

DION's convalescence had been long and troubling, with one day's progress seemingly lost the next, the prince slow and quiet and sometimes barely even lucid. It was because he was a Dominant, the physickers had told Terence: his body healed in a way that made it unlike those of ordinary people. One of the older men had some experience in treating the battle wounds of the previous Dominant of Bahamut, but was cautious to emphasise that the population of Dominants had never been large enough for physickers and loresmen to come to an understanding of their unusual constitution.

But progress was being made, slow and halting though it was. There was little Terence could do except aid the physickers in their ministrations and gradually learn each of the tasks that needed to be carried out in service of Dion's recovery. Few of them seemed especially difficult, and he had soon begun to insist on performing the more menial duties himself for the most part, pulling rank so as to force the others to leave him and his master on their own. The physickers were dedicated, of course: they had orders to serve His Highness, and they respected and admired the prince for his power and his unfailing magnanimity. Terence knew, though, that their actions were nothing but clinical. They knew a little of Dion's body, and nothing of his mind; Terence was largely unfamiliar with the former, but intimately acquainted with the latter. He had been by Dion's side for more than ten years, listening to him when he confessed his secret worries about the burdens placed on

him by his position. As boys, they had done reckless, ridiculous things, and Terence still couldn't help smiling when he recalled them. And this unequalled familiarity meant he truly knew how to help Dion with his wounds; he knew the meaning of each little grimace and grunt and sigh the prince made while he was being treated.

The day of the attack had been a strong contender for the worst in Terence's life. He had stood there on the battlefield, numb with shock, watching as the men who were supposed to be fighting alongside him moved in to cart away Dion's lifeless, crimson-stained body. After a few seconds, he had thought to curse the armour Dion was wearing, even though it had been forged in the finest of Oriflamme's foundries. A few more seconds, and he was following the rest to the physickers' quarters, shaking so much that he almost stumbled onto the grass. He had reached the tent with vomit dripping from his breastplate, and had been worse than no help to the physickers – indeed, one of them had had to leave the prince's side in order to see to Terence instead. He was in such a state that it was almost as if he had been the one wounded – and had it not been for Dion's intervention, he would have been.

In those early days, he sometimes heard the physickers speculating about it when they believed him out of earshot. While Terence sat by Dion's side, holding one limp hand and stroking his hair as he watched each shallow rise and fall of his chest, the others in attendance offered each other their theories

about why the crown prince – officially, now none but commander of one of the smaller dragoon units, but everyone still thought of him as such – had risked his own life for a middle-ranked guard. It had seemed highly irregular. Terence had no more idea of why Dion had done it than the rest of them did, but he had lacked the energy to wonder about it when Dion's life was hanging in the balance.

A letter had arrived from Dion's father: no more than a letter. His Radiance was apparently unable to leave the palace on account of his infant son, who was exhibiting some behaviours deemed unusual for his current stage of development. It was a good thing too: Terence had no doubt that if Sylvestre were to visit the garrison, he himself would walk straight up to the old man and strike him right in the face. Dion loved his father, and it was quite clear that Sylvestre had never once considered returning the feeling. Terence straightforwardly loathed him. It was one of the rare things he had argued with Dion about more than once.

He had cast the emperor out of his mind and stayed by Dion's side while the latter began to recover. His first returns to consciousness were sparse and fleeting, but as time passed, they grew longer. By now, he could spend several hours a day awake, even if he was gritting his teeth in pain at the end of it. Terence's presence was a comfort: Dion said as much several times, with increasing fervour as he gradually recovered his strength. Terence had no shame in holding him

close, bearing Dion's weight when he needed it, wiping the sweat from his brow. As the days had passed, he had gradually lost his reticence, and begun to reach for Dion even when it was not strictly required, merely to comfort and soothe him. None of the physickers would have thought to do that, and, Terence thought somewhat proudly, none would have done it with such success.

