

IT had been some time since the dragoons rose against their emperor, and Terence had begun testing a new routine: instead of retiring to the quarters he occupied when he was stationed at the barracks, he would quietly make his way to the imposing chapel that occupied most of the west wing, kneel on the cold, hard floor, and pray to Greagor for the return of his prince.

It wasn't as if he would have slept well otherwise; and, Terence reasoned, if anyone was in a position to bring Dion back to him, it was surely Greagor Herself. The chapel was still mostly intact following the coup against the false emperor and the ensuing destruction, and that seemed as likely as anything to be a sign that She was listening. Terence had often found himself dozing off in that crouched position, waking hours later, slumped forward onto the ground with the paved floor of the chapel leaving a temporary imprint on his forehead; and on each of those occasions he had done his best to gather himself and resume his prayer as quickly as he could. The chapel had become one of the most familiar locations in the barracks, second only to the hall that served as the focal point of the dragoons' mess.

And there was certainly a lot to do there too: the empire was in disarray now that the entire ruling family was out of action. The prevailing opinion among the dragoons was that Dion was the rightful emperor, and that he should be formally proclaimed as such as soon as he returned; the cardinals, mean-

while, had hastily elected one of their own number to fill the position, but the man had been a curious choice, practically unknown beforehand and probably nominated in an attempt to avoid controversy. As a result, most of his subjects were quite clearly unwilling to pay much attention to him or to the catalogue of decrees he had hastily issued in the days since his appointment. Since the coup, it had become obvious that nobody within the dragoons' order was any more interested in following the new emperor's lead than any of the civilians were – in fact, there was a degree of open hostility expressed towards him at the barracks that none had ever dared show towards Sylvestre or even towards his younger son. These recent events had confirmed the fact that Dion was the sole source of the order's loyalty.

There was rebuilding to consider as well, and the question of where the dragoons might concentrate their efforts in their commander's absence; there were fallen comrades to mourn, those slain by Cid the Outlaw as well as their brothers who had suffered much less heroic deaths, hit by some falling masonry during the assault on Twinside and pushed off a roof or into a river before they even had the time to gasp. There were the usual worries about food and supplies, known well enough over the past five years after the destruction of the Mothercrystal at Oriflamme, but brought to crisis point now by these new developments. There were the rumours of aetherfloods spreading even in the city, and the fear that comrades and loved ones

might turn Akashic within moments.

But for Terence, there was one supreme concern, and this concern was what pushed him to return to the chapel night after night. He had always been good at compartmentalising his duties, allowing himself to express his true feelings for Dion only when he was absolutely certain it was appropriate, and being the absolute model of a high-ranking dragoon on all other occasions. But now, for the first time, his devotion to his prince was beginning to eat into the attention he paid to other matters. It wasn't as if he didn't know what Dion had done: there had certainly been enough witnesses that evening in the imperial audience chamber. Dion had attempted to slay his own brother, and fatally wounded his dear father instead; then, driven mad by rage and grief, he had assumed his eikonic form and destroyed half the city. The facts of the matter were quite clear, and yet all his remaining dragoons were still adamant that they followed him, and Terence knew deep in his heart that he himself would still do anything for his beloved.

He knew Dion better than anyone: he knew how tormented the prince would be by the knowledge that he had done these things. Dion was thoughtful, and noble, and principled: the guilt engendered by his actions would be destroying him. In fact, Terence strongly suspected that this was the main cause of Dion's continued absence. Perhaps he had been injured, indeed, after losing his control and, the rumours said, doing battle with some unidentified Eikon of

Fire; perhaps it had taken him some time to recover. But he was well accustomed to that cycle of battle and injury and healing, from the wars his father had him fight in. If anything was keeping him from returning to his men, it was the fact that he would have to face them after what he had done.

Terence knew he could help his prince. He would be able to show him that he still had the dragoons' trust; he would be able to hold him close, and pass a soothing hand over his brow, and draw out his sorrow with attentive kisses. Countless were the times he had knelt at Dion's side and pledged his eternal loyalty, and that loyalty was in no way shaken by recent events. But he needed Dion there so he could tell him that; the longer the prince spent away, Terence feared, the likelier it was that he might wrongly convince himself he had lost that love.

And so there was little more to do than trust in Greagor, and pray to Her as often as Terence was able.



