

IT felt incredibly childish to admit it, but Clive couldn't sleep. Being about to lead his first mission was supposed to make him into a man, but he hadn't felt this much like a young boy in a long time: he was excited. It was like the nights before feast days of old, before Joshua had been born and before his mother had become quite so openly disdainful: there was something in the air. Tomorrow everything would change.

He shifted under his blanket. He would do well to sleep at least a little, he knew: he ought to be well rested for the mission. Tomorrow, he would be required to command other men: men older and bigger than he was, no doubt, with more years of battle experience. He would have to be alert.

But fate was apparently no keener for Clive to sleep than Clive himself was, because his thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," he called out, his voice strangely breathy, sounding wrong in the darkness. This was a time for sleeping, not for visitations. Whoever it was would have had to state his business with the guard outside, which meant it would hardly be a social call: more probably, an emergency. And when the visitor entered and Clive at last succeeded in interpreting the dark shadows that crept in, piecing them together into blond hair and strong, muscled arms, the fact that his guest was the Lord Commander himself was no less worrying.

"Lord Murdoch," he muttered, drawing himself upright as he wondered how foolishly far away he might have left his

sword. "Is everyone all right? Joshua –"

"Everyone's fine, my lord," Murdoch assured him as he strode forward. "Your father and Joshua are safe. I'm sorry I woke you."

"I was awake," Clive admitted, turning to the bedside candle to light it with the Phoenix's Blessing. Now that Lord Murdoch's face was illuminated, he could see each tiny hair in the Lord Commander's short beard; he could see the way the scar curved gently over his forehead, coming to a stop just shy of his right eyebrow. Lord Murdoch had never drawn attention to that scar, Clive realised: it was strange to see such features on a highborn man. Normally battle wounds were quickly dispelled by high-potions; for the first time, Clive wondered what kind of situation the Lord Commander had been in that had been terrible enough to leave him with no way of healing himself.

"Then I'm sorry to have caused you concern," said Lord Murdoch. "Forgive my intrusion at this hour – it's a personal matter."

"Your person, or mine?" Clive asked him.

The Lord Commander smiled at that, and said enigmatically, "Both."

"I'm all ears," said Clive.

"Clive," said Murdoch. "This is an important night for you. This is when you become a man."

Clive nodded.

“Twenty or so years ago,” he went on, “your father went on his first sortie, and I spent that night with him then, doing my duty as his sworn protector. Now I must do the same for you – except –” He stilled. Clive watched his hand as it slowly rose and then descended again, as if struck by doubt.

“Please speak your mind,” he encouraged him.

Murdoch grinned briefly. “Of course. I just wonder – maybe I’m too old now. I could fetch one of my men, if someone else might suit your tastes better.”

“I’m afraid I don’t really understand.”

“Forgive me, my lord,” said Murdoch. “How can I explain ...” He looked around the dimly lit room, his eyes eventually coming to rest on something imperceptible. “I’m sure you’ve experienced desires,” he said at last. “Would that be right, Clive? As you’ve grown older, you’ve surely come to understand that your body has certain needs – perhaps you’ve even –”

“Oh,” said Clive. It suddenly seemed very warm under his blanket. “Yes, I have. There was a girl – she works in the kitchens –”

Lord Murdoch shook his head, so vigorously it seemed almost to create a breeze. “I’m not talking about *girls*,” he said dismissively. “I mean men, Clive, real men. There is nothing more noble than uniting with another man before entering combat. It cleanses the mind and body in preparation for the fight – no woman could understand that. As First Shield and a son of the

Rosfield line, you must earn your manhood tonight. This is the rite that your forefathers have engaged in for centuries.”

Clive’s mouth was dry. The Lord Commander had delivered his words with such determination, so faultlessly that it seemed he had rehearsed what he would say. And despite that, there was a passion in what he had said that showed he really *meant* it. Reflected candlelight glinted from his blue eyes; his low voice had filled the air with an undertone that could signal nothing but sincerity.

“And what is your role in this, my lord?” he asked.

