

JILL was eleven, and a head taller than Dion at least. He was aware that other boys were starting to show interest in girls; his schoolmates had made one or two crude remarks about their maidservants, and while he had played along, he and Terence had privately confessed to each other that they didn't quite understand what all the fuss was about. It would strike them both later, they supposed.

It did not seem to have struck him in Jill's case, but he still found her the most agreeable of the other children present. The older of the Rosfield heirs was intimidating, fourteen years old and recently sworn into the junior section of the Rosarian infantry; the younger was almost embarrassingly sickly, and rather babyish for a boy of Dion's own age. Jill seemed more like himself, quiet and cautious. She had blue-grey eyes that reminded him of Terence's, and a striking bob of silver hair that put Dion in mind of the people of the Northern Territories he had read about in his history books; he knew what that was likely to mean, and equally knew it would be impudent to ask.

"Lord Lesage," she said to him, and they exchanged bow and curtsy as was proper.

Joshua dissolved into a fit of coughing soon after that, and his mother hastened over to scoop him away.

"Poor Joshua," said Jill. "He doesn't mean to be rude. I'm sure he would have liked to speak to you; he's never met another Dominant before."

"I met Titan's Dominant last year," Dion admitted, "but he

is a man grown.”

“I should have expected him to be here,” Jill mused.

Their conversation was stilted, although surely less so than an attempt at speaking to Clive or Joshua would have been. Jill looked down at the ground briefly, threaded her fingers together, and then said, “It does not seem to pain you very much.”

“Um,” said Dion, not understanding, “Titan’s absence?”

Jill laughed a little. “No. Sorry. I meant your being a Dominant. Joshua is always complaining of aches.”

“Oh,” said Dion, glancing down at his ceremonial robe as if it could enlighten him on the soundness of his constitution. “I... I do not think that would be related to being a Dominant.” It felt shameful to admit it: if only he could provide some other excuse for the boy’s ill health. “Perhaps his possession of the Phoenix’s powers worsens his condition, but I should wager the cause is something separate.”

“He is unfortunate, then,” said Jill. “He tells me at least once a day that he wishes Clive could have been chosen instead.” She looked briefly towards the older boy, who stood confident and tall, engaged in what was surely a very grown-up conversation with one of the Sanbrequois servants.

“Lord Clive is older,” Dion pointed out, not knowing what else to say.

“But you aren’t,” said Jill. “And they say you have already won the hearts of everyone in Sanbreque.”

Dion was quick to shake his head. “That is Bahamut’s doing. Barely anyone knows me.”

“You carry it well, though,” said Jill. “Nobody could look at you and fail to believe you a Dominant – even though you’re still small. But Joshua ...” She turned to look straight at him, a gleam of determination suddenly evident in her eyes. “He would want to hear your advice. May I pass it on to him?”

“I have no particular advice to give,” said Dion, a little alarmed by Jill’s sudden boldness. “All I do is try my best. My Eikon chose me, as Lord Joshua’s did him; surely that should be comfort enough to him. The Phoenix would not have settled in one he found unworthy.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Jill. “I shouldn’t want it to hurt him.”

“It hurts us all, in time,” said Dion.

Jill blinked. “Yes. I meant –”

“I know. He will grow into his position first, and I into mine.” Dion bent his head at the embarrassment of a recent memory. “I myself still have much to learn. I always seem to make a fool of myself in the company of boys older than I.”

“Do you?” said Jill, her mouth curling into a smile.

“I do,” said Dion, “without fail.”

Several paces away, Clive turned to them and waved to Jill; his conversation with the Sanbrequois had come to its end. The wave was one of easy familiarity: Jill’s own gesture in response was the same, and Dion suddenly envied them their close rela-

tionship. Clive grinned and began to stride towards them, his long, leather-clad legs seeming almost to glide in their direction; Dion suddenly felt as if he was about to demonstrate the failing he had just admitted.

“I shall leave you for now,” he said hurriedly. “I should not wish to intrude.”

“Wouldn’t you like to meet Clive?” she asked.

“When we dine later, perhaps,” said Dion. “Until then, my lady.”

He hurried away before she could say another word, wondering if he might find himself more able to look Clive in the eye by the evening. He was trying his best, after all, but there was always room to do better.