

THE Rosfield brothers had tasks they needed to see to, that was certain. And Dion was in their debt: he was even surer of that. It was not his place to be getting impatient at their continued delay. But the sooner the three of them made their way to Origin as they had agreed, the more lives would surely be spared. He often found himself standing on the deck of the place they called the hideaway, merely waiting, wishing they would come and summon him so he could fulfil his last duty. What he did not expect was that the other surviving member of the Rosfield family would come to find him sooner.

“Ah,” said Lord Byron, advancing towards Dion with a cheerful smile. “Your Highness! I’ve been looking for you. Meant to buy you a drink.”

Dion turned slowly to acknowledge his presence. Talking to others had become a chore in recent days: he no longer deserved to issue orders, nor to enjoy the benefits of a friendly conversation. Now, when he spoke, the words felt alien and disingenuous, a strange, flat taste in his mouth like stale water.

“A drink?” he asked.

“I want to thank you,” said Byron, “for services rendered in Ran’dellah. Your men arrived just at the right time. Were it not for that lancer of yours, I doubt I’d be standing here now.”

“I see,” Dion replied. “There is no need to thank me. It was only a small part of my making amends to the Phoenix. Do not trouble yourself with it.”

“Oh,” said Byron, “but now, you see, I am in debt to you in turn! And we can’t have that. Come now, I insist. My nephews are away, fetching flowers in Waloed or some other such incomprehensible thing – they’ll be gone a while. Do not worry, they won’t be off to –” Here, his genial smile faltered for the first time, and he recommenced his sentence. “They won’t go without you.”

Dion nodded, and followed him inside if only to avoid having to look at the sorrowful expression that had come to Byron’s face. By the time they reached the bar, the smile was back; Byron took a seat with an assurance that made it clear he knew the Tub and Crown well. Dion himself had mostly avoided the place; he positioned himself on the stool next to Byron’s, and looked down at the wooden counter before him as the Bearer who operated the bar approached.

“What can I get for you gentlemen?” she asked. “Oh, it’s not often I see someone from the imperial line at my bar, Your Highness.” She gave a brief, ungainly curtsey; Dion did his best to nod back.

“Well, Maeve,” said Byron, “seeing as we’ve finally persuaded His Highness to join us in this fine establishment – what about two snifters of your finest?”

“My finest?” Maeve echoed. “But my lord, you must know Cid said to keep that for –”

“Clive is very far away at present, my dear,” said Byron. “And I believe I am the one who contributed that particular

vintage to your stores.”

“Right you are, my lord,” said Maeve.

She served the drinks straight away: Dion took the goblet he was offered, glanced only briefly at the thick golden liquid inside, and took a sip. The taste was unfamiliar; before he could truly form an opinion, Byron said, “Well, then, Your Highness.”

“Please,” said Dion, “do call me Dion. I am no longer deserving of that title; I have done terrible things.” He had said it many times now, and it had never become abstract, never ceased to remind him of the devastation he had inflicted on his own people. It pained him almost physically to say it out loud, again and again; but it was a pain he needed to inflict upon himself until his repentance was complete.

He watched as Byron’s smile vanished again, and as his companion’s eyebrows raised with concern, and lines etched themselves into his forehead; and quickly, he added, “Neither am I deserving of your pity.”

“Lord Dion,” said Byron. “I know what happened in Twin-side. You cannot continue to blame yourself, surely – it was hardly deliberate.”

“And yet it was nobody’s fault but my own,” Dion insisted. “I had wondered whether Ultima –” The memory of those unearthly blue eyes came back to him, and he hesitated. “He goaded me, certainly. But I was the one who took to the skies and visited such awful scenes on the Dominion. Never in nearly nine hundred years has a Dominant of Bahamut turned

on his own people. I am an abomination.”

“The consequences were dire, I cannot deny that,” said Byron. “But it was a mistake. You erred, as any man would.”

“I am no man,” said Dion. “That much is clear to me now. We Dominants are not men. We are machines of destruction. We bring only misery, everywhere we go, and –”

“Enough,” said Byron, setting his goblet down forcefully; Dion blinked, unaccustomed to being interrupted.

“My nephews are Dominants,” Byron went on. “And you dare tell me they are inhuman? Why, Clive is the kindest soul in the Twins. Look at this place – have you ever seen people overcome their differences and work together as they do here? Bearers and Dominants, noblemen and commonfolk, Sanbrequois and Dhalmekians and Rosarians: all this, because Clive worked so hard to build this place.”

He was right; Dion looked down again. “Forgive me,” he murmured.

“People are kind here,” said Byron, “not because they owe each other debts and duties, but because they have good hearts. That’s all it is. I admit, it took me some time to adjust, arriving here and seeing Bearers speak freely with the ordinary folk, and coming to understand that not every problem could be solved with coin – but Clive has built this life for us all. Not only all of us here at the hideaway, but in years to come, if the gods will it, all over Valisthea. So, I ask you, accept this rambling old man’s generosity, not because you deserve it, but

for the sake of House Rosfield, and all the tireless work my nephew has done here.”

Dion’s throat felt tight; his eyes stung. “I,” he said, “I regret that despite your words, my feelings towards myself and what I have done will not change. But you are right: your nephews are extraordinarily good men, and this place is truly the fruit of some miracle. And so, I acknowledge your kindness, and thank you for it.”

Byron beamed. “Well, I’ll drink to that. To kindness, my lord.” He raised his goblet and took a long drink; Dion watched for a moment before lifting his own and doing the same.

This time, he felt the full force of the spirit, like liquid flame scorching his throat. “Good Greagor,” he muttered, setting the vessel down again; “this is vile.”

Beside him, Byron laughed, long and loud.