In the early days, during Dion's period of unconsciousness, Terence had found himself speaking more and more freely. *Your Highness* had given way to *my lord*, then just as soon to *my prince*, to *Dion*, even in the physickers' company. And then, when he had bidden them attend less often, he had been unable to keep himself from using still more egregious language. *Dion – dear Dion. Sweetheart. My love.*

Because, he had realised a year or so ago, he *was* in love with Dion. He had been for a long time. He had had the opportunity to experiment with other young men recently, mostly lower-ranked members of the military, and each time had found himself wishing whichever body he found in his hands was that of the prince, wishing it was Dion's warm skin beneath his fingers, his lovely golden hair, his bright brown eyes. Those experiences had reminded him that many years ago, when he had first felt the beginnings of boyish sexual desire, it had always been Dion to whom his thoughts automatically turned: then, not yet his master, merely his best and truest friend. At the time, he hadn't known what it

signified; now, looking back, it was quite clear.

Such thoughts alone had nothing to do with love: Terence knew that full well. But there was more. There was the fact that he wanted nothing more than to be by his prince's side, supporting him in every decision he made. It was his sworn duty, yes, but it was also his most fervent desire. He wanted Dion to be happy, as happy as he could be in the role he had, and he wanted to be the one who made sure of that. Helping Dion in his times of need, seeing the prince cheered by his words and his presence, gave him a joy that was inexpressible. Terence was sure that he loved him, and although he had been ashamed to admit it to himself at first, it had come to be undeniable.

At some point, he knew, he would need to reveal the truth. He suspected that Dion was interested in men from a few remarks he had made and a few looks at his knights that had seemed more lingering than usual, but that was immaterial. Princes did not enter into relationships with their squires. Dominants pursued other Dominants, mostly; ordinary people were unworthy of them, and ill prepared for the realities of gradually losing a loved one to the crystals' curse. And arranged marriages among Dominants were frequent, in the name of the realm's stability: had it not been for the disaster in Rosaria eight years ago, Dion's stepmother would most probably have been his mother-in-law instead by now, regardless of either young man's wishes. There was little

chance Dion felt the same way about Terence as Terence felt about him, but, he had concluded, it was wrong to continue being merely his friend and servant without Dion knowing the truth. It felt deceitful; it felt as if Terence was using his own position to his advantage.

This latest event had only cemented the need for Terence to tell Dion the truth. For his sake, Dion had taken the force of an attack that an ordinary person like Terence would never have survived. For a day or so afterwards, it had seemed that even Dion would more probably succumb to the wound than regain consciousness. The physickers had told Terence this while he had sat moaning and crying in a most unbecoming way, tearing little squares of paper from the useless letter that His Radiance had sent attached to the leg of a dragonet. Terence himself would have died almost instantly, they told him; at the time, he had thought that preferable. Then, after the prognosis had improved and Dion had at last awoken for a few precious seconds – Terence had wept then, too, although it had felt very different.

But the fact remained that Dion had risked his own life for Terence. That was a debt Terence would never succeed in repaying. The fact that he continued to conceal his true feelings made him feel still more guilty about it. Dion deserved to know, and to have the right to decide what to do with Terence as a result: perhaps, in his new knowledge, he would be uncomfortable with their spending so much time together, and he

would ask Terence to keep a greater distance. Terence would be heartbroken, but he would comply, if that was what Dion wanted.

There were many quiet moments during Dion's recovery that Terence might have seized to make his confession, but he could never quite bring himself to voice his thoughts. Dion was still fragile, and now that Terence had ordered the physickers only to visit when strictly necessary, Dion relied on him. If he were to tell Dion the truth, Dion would be unable to send him away even if that was what he wanted. Terence had driven Dion into this position where Dion relied on him for his care, and confessing to him now would be just as cruel as doing it on the field of battle.

