a snarl; his eyebrows drew together; his eyes flashed briefly with gold, so otherworldly that Olivier instinctively moved back. But just as quickly, Dion’s anger was gone again: now he merely looked utterly miserable.

“I,” he murmured, “yes. I killed him.”

He had stopped rowing – the oars sat uselessly at his sides.

“It was not my intention,” he added in the same low and rasping voice. “I meant to –”

He looked up, sharply, and met Olivier’s eyes; and then, suddenly, tears began to flow from his own. “I’m sorry,” he stuttered. “Forgive me ...”

Olivier watched as Dion wept, his silent tears turning to louder sobs. It was an unusual sight: the men of the Lesage line did not cry. Olivier remembered his father impressing that upon him many years ago: their duty was to be strong and noble for the empire, to control their emotions and convince the people that they were guided by nothing but a venerable combination of careful judgement and Greagor’s divine inspiration. Dion had surely been schooled in the same principle. Olivier had never seen Dion cry before; the sight was ugly and disconcerting.

Eventually, Dion's sobs turned to irregular sniffs; he spoke again. "Please do not make me speak of it," he murmured. "I – I'm not feeling terribly well. I think I shall have to pause this rowing for a moment."

He pulled the oars into his lap, grimacing with the effort; then he closed his eyes and leant back a little, and reached out with his left hand for his right forearm, letting out a quiet gasp of pain as he made contact.

"Then I'll row," said Olivier.

Dion opened his eyes. "You? These oars aren't made for children. I doubt you've ever done physical work like this before."

"Well, I may as well try," said Olivier. He reached over to take the oars; Dion was too weak to try stopping him. Then he awkwardly positioned them at his sides, as Dion had done. Dion had been right about their unsuitability: they were large and heavy, and rough against his palms. It constantly felt as if they were about to slip out of his grasp and slide into the Blighted water.

"You'll have to turn around," Dion murmured, "otherwise we'll go back the way we came."

Olivier carefully manoeuvred himself and the oars so that he faced away from Dion, and then he began to row. Each stroke seemed to make little difference: he was unable to form the same wide motions that Dion had. Nonetheless, they moved forward by inches all the same, and the fact that he

didn't have to look at Dion's pained expression made it a little easier.

"Were you planning to row all the way to Twinside?" he asked.

"Row to the edge of the lake," Dion corrected him, "then walk to Twinside."

"How far is it?"

"A few days' journey," said Dion.

"A few days?!" Olivier echoed. "But where are we going to eat? And sleep? And use the privy?"

"I didn't ask you to come," said Dion.

A while later, Dion leant forward and tapped Olivier cautiously on the back. "I'm feeling a little better," he said. "Let me take over the oars."

Keen for the chance to rest, Olivier passed them back to Dion and turned around to face his brother again, watching as he recommenced the task. He rubbed his arms; they were aching a little. Despite that, it had been a novel experience, and the sight of the boat gradually making its journey through the lake as a direct consequence of his own work had been quite gratifying. Dion had been right: Olivier had never done anything of this sort in his life. He had been denied the opportunity for any such physical activities.

Dion rowed for some time, making faster and steadier progress than Olivier had; but the renewed effort was making

him flag again, and eventually, he leant back and closed his eyes once more.

“My turn?” Olivier suggested.

Dion let him take the oars, too exhausted to reply, and Olivier turned his back to him again and resumed the rowing.

They continued taking turns until they came to the very edge of the lake. Dion’s longer arms and greater strength and experience meant he took them further during his shifts, but Olivier was able to contribute a little and allow Dion the chance to rest and regain enough stamina to take over once again. As they approached the shore, their collective pace slowed: the time Dion was able to spend rowing was getting shorter and shorter, and he needed longer rests before he could recover the strength to resume the duty.

When they made land, Dion had the oars; he ushered Olivier out of the boat first, before taking his lance, standing unsteadily, and stepping onto the shore himself. A few dizzy steps forward, and then he found himself on his knees, barely aware of how he had got there.

Olivier turned to examine his brother: Dion was sweating and trembling, eyelids drawn low over his eyes.

“You’ve a fever,” said Olivier, “haven’t you?”

“It is no matter,” said Dion faintly. “Wait a moment, and then I shall –”

“Stay here,” said Olivier. “There are people in the distance – they’re probably traders. I’ll see if one of them is



selling medicines. Do you have money?"

