

WHEN he first arrived at the hideaway, Terence never guessed he would form a friendship with Gav; the two men were quite unlike. Gav was outgoing and indiscreet, excessively generous with his emotions; Terence preferred to remain guarded and to reserve the expression of his true feelings for Dion alone. Nonetheless, few people could remain stoic in the face of a cheerful “Areet!”, and Terence soon found himself drawing to Gav’s side on more evenings than not, partaking in a glass or two of the hideaway’s finest ale – really, its only ale – while Gav downed considerably more pints himself.

“Expect you’re used to wine,” Gav said on the first evening, “but we don’t get much fancy shite around these parts.”

He was right, but the ale was passable, and Terence quickly got used to it. It was a good thing too: he whiled away more hours drinking at the Tub and Crown than he’d initially anticipated. When Origin had first fallen and he had received the stolas from the typically thoughtful Jill Warrick, he had made for the hideaway straight away; upon arrival, he had been fully prepared to spend all his time at Dion’s side, but it had turned out that there were plenty of other people who sought audiences with the man who was now the nominal ruler of Sanbreque. Moreover, it was a principle of the hideaway that all those residents who were sound of mind and body dedicated a proportion of their time to assisting in its upkeep, and so Terence often found himself sweeping floors and nailing planks,

which was a welcome distraction from worrying about Dion's health.

It was on one of his evenings of drinking with Gav that Quinten came by.

"I'm finished with His Lordship," he said to Terence. "He was asking for you."

*His Lordship* was the term the Sanbrequois residents of the hideaway had adopted to refer to Dion. Dion himself had made it quite clear that the word *Highness* was no longer appropriate – *Radiance* still less. Those who hailed from the empire had mostly been unable to bring themselves to refer to him by name, however, and so *His Lordship* had naturally developed.

"Thank you, Quinten," said Terence, finishing his ale, and he went up to see Dion.

Almost an entire moon had passed now, and Dion was still in the infirmary. Tarja had told Terence she believed he would be on his feet again eventually, but beyond that, everything appeared to be very vague. It was frustrating for Terence, but he kept reminding himself to count his blessings: at least he had his own health. If anyone had the right to be resentful and ill-tempered, it was Dion, but Dion always seemed placid. Perhaps it was an effect of the complex regime of medicinal herbs that punctuated his waking hours.

Terence entered the infirmary, exchanged a nod of greeting with Tarja, and headed into the back room that Dion had made his home. It was the same room that he had recuperated in

when he first visited the hideaway, he had told Terence; then, he had shared it with Joshua Rosfield, and their surroundings had remained largely impersonal and free of clutter. By now, Dion had spent long enough in this room for it to become more visibly his. Books and papers littered the floor by his bed; a vase of purple wyvern tails stood on the bedside table, a gift from old Harpocrates. When the old man had stopped by to leave them in, Dion had been overcome by emotion; days had passed before he was able to explain the whole tale to Terence without losing his composure.

“You called, my prince,” said Terence, drawing close to Dion’s bed. Fortunately, that particular term was one that Dion had made no request for him to stop using.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“Tired,” said Dion.

Terence let out an unsurprised hum of sympathy. It was something they had bickered about before: Dion was often tired these days, and the cause of it was obvious. It was these long meetings he insisted on having with the people who were now taking care of the realm, and of Sanbreque in particular: while Dion felt he had no right to lead the empire, he still considered himself to have a duty to his people. As a result, he regularly undertook these lengthy one-on-one meetings with Quinten of Lostwing, or with Byron Rosfield, or even with Eugen Havel when the man deigned to set foot in the hideaway. Harpocrates had been another frequent visitor at first, but af-

ter a while he had declined to come by for anything but brief social calls, maintaining that Dion should prioritise his health. Terence wished the others would do the same, but their chief concern, understandably, was the realm.

“I counted four bells while Quinten was here,” said Terence. “You shouldn’t be spending so long in these meetings. It’s exhausting you.”

“I must, Terence,” said Dion. “There have been disturbances among the Greagorian faithful. Quinten needs my guidance.”

“But not for an entire afternoon,” said Terence. “Couldn’t you have taken a break? Look at you – you’ve no energy.”

Tarja peered through the doorway. “I’ve tried telling him enough times, Terence,” she said. “You know as well as I do – he won’t listen.” She receded again.

“I just don’t know what advice you could possibly have given Quinten when you’re this exhausted,” said Terence.

Dion yawned. “A little more than none. It was better than nothing.”

Shaking his head minutely in despair, Terence unbuckled his boots and slipped into Dion’s bed beside him. He was fortunate that Tarja allowed him to do this; he had thought it might be awkward to ask, but she had mercifully suggested it before he broached the topic, telling him it would bring Dion some comfort. He was equally fortunate that the bed was large enough for two well-built men to lie in together. Dion was

thinner than he had once been, but Terence continued to hope that was a temporary condition.