So he continued to keep his feelings hidden, even as he found himself being more outwardly affectionate with Dion than he had ever dared be before. Dion was responding too, leaning into Terence's touches with what seemed to be increasing enthusiasm, but was really, Terence was sure, no more than a sign that he was regaining his strength. If Dion sometimes returned Terence's gestures, reaching out gently to cup his face, it was only because he needed proof that he had truly survived and remained among the living. And if he spoke more softly than usual, it was his exhaustion that was the cause.

At first, the dragoons in Dion's unit had delivered their reports elsewhere, trying to find leaders among themselves. The prince was still in no state to command his modest forces; Ter-

ence normally had a good head for strategy, but he had been so distraught and distracted for the first few days that relying on him for such matters would have been equally fruitless. But as time had gone on, the others had found themselves largely incapable of formulating their own battle plans, and so they had begun returning to Dion's quarters, hoping to find him more amenable to advising them. Terence always refused before they got anywhere near the prince; in the face of their continued approaches, he had eventually consented to fielding their requests himself. He held no particular status, but the men were desperate enough for a leader to listen anyway.

A day came when one of the young dragoons made such a visit shortly after dinner. Terence had cleared away the dishes, delivering them to the place they were normally left for the servants to take away, and had helped Dion into his bed; that was when the man intercepted him, and they spent a long time discussing the unit's role in the planned advance towards enemy lines. When the conversation was over, Terence bade the soldier good luck, and returned to Dion's side to see if he needed anything.

"You were a long time," Dion murmured, reaching to take one of Terence's hands in his own as Terence knelt at his bedside. It was the sort of gesture that Dion had never employed until his injury; now, Terence supposed, he needed support and comfort. He let Dion draw his hand closer, bringing it to rest on his blanket, and they wound their fingers together as if



by instinct.

“The men make their offence tomorrow,” Terence explained. “He was asking for guidance. The plans seem sound, at least; I am reasonably confident that they will succeed.”

“A consequence of your prudent advice, no doubt,” said Dion. “I should not be surprised to see you promoted before long.”

Terence lowered his head and shook it: praise from Dion was always wonderful and shameful at once. He was glad, at least, that promotion meant nothing in terms of his duties as they related to the prince; that had been arranged many years ago. He had been Dion’s squire to begin with, but even after being made a full-fledged knight, had been given dispensation to stay at his master’s side.

“Perhaps as soon as you return to the field,” Dion added.

“It would be an honour,” said Terence.

Dion was silent for a moment, and then said, “I am sure you wish to be there now. I know physicking is not your calling, Terence. I am well enough now not to be attended constantly – you might call back the gentlemen you dismissed, and leave me in their care. I should not begrudge you that.”

“I must admit,” said Terence, “I would rather be here. If I were to return to battle now – I should find myself distracted by worries for your recovery. I should prefer to be in a situation where my attention might remain undivided.”

“I am honoured by your loyalty, Terence,” said Dion. “But I implore you not to let your duty to me prevent you from taking your rightful place on the battlefield.”

Terence looked down at where their hands met; he let his gaze travel upwards and settle on Dion’s tired face, and he wondered, suddenly, whether the time to reveal his secret might have arrived at last.

“It is not merely duty that keeps me by your side,” he admitted.

Dion blinked, and adjusted his position; his features hardened into a frown.

“Are you in pain?” Terence asked, glad of the apparent opportunity to change the subject of their conversation. “Shall I prepare a poultice, or –”

“No,” said Dion, his hand tightening against Terence’s. “No, I am fine. If it is not your duty that keeps you here, then – our friendship? Please, say what you mean to say.”

“You wish me to speak freely,” said Terence.

Dion nodded. “Of course. Always.”

He seemed alert and concerned now, looking into Terence’s eyes with an intensity that made Terence’s heart thud. It really was time, he thought: time to make his confession, and to hope Dion would not think too badly of him for it.