On one of those cold mornings, he found himself awoken by the voice of one of his subordinates. "Sir," the dragoon was saying; "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir –"

Reluctantly, Terence sat up, pressing a hand to his neck; days of sleeping on the chapel floor had made it ache more and more each time he woke. "What is it?" he mumbled.

The man was clearly embarrassed to be interrupting his su-

perior, although his hesitant bowing and scraping was having no effect other than making Terence irritated and impatient. “The council, sir,” he stammered eventually. “It was meant to start half an hour ago –”

Terence let out a frustrated sigh; in all his years of service, this was the first time he had forgotten a meeting of the dragoon captains’ council. “I shan’t be a moment,” he said, scrambling to his feet. “Begin the business without me.”

“Sir,” said the dragoon, hurrying away.

There was no time to waste on self-pity; Terence headed straight for the armoury. It wasn’t proper to attend this sort of meeting in only his clothes, and besides, the plates provided a sort of formality that often helped in these situations. He stood there and let the attendant dress him, offering only a few terse words as the boy nervously enquired after the fit; then, as soon as he could, he hurried on to the hall.

The captains who remained had assembled and clearly done their best to begin the council, but without Terence’s command, they seemed to have made few decisions. He was a tall man, but with their full dragoon armour, they towered over him; nonetheless, he strode through their midst with unwavering resolution, heading to his usual position at the table, where the map of the realm was arrayed, dotted with the small wooden counters that marked the positions of the opposing forces.

Terence’s role now was to lead the council and invite the

dragoons to speak freely about their ideas and their concerns; to guide the discussion and, in time, draw out a conclusion that might result in some concrete action. Although he was naturally a softly-spoken man, he knew how to use his voice in a way that commanded respect, and his subordinates were well used to listening to him and submitting to his normally very reasonable requests. This occasion was no different from any other; Terence spoke with calm assurance, getting to the heart of the matters at hand and talking them through with unfailing equanimity. And yet, as he looked down at the map spread over the table, he could picture nothing more clearly than a certain memory from the field. He had been at an encampment on some contested parcel of land, in the heat of summer; there had been a table and a map of the same sort there, too, and on one particularly warm and long evening he and Dion had lain on that table and fucked each other senseless, scattering all the little wooden pieces to the floor.

Reluctantly, he pushed the memory aside. Now was not the time to indulge in such thoughts, even if the readiness with which they came to his mind was proof that Dion inhabited Terence's every breath. Everything he did was for his prince; it always had been, ever since he first joined the order, even before. And the longer Dion was absent, the larger he loomed in Terence's innermost thoughts. Undoubtedly his recent failure to get enough sleep was exacerbating the issue.

A little way into the meeting, there was a commotion at

the door. Terence looked over, his eyes narrowed, ready to chastise the intruder or latecomer who had dared interrupt the order of business; and then he found his breath catching in his throat. For the newcomer was *him*, the most extraordinary man Terence had ever known, standing there dressed only in the light clothes he habitually wore under his armour: His Imperial Highness, Dominant of Bahamut, Greagor's Favoured, Crown Prince of the Holy Empire of Sanbreque.

"Your Highness," said one of the knights who stood near the entrance, where Dion had walked in; and the tone of his voice made it clear that he he had absolute faith in his liege lord. But then, another of the dragoons spoke, his voice loud and confident: "Your Radiance."

Dion had remained by the doorway, far from Terence; but Terence knew his face too well, and so he noticed when his prince's expression momentarily faltered. Though divested of his armour, Dion stood as strong and proud as ever, and surveyed his remaining forces, for the most part, with statesmanlike impassivity; and yet that tiny slip, that small quirk of the lips and drawing together of the eyebrows, was enough to prove to Terence that Dion was deeply troubled.

The men, in all likelihood, had not noticed. For as soon as that certain dragoon had had the insight to address Dion as *Your Radiance*, they had gradually begun to drop to their knees, until all of them but Terence were low to the ground, demonstrating their continued loyalty to the man they now

recognised as their emperor. Terence should have knelt with them – instead, he found himself rooted in place.

“Rise, all of you,” said Dion, his voice as confident as it always was. “There is work to be done. Ready the boats; we make for Ran’dellah. The city is besieged by a horde of Akashic, and the Dhalmeks call for aid.”

“The Dhalmeks?” said one of the captains incredulously; then, he abruptly fell silent, and added, “Of course, Your Radiance.”