Dion shook his head. "Gave it all to the ferryman."

"I shall barter something, then," said Olivier, and he walked over towards the figures further down the path.

As luck would have it, one of them was indeed a trader in potions and tinctures. She wouldn't consent to giving away her wares for nothing, even when Olivier explained that his brother was barely able to stand; when he showed her one of the gems set into his clothing, though, she was suddenly much more accommodating, and gladly handed over a generous number of small bottles in exchange.

Olivier stuffed them into his pockets and began to make his way back to Dion; he had almost reached him when he was suddenly intercepted by two men with veiled faces and long, shining daggers, who, unbeknown to him, had been staking out the trader's stall and congratulated themselves on identifying a young boy who appeared to be travelling alone.

"What do we have here," one of them sneered, "some little prince wearing all his trinkets on display?"

"They're worth more than a few potions," said the other. "You've been ripped off, son!"

With that, they made to launch themselves at him; Olivier found his voice. "Help!" he called. "Dion, help me!"

At the sound of the name, the bandits stopped in their tracks. "Dion?" said the first one. "He can't mean ..."

“Ain’t seen a boy dressed this fancy in a long time, not since Oriflamme fell,” said the other. “I think it could be him, you know. Saw a portrait of him once ...”

“The so-called Holy Emperor?” said his companion. “Well, that changes things.”

“Think we should take him alive?”

Olivier would never find out whether he would have been taken alive or not, because at that moment, Dion appeared with his lance aloft. Having gathered the little strength he had in order to come to his brother’s aid, he made short work of the startled bandits. Enacting any of the dragoons’ famed jumps was out of the question, but he nonetheless manoeuvred his lance deftly enough to send them both to the ground in moments, before wasting no time in driving the end of the weapon into each of their necks in turn. The men lay still, glassy-eyed, dark blood seeping from their throats and pooling under their heads.

“You didn’t need to kill them,” said Olivier. “Couldn’t you have just ... semi-primed and scared them off?”

“They knew who we are,” said Dion grimly, having fallen to his knees again.

Olivier felt in his pockets for the potions; one of the bottles had broken in the tumult, and some of the others had ended up coated in its thick, sticky contents. He handed them to Dion nonetheless. “Here are your potions,” he said. “One of them broke. Sorry.”

Dion gazed at him incredulously for a moment before uncorking the bottles and swigging from each one. As he did so, he felt the fever pass; by the time all the potions were consumed, it felt more as if he was in the final days of a flu than the first ones of a plague. “What did you trade for these?” he murmured.

Olivier showed him the place where the gem had been cut out of his breeches.

“That would have been worth more than a few potions,” said Dion.

“That’s exactly what he said,” said Olivier, gesturing towards one of the bloodied corpses.

Dion gave a small nod of acknowledgement. “Olivier,” he said, “we cannot let be known that the two of us are travelling this road without protection. Had I been alone, I should not have had to be so cautious, but together, we are a target. You must not say my name aloud, and I must not say yours. Do you understand?”

Olivier nodded. “Should we have false names, then? Like Clive from the hideaway?”

Dion frowned, not having spent enough time conscious at the hideaway to understand the reference. “I shouldn’t think so,” he said. “We can just say *Brother*, if we must. The important thing is that you must not call out my name, even if you’re in trouble. Do you promise not to do that?”

“Will you have to kill more people if I do?” Olivier hazarded.

“Yes,” said Dion. He looked down at the two bodies, heaving a long sigh. “Greagor knows I have taken enough lives already. May She have mercy on me.”

Olivier had little idea of how to respond to that; Dion steeled himself and looked back at his brother. “We should try to change the way you look as well,” he said thoughtfully. “People will be unused to seeing me without armour, but you could be recognised. Excuse me while I –” He reached for the two pigtails that hung down beside Olivier’s face, undid their fastenings, and then tugged the hair out of each plait, tucking it behind his ears instead. “That will help,” he mused. “Had you been keeping your hair like that by yourself? Didn’t your attendants use to do it?”

“I watched them do it enough times,” said Olivier. “It wasn’t hard.”