Dion closed his eyes; Terence reached out to stroke his hair, running his fingers through it gently. Even Dion's hair seemed weak and lifeless. He sighed, leant forward to kiss Dion's temple, and then reclined.

After a while, Dion shuffled onto his side to face Terence; his eyes slowly opened.

"More awake?" Terence murmured.

"A little," said Dion.

Terence watched him for a moment, planted a light kiss against his lips, and then said, "You shouldn't."

"Shouldn't what?" said Dion.

"Have all these meetings," said Terence. "You're wearing yourself out. It's no wonder you're recovering so slowly."

"Terence," said Dion.

"It's true," Terence insisted.

"But what else can I do?" said Dion. "What good can I do for the realm, if not this?"

"You've done plenty of good for the realm already," said Terence. "Was Ultima not enough? You need to do *yourself* good now, my prince. Your tutor said as much, did he not?"

Dion shook his head, and then said hesitantly, "Have you spoken to Tarja lately?"

"Not properly," said Terence.

"So she hasn't told you about ..." Dion began.

“About what?”

“The arm,” said Dion.

His right arm, he meant. That was what they had taken to calling it: *the arm*, as if it was no longer any responsibility of Dion’s. It might as well not have been. When he arrived at the hideaway, Terence had discovered a sobering truth: the crystals’ curse had spread. While it had once extended from Dion’s elbow to his wrist, it now reached as far as his shoulder in one direction, and almost to the very end of his hand in the other, revealing only tiny circles of pale flesh at the tips of fingers he could no longer bend. Dion’s wrist and elbow were equally immobilised. The arm was functionally useless.

“She didn’t say anything about the arm,” Terence mumbled.

“Ah,” said Dion. “I see.”

“What is it?” said Terence.

“She doesn’t know whether the curse will keep spreading,” said Dion. “There’s a chance it might, she thinks.”

“But there’s no more magic,” said Terence. “How will it spread, when there’s no magic?”

“I am not sure,” Dion admitted. “I believe she fears that my encounter with Ultima did not leave a mark commensurate with the amount of aether I must have expended. There is a possibility that some of its effect is yet to manifest itself.” He paused. “She thinks, to contain the spread ... it may be best for the arm to be severed.”

Terence's heart sank. "Severed," he whispered back, skimming his fingertips along the arm as if his touch might encourage the curse to stop developing.

"Yes," Dion murmured. "She is not sure at this point. But you should be aware it is a possibility."

"Dion," said Terence.

Dion's eyes were glistening. "I am sorry," he said. "I'm sure you never thought you would be asked to love a man who was not ... whole."

"Dion," said Terence again. "My prince. I swear, this will make no difference. Of course it won't. I will love you regardless. Whatever happens – I will be at your side."

He leant forward to kiss the slow tears away from Dion's cheeks. Dion said no more; he let Terence hold him and kiss him gently, and before too long his breaths were deep and regular in a way that could only mean he was asleep.

At least that would get him some rest, Terence thought, before carefully extracting himself from Dion's one-armed embrace and standing up as quietly as he could manage. He picked up his boots and padded out into the main room of the infirmary.

"You didn't tell me about the arm," he said to Tarja.

"I'm sorry, Terence," she said. "I'm still not sure whether we'll have to do it. But I think if we don't, there's a chance the curse will keep spreading."

"I see," he said.

“If we do need to amputate,” said Tarja carefully, “it’ll be a straightforward procedure. In the case of limbs that are entirely petrified, the blood flow is already cut off, so they can be removed easily enough without –”

“Tarja,” said Terence. “Stop. Please.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

They stared at each other silently for a while, and then Terence murmured, “It’s so unfair.”

Tarja said nothing. He took that as encouragement to continue.

“I sometimes think it would be better if he’d died,” he went on, not daring to raise his voice above a whisper. “Isn’t that awful of me? But what kind of life is this, being confined to his bed advising all and sundry on how they should be ruling the realm? I thought once his father was gone he would at least be able to live on his own terms, but he seems to have more duties than ever. I just wish he could rest.”

He was crying, just a little – he had kept himself from breaking down in front of Dion, not wanting to add to his prince’s distress. But now he was the one who needed comfort, and he found himself sniffing into Tarja’s hair as she stepped forward to embrace him, rubbing his back in soothing circles as if applying an ointment.

They withdrew from each other; Terence wiped his face with the back of his hand.

“You should go back in there,” said Tarja. “Spend the night with him. You need each other tonight.”

“You don’t mind?” said Terence. Tarja had always made it very clear that her patients were not allowed overnight guests.

“Go on,” she said.

He whispered his thanks and slipped back into Dion’s bed, trying to reconstruct the embrace his departure had interrupted.

Dion stirred a little. “All right?” he murmured.

“No,” Terence admitted, not knowing whether Dion was really awake. His lack of discernible response suggested that he wasn’t. Terence leant forward and pressed his forehead against Dion’s, hoping that such proximity could soothe them both.

“I love you, always,” he whispered, and that thought was the last he had before he joined his prince in sleep, a blessed, brief respite from their troubles.