The men filed out, offering quick arm-cross salutes to Dion as they passed him; he returned each with a careful, stately nod. All the while, Terence remained where he was, barely daring even to breathe, even to think. The sight of his prince, back with him after such a long and unknowable absence, was so powerful that he dared not do anything that might disturb it.

And then, once the hall was empty but for the two of them, Dion lowered his head, turned away, and followed his men out into the passageway.

Terence was reeling; he felt almost faint. Turning first towards the table, he gripped its edge briefly, letting the contact with the hard wood convince him that what he had seen was no illusion. Dion was back, and he was clearly plagued by regret over what he had done; and Terence’s only duty now was to seek out his prince, and comfort him, and assure him that he still had the trust of his dragoons, and Terence’s own undying



loyalty most of all.

As soon as he felt able to move, he made for the door and stepped out into the passageway himself. Dion was already gone; Terence had no idea which way he had turned when he left the hall. And so he began to roam the barracks, checking each room with careful, quick precision to determine whether his prince might be inside.

He found him, at last, in the treasury. Dion was bent low over a table, counting out coins and transferring them carefully into piles; he was so deep in concentration that he made no reaction to Terence's arrival.

"Your Highness," said Terence.

"I'm *busy*," said Dion, but then he looked up, and met Terence's gaze; then, he stepped away from the table where he was sorting the coins, and turned to the side, and said no more.

Quietly, Terence closed the door behind him, and carefully advanced in Dion's direction.

"Terence," said Dion, still not looking at him; his voice was barely more than a whisper. "Please tell me why the dragoons insist on addressing me as their emperor."

"Our loyalty to you is unwavering, sire," said Terence. "Not once has your leadership been called into question."

He watched as Dion's fists slowly clenched; as Dion's brow furrowed and his nostrils flared, as he closed and then opened his eyes, harsh light flashing from his dark irises. "I killed all those people," he hissed. "I killed my own men – my own *father*."

And still they continue to follow my orders as if I had done *nothing* – still you *stand* there –”

“Always,” Terence murmured.

“Does the sight of me not disgust you?” said Dion.

Terence moved closer to him. “I know who you are, my prince. I know you would not willingly cast aside the care you have always shown for your people. The dragoons know this too. And *my* feelings remain unaltered.”

Dion was so angry that he was baring his teeth, his breaths coming out loud and rough as if he were a slaving animal. He was contorted with rage, his shoulders twisted forward unnaturally as if he was afflicted by some great pain – and Terence knew that in a way, he was. He too could feel it himself; the knowledge that Dion was afflicted by such grief wounded his heart.

He took another step forward, and reached out with one hand, and said, “Dion –”

And Dion sprang back, crossing his arms protectively over himself before gingerly fingering the bandage that still covered his right forearm. “Terence,” he said, “you cannot. I am no longer worthy of your attention.”

“I,” said Terence; and then he paused to choke back a sob that had begun to rise in his throat. “I will obey your order, my prince,” he croaked. “But know that on the matter of your worth, I disagree most adamantly.”

Dion made no reaction.

Speaking of strategy often made Dion calmer when he was overwhelmed, Terence knew. It had been clear in the meeting hall: the opportunity to command his dragoons had ensured he mostly remained composed until he was alone.

“You bade us make for Ran’dellah,” he said softly. “What would you have us do upon arrival?”

“The Phoenix’s uncle is there,” said Dion, his voice quiet and flat. “I owe his nephew a debt. Pledging our aid to Lord Rosfield will ensure that part of that debt is repaid, however small a part it may be. Then –” He cast his eyes briefly over the small heap of coins he had been gathering. “Now is not the time. We must make ready.”

“That we must, sire,” Terence murmured.

Dion sighed, and then raised his eyes slowly to meet Terence’s; they had flashed with passion only moments ago, but now they were dull and downcast. “If you insist on granting me your service,” he said, “there is a matter with which I require assistance. You will have noticed I am without armour – I was compelled to leave the set I wore behind, and I shall need a replacement before we set sail.”

“Then we make for the armoury,” Terence said firmly.