“Then I must apologise,” he said, “for not telling you this sooner. For a long time, I was unaware of the nature of my feelings. Only in the last year or so have I been able to admit

to myself the meaning of my thoughts. But –” He couldn’t bring himself to continue looking into Dion’s eyes; he bowed his head instead, concentrating on the soft fibres of the blanket where their hands met. “My devotion to you is stronger than any other concern. The only place I wish to be is by your side. I would do anything for you, my prince – I would give myself to you without question – you are –”

He cut himself off and sighed, unsure whether he had made himself remotely clear; by this point, adding more would surely have the opposite effect. It would have been so much simpler to tell Dion directly that he was in love with him, but despite Dion’s plea that he speak plainly, the fear of his reaction prevented that. Terence had never been cowardly – the commendations he was beginning to win on the battlefield were proof enough of that – but he knew what came next would hurt more than any war wound.

“It is love,” said Dion, with impossible softness. “It is, isn’t it? You love me.”

“I can only apologise again for this embarrassment,” said Terence, still keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the blanket as he did his best to keep his voice from trembling. “I know you did not ask to be the target of such attention. Recently, I have sought out other men in the company, in an attempt to –” He stopped sharply again. Telling Dion about his dalliances with other soldiers would hardly be less mortifying. He was speaking indiscreetly now, and that could do nothing but compound

his shame.

“Terence,” Dion murmured, “to be loved by you is the greatest honour. I never dreamt I might merit such a thing.”

“I understand that this admission will change the nature of our relationship,” Terence went on. “If you wish to dismiss me from your service, please allow me to recommend a replacement. There is a young Sir Henri in the mounted corps – he is a fine and loyal soldier, and I promised to mention him to you. And he is recently engaged to be wed, so there is no chance of –”

He found himself unable to finish the sentence, cut off by a loud sob that seemed to have come from nowhere. That was the beginning of it: he was crying then, messily and noisily. Of the two of them, he had always been the first to lose control like this, being less schooled in suppressing his emotions than the Dominant of Bahamut and son of Sylvestre Lesage; and now, he had abruptly realised that the closeness with Dion he had enjoyed for more than ten years was about to end, and that it was entirely his own fault.

Gradually, Terence became aware that Dion was reaching out with his free hand to take the one of his that remained; he let him take hold of it and draw it onto the blanket, lacking the presence of mind to resist. Dion was speaking too, he realised eventually. “Terence,” he was saying, in that same soft, light voice; “please, my dear Terence, fear not. I will certainly not dismiss you from my service. I could not bear to part from

you.”

Terence could do nothing but shake his head; Dion let go of him with one hand and then moved it upward, placing it just behind Terence’s ear as if to stabilise him. “I must sincerely thank you,” he continued, “for having had the courage to make this admission. Please, Terence, please do not be sad; what you have said has filled my heart with nothing but joy.”

“How can you say such things,” Terence stuttered, “when I have taken advantage of your trust in me, and kept this from you for so long? I have deceived you, and you still grant me the favour of your kindness? My lord, I do not deserve this from you.”

“Listen to me,” said Dion calmly. “Let me say my piece, as you have said yours. Terence, if you were to leave me, I should be distraught, make no mistake. I must admit that I have not dared think over my own feelings as you have done – I have not been bold enough to do so. But, I implore you, believe this: I am certain that I would have you by my side for the rest of my life.”

He raised his other hand to take hold of the other side of Terence’s head. Their faces were so close now; Terence could make out every detail of Dion’s skin, the curl of his dark eyelashes, the tiny red spot that sometimes rose in his left cheek. “I do not understand,” he choked, the vision of Dion’s sweet brown eyes before him melting into a blur as fresh tears sprang to his own. “I must ask you now to speak plainly, if you will,

my lord.”

“My apologies, Terence,” said Dion, moving his thumbs gently over Terence’s cheeks. “I am having trouble expressing myself. I have never found myself needing to put feelings such as these into words before.” A little shuddering hiccough escaped him, and suddenly Terence realised, not without some alarm, that Dion’s eyes had begun to moisten as well.