Murdoch gave him a thin smile. “I think you’ve already guessed.”

“Please speak plainly,” said Clive, willing himself not to stammer.

“My duty is to serve you,” said Lord Murdoch, “as I have served your father. I received his seed when he became a man, and now I must receive yours. I will be your vessel, Clive.”

“I see,” said Clive.

That was the point at which the rite began, Clive supposed, because in a short time he found himself in quite a different position without really having realised how he had got there: he had pushed away his blanket, and pulled down his breeches, and the Lord Commander’s hand was on his dick, which was responding enthusiastically to those strong, rough caresses, growing rapidly to its full length. Murdoch’s other hand was on Clive’s thigh, and one of Clive’s had made its way to the

back of Murdoch's neck, and he could hear himself releasing the occasional whimper as Murdoch teased out his erection, his face still gently illuminated by the candlelight, smiling down at the First Shield he had trained.

"Are you ready?" Murdoch murmured.

"Won't I hurt you?" Clive couldn't help asking.

The Lord Commander chuckled. "Thank you for your concern. I prepared in advance – don't worry."

Clive watched as Murdoch stood to lower his hose and then his undergarments; he placed his own hand on his dick while he waited, just where Murdoch's had been before, stroking it carefully in anticipation. He watched Murdoch climbing onto the bed, facing away from him; he watched as he bent forwards to kneel, and offered himself to Clive without hesitation.

Still tugging at his dick, Clive now had a clear view of the Lord Commander's arsehole; and, as First Shield of Rosaria, he was expected to penetrate it. To release his own seed into it. It was unbelievable. But he moved forward onto his knees and found the hole with his dick, guiding it carefully between the cheeks of Murdoch's arse before starting to push it in, little by little.

Then he started to thrust, clutching at Murdoch's waist; he could detect the Lord Commander's small trembles and quivers as he worked back and forward through his passage. "You can go faster," said Murdoch, his voice lower and more intense than Clive had ever heard it. And Clive did so: he found a more in-

tense rhythm, gasping with pleasure as he moved in and out of the thrilling tightness that encircled his dick. His sounds were drowned now by Lord Murdoch's moans, which had started short and quiet, but were gradually increasing in both length and volume; the sound of them was absolutely exquisite.

It didn't take Clive long to reach his climax; most of his experience with this kind of activity had so far consisted of inexperienced fumbling at his own dick, after all. Emptying into Lord Murdoch's arse, he exhaled a long, shaky sigh that seemed briefly as it out would never end. Murdoch moaned with him; Clive thought, momentarily, in his bliss-addled state, that they sounded like two wild cats.

He withdrew, letting himself fall back into a reclining position. Now he could see Murdoch's dick, for the first time since he had entered him; it was fully erect, almost ludicrously huge, a small dribble of pre-come visible at the tip. Murdoch was quite conspicuously refraining from touching it; his hands were clamped against his thighs. After taking a few deep breaths, he rose unsteadily, and began to pull up his breeches.

"Aren't you going to –"

"No," Murdoch said harshly. "This was not for the sake of my pleasure. I'll see to myself in private."

"I could help," Clive suggested, before he could stop himself.

Murdoch turned towards him with a knowing smile; he was fully dressed now, and yet there was a prominent bulge at

his crotch that Clive couldn't help staring at. Clive had reached the point of orgasm only moments ago, and yet now he was eager to tug Murdoch's clothes away from him again and lay his hands on that irresistible erection; to lick the pre-come away from Murdoch's shaft and hear him moaning once more.

"That's not part of the rite," said Murdoch, putting an end to Clive's thoughts. He stepped forward, raised a hand, and gently ran it through Clive's hair. "You did splendidly," he murmured. "You'll make an excellent First Shield. May the Phoenix's power always be with you." And then he left, walking away somewhat awkwardly as a result of his substantial erection.

Clive lay back in amazement; never in his life would he have guessed that such a thing might happen tonight – or any night. But despite the excitement, he found that his problem from before Lord Murdoch's visit was solved: now, he gave in to pleasant, peaceful sleep almost immediately.