They walked there in silence; Terence had expected Dion to fall into step beside him, but he stayed a few paces behind, and there was no method Terence could concoct that might entice him to draw closer. In time, they arrived: not at the general armoury where Terence himself had been clothed a little ear-

lier, but at the small set of rooms Dion used as his apartments on the rare occasions he had business at the barracks. Passing through the principal room, Terence cast a regretful glance at the bed; there, he had enjoyed many an exhilarating night with his prince, but in times so much happier that it was now hard to believe they had ever existed at all.

They entered the small side chamber where spare sets of clothing and armour were kept for Dion; it was barely larger than a storecupboard. Terence carefully extracted an unworn surcoat from the racks, sized it up against Dion's chest, and said, "Hold?"

Dion did as he was told, raising an arm to pin the surcoat in place at the front; Terence moved behind him in the meantime, and began to lace it up at the back, gently tugging the two sides into place. He could feel Dion trembling a little as he did so; instinctively, he placed a hand against his shoulder, and felt the unmistakable ridge of bandages under his doublet.

"You're injured," he said, unable not to let his voice take on an accusatory tone.

"I was seen to," said Dion. "It is residual at worst."

There was no protest Terence could profitably make in reply; he continued working until the surcoat was in place, snug around Dion's waist. At moments like these, dressing Dion in this way countless times before, he once would have placed a hand just above each of his prince's hips and pulled his body briefly against his own; and then, perhaps, he might

have moved one of those hands to his head and pushed aside that lovely golden hair so he could kiss the back of Dion's sweet neck. But this time, he obediently continued instead, stepping briefly away to gather a set of pauldrons before fastening them against Dion's shoulders one by one, carefully arraying each layer to separate silk from leather from steel.

He was close to Dion's face now, and dared steal a glance at it; now, his prince's eyes were glazed, and his mouth turned down. Misery was etched into his entire expression, from the draw of his eyebrows to the redness high in his cheeks that bespoke a deep shame. As Terence moved his hands carefully across the joins where pauldrons met surcoat, checking that all was fastened securely, he heard Dion let out a choked, quiet gasp; immediately, he looked back up at his face, but there had been no change in Dion's countenance.

"My prince," he said, nonetheless unable to continue without voicing his concerns. "I fear that you may yet be insufficiently rested to command your troops. Please do not endanger your health." For once, though, it was not Dion's physical state that worried him: it was the darkness in his mind, deep and terrible in a way Terence had never seen before.

Dion was silent for a moment, and then said simply, "My gauntlets, Terence."

Gritting his teeth, Terence reached for the final components of Dion's armour. Holding the left gauntlet first, he tugged it over Dion's outstretched arm, checking that each of

his fingers was in the proper place, and then manipulating the jointed metal so it sat right, rearranging the sleeve of his doublet to cover the seam and assure the optimal protection. Then he lifted the remaining gauntlet and turned his attention to Dion's right hand, looking down at the bandaged forearm that Dion extended to him. Before he could stop himself, he had removed one hand from the gauntlet and taken hold of that forearm instead, running his thumb solemnly across the coarse bandage as he reflected on the injustice of a world where his prince was made to suffer.

Dion shook a little, letting out another small sound; Terence looked back to his face, and saw that his sorrow had at last got the better of him. For Dion had begun to weep: tears rolled down his cheeks and trickled onto his collar, and as Terence's gaze passed over his face, he started to sob more openly, forcing out loud, ragged breaths.

Abandoning the gauntlet entirely, Terence laid his own hands on each side of Dion's head, resting his thumbs gently against his prince's warm cheeks. "Dion," he whispered. "Hush, Dion, please."

"I'm sorry," Dion stammered. "My own Terence – I'm so sorry –"

Terence leant in, and kissed his prince lightly on his jaw, his cheeks, his chin; he kissed him on the tip and the bridge of his nose, on his eyebrows, thrice on his forehead. He kissed him against his eyes, feeling Dion's wet, delicate eyelashes flut-

ter at the contact; then, finally, he kissed him on the mouth, pressing his lips against Dion's own until they fell open a fraction.

Dion had been passive and motionless when Terence began to kiss him, but now Terence could feel his hands gripping his back through his habergeon, strong and tight, one gauntleted and the other bare. The realisation brought him some relief: Dion had seemed so determined to reject his sympathy when first he returned, but now he was at least drawing some sort of comfort from Terence's presence. Terence could only hope that it would be enough to lift him from the depths of his sorrow. He wanted nothing more than to bear Dion through this; to stay by his side until he was smiling and laughing again.