They moved on slowly, encountering the occasional trader by the roadside. Olivier bartered another of the jewels in his clothing for a heavy cloak, making himself less of a target for bandits enticed by his finery. More of them were exchanged for food and water, and for more medicine for Dion when he began to falter.

“You wouldn’t have made it very far if you’d come on your own,” Olivier told Dion.

“Indeed,” Dion replied, “without my travelling treasure coffer. Thank Greagor for my good fortune.”

Olivier couldn’t quite tell what he meant by that, and so he said no more for some time. They continued on their journey, passing onto a smaller road that Dion insisted would take them to Twinside; the number of merchants decreased rapidly after that, and for long stretches, they saw no other humans. Eventually, it began to get dark.

“What are we going to do about eating?” Olivier asked.

“I’m not especially hungry,” said Dion flatly. “If you want something, you’ll have to find it yourself.”

“Where?” said Olivier.

Dion scowled. “I don’t suppose we’re terribly far from a lake – try catching a fish. Or you can forage for leaves and berries, if fishing is beyond you.”

“But I’ve never done any of that,” said Olivier plaintively. “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Fine,” Dion muttered, and he stepped off the path and headed into the undergrowth. Olivier followed.

As Dion had surmised, there were plenty of small lakes nearby. Olivier watched as his brother somehow succeeded in spearing a couple of fish on the end of his lance, before gathering together some scraps of wood and a small stone, striking the latter against his blade, and eventually producing enough sparks to start a fire over which the fish could be gently toasted.

“Where did you learn to do all that?” Olivier asked, watching as the small flames of the fire flickered.

“Military training,” said Dion. “We spent a long time on the road, far from civilisation. This sort of thing was our only source of food. I’m sure you think that sounds awful.”

“No, not at all!” said Olivier enthusiastically, taking the chance to bring up the topic of the dragoons at last. “I wish I could fight for the empire like you. I’ve been meaning to ask about it – it sounds like great fun.”

Dion glanced at him doubtfully, wondering if his own illness was preventing him from hearing Olivier’s words properly. “Fun?” he echoed. “What do you think this is, a lark? I’m sure it all seemed like stories to you, safe in the palace on your mother’s knee, but somebody had to be out there on the battlefield. Do you know how many men I have seen die? How many men our physickers had to kill because their wounds caused them such agony? Have you ever known the stench of death?” He thought back to a campaign of some years ago; the losses had been heavy, and all he could do was whisper words of gratitude to his men as they waited to pass into the beyond. He had felt utterly powerless, and had it not been for the comfort he had drawn from spending each night in Terence’s arms, he might have begged the physickers to show him the same mercy they had to their most hopeless patients.

He found, annoyingly, that tears were springing to his eyes. He had rarely been tearful before the uprising; like Olivier, he

had been instructed in his youth not to show such vulnerability. All that seemed entirely irrelevant now.

“But those men gave their lives for Sanbrequé,” said Olivier. “They died with honour, didn’t they? Wasn’t it the best way they could serve their empire?”

“What empire?” Dion hissed back. “Father is dead, crystal grows scarcer by the day, the Blight claims more of our land – we have lost everything we knew. As if either of us would be fit to rule.”

“But I’m already in charge,” said Olivier. “I’m the emperor.”

“You are a child,” said Dion, “and you know *nothing*.”

Olivier considered. He wanted to prove to Dion that his last statement was untrue: Olivier had received unfathomable quantities of instruction to prepare him for his position, and while he had found a lot of it deeply uninteresting, some had stuck. Dion was surely aware of how meticulous this preparation would have been. His antipathy towards Olivier’s being the emperor had to be for another reason.

“Are you jealous of me?” he said at last.

Dion scowled.

“Mother said you couldn’t be emperor anyway, on account of your blood,” said Olivier, repeating something he had never fully understood, “and Father said you didn’t want to be.”

“Father was correct,” said Dion, ignoring the first part, “but I have done many things I never wanted to do. What I want is irrelevant – I have duties. I must do what is right.” The

thought suddenly resurfaced that in Twinside, he had surely done something very wrong; he pushed it aside. “It is not for us to do merely what we most desire. We must serve our people as best we can – as Bahamut, I was always needed in combat. I should have preferred to negotiate away from the battlefield, but my position demanded otherwise.”

“Father said you liked fighting,” said Olivier.

Dion blinked. “I know how to do it. That doesn’t mean I like it.”