“The day I stepped in front of that blade,” said Dion, his voice remaining steady even as the tears began to trickle down his face, “I did so because I was certain – I remain certain. I cannot lose you. If you were to die – my life would end that same day.” He held Terence tighter now, gripping his head in fervent desperation. “Terence, you are dearer to me than any man. I cherish you beyond measure. And if you knew how I have come to desire you, you would be impressed by the restraint I have shown thus far.”

Terence could do nothing before Dion moved forward; their noses touched, and then Terence felt his prince’s lips against his own. It was clumsy and strange: the pressure and the angle weren’t quite right, and there was a momentary impact as their teeth briefly collided. Terence could tell Dion had never kissed anyone before, beyond the ritual pleasantries he would have exchanged with the daughters of the nobility at court dances. And yet, despite everything, this was the most perfect thing that had ever happened.

“Terence,” Dion murmured, when they broke apart at last.

“My Terence. Look at us – we’ve been such fools.”

His cheeks shone with their mingled tears, but his eyes were bright and alive now. He was as handsome as Terence had ever known him, his elegant features almost princely in themselves; and suddenly Terence remembered who the two of them were, and understood that their first kiss had to be their last.

“Dion,” he said, and then corrected himself. “Your Highness. I must thank you for the indulgence you have shown me, but I am sure you know this must go no further. A prince and his guard – a Dominant and an ordinary man –”

“You are far from ordinary, Terence,” Dion murmured.

Terence did his best to ignore him. “It is not right. The scriptures make it very clear that each man has his ordained position. If we were to –” He barely dared say it. “To embark upon a relationship – there would be dissent among the troops, if not outright mutiny.”

“They would deny their prince his happiness?” said Dion. “Fear not, dear Terence. They can do nothing – I outrank them all.”

“Not in battle,” Terence pointed out.

“Not at present,” Dion admitted. “But we both have yet to complete our ascent through the ranks.”

“And until then –” Terence began.

He was cut off as Dion leant forward to kiss him again, reaching out and taking hold of Terence’s collar. It was already

a surer and sweeter kiss than the last; Dion sighed against Terence's mouth, and his eyelashes fluttered over Terence's nose, and his fingers lightly brushed Terence's neck.

At last, Dion retreated. "Then we shall keep it a secret, if we must," he said hoarsely. "But now that I know you desire the same as I – I can hardly turn away from this. Terence, I have wanted this for years."

"For years?" Terence whispered.

Dion nodded, a peaceful smile spreading across his face; then, suddenly, he grimaced, and clutched briefly at his side.

"This is hurting you," said Terence. "You should rest."

"In a moment," said Dion. "First, dear Terence, I promise to you that I will not let this jeopardise your honour. I know full well that out of the two of us, it is you who stand to lose your position, should we be found out – I swear I will not allow it. If I need renounce my own standing to preserve yours, then I will."

"My prince," said Terence.

"I have already risked my life for you," Dion added, gesturing towards where the bandages began on his chest. "Let that be proof that I am ever ready to defend you, as much as I am able. And now, Terence, tell me you will be mine. We both want this, do we not?"

"More than anything," said Terence. "My prince, I must admit that I still worry. If we are indiscreet, I should not like to know how things will turn out."



“Then let us be discreet,” said Dion, “for having had this for a single second, I cannot put it aside.”

Terence considered: to go back to being merely Dion’s attendant and loyal friend after what had happened on this night would be agony, almost as bad as having to leave his prince’s service altogether. “I feel the same way,” he admitted at last. “I – I am yours, Dion, my love. I am entirely yours.”

He was the one to lean forward this time, to save Dion the effort of drawing himself up; he bent over him and kissed him softly, skimming Dion’s jaw with his fingers.

“Stay with me tonight,” said Dion. “Not to – I regret that I have not the strength to acquaint myself with your body. But – stay beside me – please?”

“Yes,” Terence breathed. “Tonight and whenever you desire it.”

He stood to remove his armour, tugging off the plates impatiently and then divesting himself of most of what was beneath as well until he was in only his smallclothes. With a little trepidation, he returned to Dion’s side; Dion cast his eyes over his frame, and murmured, “My Terence. My wonderful Terence.”