He drew back a little and studied Dion's beautiful, grief-stricken face. Dion's eyes were still small and red, but the tears had ceased; Terence moved a hand to the back of his head, and lightly caressed his hair, and pressed another swift kiss to his cheek.

"Forgive me," said Dion as he did so. "Not only for the sins I have committed, but for what I have resolved to do."

"And what is that, my prince?" Terence murmured.

Dion gave a tiny shake of the head. "We shall discuss it in Ran'dellah," he said. "For now, there are preparations to make. How soon will the fleet be ready?"

Terence's fingers stilled in Dion's hair. "There will be no fleet, sire," he admitted. "A single ship will suffice for the men

still with us.”

“In Greagor’s name,” said Dion, very quietly.

His eyes were beginning to moisten again; Terence quickly resumed his careful stroking of his prince’s hair, and added, “It was not just – it was not only Bahamut. There was an aether-flood, even before anything happened to the Mothercrystal.”

He was about to go on, but Dion twitched a little, and said, “Terence – please stop. You may call me weak, but I cannot bear to hear this.”

“I have never known a man *less* weak than you are, my prince,” said Terence truthfully.

Dion sighed, and cleared his throat, and then said, more loudly, “When do we depart?”

“It should not take long to prepare the ship,” said Terence. He glanced through the window, took note of the position of the sun, and added, “Soon after midday, perhaps.”

“Then I have preparations to make,” said Dion. Slowly, he let go of Terence’s back, and reached out to take hold of the hand in his hair, lowering it gently until it hung instead by Terence’s side. “Let us finish here,” he added, nodding towards the gauntlet that still lay on the dressing table.

Terence turned to pick it up, but he found himself distracted once again by the damaged forearm that Dion offered him. “Has it spread?” he asked.

Dion shook his head.

“But it pains you,” Terence guessed.



“I have known worse,” said Dion.

They stood there still for a moment, looking into each other’s eyes without making a sound; then, Dion inclined his head, and gestured towards the gauntlet with his left hand.

“My apologies,” Terence mumbled. He took the gauntlet and slid it carefully onto Dion’s arm; Dion looked down at it, flexed his fingers, and gave a small nod.

“Very well,” he said. “Then we make ready. I shall await you on board.”

“On board?” said Terence. He had expected that they might prepare for the journey together; there would be need only to gather a few provisions, and then, perhaps, they could await the troops while spending a little quiet time in each other’s company. Once they arrived at Ran’dellah, both would be occupied by the need to issue orders to the men; chances to see each other would be slim at best.

“I need this time to reflect,” said Dion. “And at present, your company would be a far greater honour than I deserve.”

“That’s nonsense,” said Terence feebly, but Dion had already turned and begun to make his way out.

“Please do not dispute it,” he said, looking back towards him. “I would not wish for us to argue – especially today.” He paused, and then said, “I shall see you later.”

Before Terence could respond, Dion was gone. He turned to observe his prince’s retreat, worried and regretful; he wished he could tell what was going on in Dion’s mind, and

how he might succeed in assuaging his suffering. It was clear enough that Dion was hiding something, some plan he had to do something Terence would disapprove of – but surely Dion knew that Terence would follow him regardless of what he intended. Terence had always been by Dion’s side; that would never change, no matter what happened.

It wasn’t uncommon for the two of them to have to spend time apart. Terence had known this since he first joined the ranks of the dragoons; it was a sacrifice both of them were frequently required to make. Moving up through the chain of command had brought Terence closer to his prince in many ways, but at the same time it had meant that sometimes they were both occupied by separate and equally time-consuming duties. But the payoff was rich reward: entire weeks, on occasion, that the two of them could spend together in the field, sometimes barely encountering any other humans beyond the daily reports from their subordinates. They spent those days hunting, sparring, fucking, talking, dreaming, simply enjoying each other’s presence. In all his life, Terence had never passed up an opportunity to be by Dion’s side; and Dion had been the same – until today.

He drew closer to the window and looked out at the bright sun that was gradually climbing through the sky. Its light seemed unsuited to the state of the city, damaged and desolate after the coup. Nor did it mesh well with the disturbance that Terence knew to be in Dion’s heart. But, he supposed, there

would always be a dawn; and now that he had seen his prince, back among his knights and physically if not mentally as well as he ever was, he knew that the light of hope shone on.