“He said that was why you were never at the palace very much,” Olivier insisted. “Because you preferred being at war.”

“I –” Dion was astounded by the discovery. “He knew that wasn’t true. He always knew I hated it.”

“He said that was why I was the one they made emperor,” Olivier went on. “You wouldn’t have appreciated having to stay in the palace and not being able to go to battle.”

The lack of logic in it made Dion’s toes curl. Being emperor would hardly have prevented him from entering combat – the king of Waloed was proof of that. But abdicating at all, with all the trouble going on, had already been senseless. Passing the throne to a child instead of trusting the cardinals to hold the usual election was needlessly hubristic. And telling his brother that Dion’s engagements on the battlefield were undertaken eagerly – that was nothing but insulting.

“I never asked to be Bahamut,” he said harshly. “And Father – Father lied.”



Admitting it out loud made him feel ill again. "I'm going to sleep now," he said. "You should too."

"How are we supposed to do that?" Olivier demanded. "Just lie on the ground?"

"Well, do you have any other ideas?" Dion snapped.

Olivier shrugged.



There were a few more days of travelling to complete before they reached Twinside. The state of Dion's health fluctuated; thinking about his father seemed to make him feel worse, but he wasn't always able to prevent such thoughts from coming back to him. The brief conversation he had had with Olivier by the campfire had been enough to make him realise that Sylvestre may not always have promoted his best interests – in fact, the more he considered it, the more he began to understand that Sylvestre had been taking advantage of him for many years. It hardly made what he had done any more excusable, but it explained much of his father's behaviour.

Olivier took charge of their supplies, continuing to exchange his finery for food and medicine. The responsibility was much more gratifying than his courtly duties had ever been – they were usually abstract and impenetrable, and had often consisted merely of following Anabella's whispered instructions. Handing Dion a potion and watching him

visibly become less unwell was infinitely more rewarding. He refrained from asking Dion more about his military exploits: he had come to understand that Dion didn't really want to talk about them. Instead, they shared their memories of happier times. Dion told Olivier about all the sights and smells of Oriflamme, a city that Olivier was too young to really remember.

When they finally drew near Twinside, though, Dion grew quiet. The weight of what he suspected he had done was making him increasingly anxious. He knew there would be damage, not how far it would extend; he simply hoped the dragoons hadn't suffered too many casualties. Above all, he selfishly hoped to find Terence alive and well – he had no idea whether he would still be able to count on his support, after doing such awful things, but he hoped at least for his safety.

“You must go in first,” he said to Olivier when they reached the city gate. “I do not think I can bear to look without some knowledge of what I might see. Go in and find out what state the city is in, and then come back and tell me.”

“Will you be all right alone?” said Olivier. They had been unable to procure medicine since the previous evening, and Dion seemed weaker than he had for some time: his face was pale, his breathing a little laboured.

Dion nodded, sinking into a sitting position. “I shall wait here. It is better for me to know first. Go.”

Olivier did so, and was back not long afterwards with po-

tions. Dion found the energy to drink them, and then sat up straighter and said, "Tell me."

"There does seem to be an awful lot of damage," said Olivier warily. "Some of the buildings have collapsed. The Mother-crystal is gone. I think the palace is destroyed."

"And the people?" Dion whispered.

"Some of them are wounded," Olivier admitted. "It looks as if some lost their homes. I saw them helping each other in the streets."

Dion made no visible reaction.

"The dragoons' barracks still stand," said Olivier.

For a moment more, Dion remained motionless; then, slowly, he began to cry. He buried his face in his hands, trembling and sobbing quietly, as Olivier looked on.

"Do you need more medicine?" said Olivier.

Dion shook his head. "No," he croaked. "Please, just give me a moment."

Olivier stood there uncomfortably as Dion continued to weep; he shortly realised that Dion's sadness was making him feel sad in turn. He didn't want his brother to suffer. Carefully, he sat on the ground next to him, and leant against Dion's side, reaching out with one arm in a tentative embrace. Dion did nothing at first, but then he shifted and took hold of Olivier too, until the two of them were clinging to each other, a gesture that would have been seen as most inappropriate for two sons of the Lesage family. Nonetheless, they maintained their

position until Dion's crying had mostly stopped; he drew back, sniffed, and said, "Thank you, Brother."