Terence climbed into bed beside him, briefly taking note of the softness of the mattress – it was a level of comfort that was no doubt reserved for members of the imperial household – and then extended an arm to hold Dion close.

“How long I have dreamt of this,” Dion whispered.

“I had no idea,” Terence replied.

“Nor I,” said Dion, “about you.” He yawned contentedly. “This feels right, does it not?”

Terence’s chest was tight; he wondered briefly whether this was how Dion felt when he was about to prime, as if some divine light beyond his control would shortly burst forth and engulf his entire being.

“It feels perfect,” he said truthfully.

Dion gave a small hum of contentment, and then said no more; he closed his eyes, and Terence watched as his breathing became slower and deeper, observing the steady rise and fall of his prince’s bandaged chest. He himself felt no hint of tiredness: there had been so many revelations in such a short space of time that his mind was alive with thoughts. Not long ago he had been sure that Dion was about to send him away, and that they might never speak again; and then what had happened had been the exact opposite. Dion’s feelings matched his own; after their mutual confession, the path forward had been clear, despite anything the scriptures might say. And it already seemed so easy. They had been friends for so long that becoming lovers was almost natural. Addressing each other as lovers did, touching each other in these soft, intimate ways: they already knew how to do such things. It seemed entirely normal.

Terence was on the verge of sleep when suddenly, Dion stirred a little, and murmured his name.

“My prince?” said Terence, forcing himself to become alert.

“Are you all right?” He turned his head to look at Dion, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness; Dion’s were still closed.

“I am well,” said Dion quietly. “I just wondered – you said you had been able to experiment with other men.”

Terence gave a hum of confirmation. He hoped Dion didn’t mind – if he had dared imagine his feelings towards the prince would ever have been returned, he would have been quite content to abstain from such activities and save himself for the one person he had ever truly desired for more than a few lustful seconds.

“I have not had the chance myself,” said Dion, “given my position. I hope that is not a problem.”

“Not at all,” said Terence.

“Perhaps,” Dion added, “when I am healed, you might be able to show me ...”

Terence couldn’t help choking out a brief laugh at that. “Yes. Of course. But you should rest now, my prince. You need your sleep.”

Dion said nothing for a long time after that; Terence watched him, alert again after their short conversation. Someday, he thought, he would kiss every inch of Dion’s body, every strand of his hair. He would praise him as he deserved: not for being a Dominant, a prince, or a war hero, but for being himself.

A long time passed; then, again, Dion mumbled, “Terence?”

“My prince?” he replied.

Dion took a moment to respond; Terence wondered if he was entirely awake. “Nothing,” he said at last, indistinctly. “Just ... wanted to know if you were there.”

“I’m here,” Terence confirmed, “always. Sleep, my love.”

There was a vague noise in response; Terence bent to kiss Dion’s shoulder, holding him closer.

He must have fallen asleep soon afterwards, because he suddenly found himself being woken by the voice of one of the detachment’s senior physickers, and a blast of strong morning light as the man entered the tent.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” he was saying – and then Terence met his eyes. They widened a little; Terence was sure his own were doing the same. For a moment, both of them remained frozen in place, and then the physicker drew back slightly.

“I’ll wait outside,” he said. Gaspard was his name, Terence remembered, although the realisation seemed entirely irrelevant. He watched him leave with increasing trepidation, before turning to face Dion; the encounter had clearly woken the prince as well, as his worried gaze met Terence’s own.

“Alas,” Dion muttered, “not even a day, and we are already found out.”

“So much for discretion,” Terence agreed.

Dion nodded, and then winced a little. “Would that I might confront him,” he said. “But I am quite sure I lack the strength

to rise. My wounds pain me this morning.”

It was clear, Terence saw, in the tight expression his prince wore; in the fact that he spoke lightly, as if afraid to move too much. “I hope my being here did not –” he began.

“No, quite the opposite, I am sure,” said Dion.