"I don't want to be sad," said Olivier, feeling like a very small child. "I don't want you to be sad."

"I know," said Dion, squeezing his brother's hand gently before hauling himself to his feet. "Let's go into the city. We should not delay it any longer."

The two of them walked through the unattended gate. At the sight of the destruction, Dion paled. Olivier's news had warned him of what he should expect, but the sight of it was almost unbearable. He had caused this chaos: he had destroyed the capital of his own nation. He stumbled back, briefly overcome, and found that Olivier had reached out to take his hand.

"I told you the barracks were still standing," said Olivier, nodding in the building's direction. "Don't you think we should go there?"

Dion nodded, although not without trepidation. Daring to show his face before his men after leading them into this disaster seemed in poor taste; he suspected that most would have turned from him already. But on the other hand, he deserved to bear witness to their anger. He needed to take responsibility for what he had done.

They climbed the steps into the building, entered its dark atrium, and then, before Dion could decide where he might seek out his men, a door opened and a familiar figure came through it.

*Terence.* He wore a bandage over his forehead, but seemed just as strong and confident as ever, straight-backed and proud in full uniform. Dion could scarcely believe it. He dropped Olivier's hand, ready to go to Terence as quickly as he could, but then he remembered: it was not for him to presume that Terence would still be his. He had betrayed the empire with his actions – he had killed so many innocent people. Terence had the right to hate him.

But it was Terence who ran forward and threw himself into Dion's arms; it was Terence who grasped Dion's face with both hands and leant his forehead against Dion's own as if only such proximity could convince him his prince was alive. "Dion," he said, his voice thick with tears. "Dion, I never – I thought you were –"

"I know," said Dion. "My Terence. I'm sorry."

He was quite prepared to spend all day apologising, although it would never be enough; Terence made it impossible, anyway, by drawing him into a kiss, long and clumsy and desperate.

"You would forgive me my sins," said Dion hesitantly when it was over.

Terence nodded. "I meant what I said. I would follow you to the end. I swear it."

"You are more than I deserve," said Dion.

Terence shook his head, and then said. "You look ill, my prince. Has anyone seen to you? I would have you visit our

physickers.”

“It may be a good idea,” Dion admitted. His gaze drifted to Terence’s bandaged forehead. “And you, too –”

“A minor injury,” said Terence. “It was nothing – it’s almost healed. But you – I’m amazed you made it here –”

Dion turned a little, ready to explain that he had benefited from Olivier’s help; Terence followed his gaze, and saw the boy for the first time.

“You!” he growled, in much the same way that Dion had when he first awoke at the hideaway. “Are you haunting us? What do you want from him?”

“No, it’s all right,” said Dion. “He’s been helping me. He was not himself when –” He suddenly found himself too tired to begin attempting to recount what had happened. “I shall explain later,” he said.

“If you have hurt Dion,” said Terence fiercely, “you shall meet your end at my blade.”

“I haven’t hurt him,” said Olivier. “He told you I’ve been helping – didn’t you hear? And you should call him His Highness.”

Quite unexpectedly, Dion found himself laughing.



In the care of what was left of the dragoons’ healing corps, Dion soon made a full recovery. He was yet to discover ex-

actly what effect Clive's taking possession of his Eikon had on his ability to prime, but otherwise, he felt as healthy as ever. Having found to his great surprise that his dragoons remained loyal, he planned their next move: the stolases told of an Akashic siege on Ran'dellah, and he was determined that his men should lend their aid to the city. The idea that they would be joining forces with the Dhalmeks raised a few eyebrows, but Dion was insistent.

"After that," he told Terence in confidence, "I must return to the Rosfield brothers. I owe them a great debt."

"Then I shall accompany you," said Terence. "I would not leave your side."

There was nowhere else Dion would have him go. "What about you?" he asked Olivier. "Brother?"

"I should like to return to the hideaway as well," said Olivier. "I have much more to learn." Helping Dion during their journey to Twinside had given him a new appreciation of what life was for: not merely for making pronouncements from his throne while others waited on him, but neither for winning fame and glory on the battlefield. Getting to know his brother, and being able to support him, had brought him a true, rich satisfaction. He wondered whether he might befriend those living at the hideaway by assisting them in the same way. They certainly needed it.

"Then it shall be done," said Dion.