Terence ran a hand gently over Dion’s hair, and then said, “I imagine our physicker has something to help. I shall go and speak to him.”

“Yes,” said Dion. “Terence – if he says anything untoward, bring him here and let him answer to me. Won’t you?”

“I promise,” said Terence.

He hurried to dress himself in a minimum of clothes, and then went out to meet the physicker. Gaspard was waiting outside the tent; he met Terence’s eyes when the latter appeared, looked him over, and said nothing.

“His Highness is in pain this morning,” said Terence, doing his best to remain composed. “He would be glad of your salves.”

“I hope you realise,” said Gaspard, “how risky this is for both of you.”

Terence sighed. “We do. But –”

“How long has this been happening?” Gaspard asked him.

“Just one night,” Terence admitted. “But you must understand – it is not merely ... carnal. We are in love.” As he said it, he felt a lurch in his stomach, and couldn’t help smiling despite the circumstances.

Gaspard looked him over for a few seconds before replying. “Ah. I see.”

“I must beg you not to speak of this to the men,” said Terence.

There was a snort in reply. “I hardly think that’ll make much difference,” said Gaspard. “If you carry on like that, it won’t be long before everyone knows anyway.”

“Do you ... disapprove?” Terence asked him.

“Not my place to judge you either way,” said Gaspard. He paused, and then added, “I don’t disapprove. But not everyone will have the same opinion. What’ll happen when His Radiance finds out?”

“I do not think,” Terence stuttered, “we have much intention of telling His Radiance.”

“Well, I didn’t imagine you’d be writing to him,” said Gaspard. “You must realise he’ll know within days, if you keep this up.”

“We shall be more careful,” said Terence. “But if you plan to tell us not to pursue this, you waste your breath. I – I have desired this for so long. I adore him.”

Gaspard smiled a little at that; then he shifted on the spot and said, “Let me attend to His Highness.”

“Yes, at once,” said Terence, leading the way back inside.

He caught Dion’s eye as he approached, trying to convey with his expression that there was no immediate need to worry; then he hung back as Gaspard collected the medicine chest and

made his way to the prince's side. Sitting down at the table, he watched while the physicker saw to Dion's wounds, carefully applying salves and poultices as Dion flinched and hissed at each sting. It wasn't the first time Terence had wished he could move in to take Dion in his arms, and hold him until his pains were soothed; and this time, he slowly realised, he would be able to do such a thing as soon as Gaspard left them. There was no need to restrain himself anymore; he was free to give himself entirely to his prince.

"That's all I can do, I'm afraid, Your Highness," said Gaspard at last, drawing back.

Dion smiled thinly. "It is some help. You have my thanks."

Gaspard nodded graciously, and stood to stow away the medicine chest; then he drew closer to Dion again, and said, "I had a son. He fell on the frontlines last year. It was his first assignment."

"Then let me offer condolences on behalf of His Radiance," said Dion. "My father is ever humbled by his people's readiness to sacrifice themselves in service of our great empire."

Terence ducked his head to hide his frown: he was quite sure that the emperor couldn't care less about the young men who were routinely slain in battle. Moreover, this hardly seemed an appropriate time; Gaspard could surely tell Dion was suffering enough without having to be reminded of the ongoing losses of men from a people he cared for dearly.

"With respect, Your Highness," said Gaspard, "I wasn't after

sympathy. I just wanted to say this: there was a girl he liked, back home in Moore. The day before he went off to the front, he said – when I come back, Dad, I’m going to tell her how I feel. And then, of course, he never ...” He shrugged, and as his head moved, the light caught a patch of silver in his hair; Terence suddenly found himself wondering if Gaspard was older than he had assumed.

“All I’m saying is,” he went on, “we never know how much time we have left before Greagor calls us to Her side. Youth is a precious thing – it shouldn’t be wasted on regret.” He nodded at each of them in turn. “I wish you both happiness, Your Highness. Sir Terence.”

Gaspard turned and left the tent then, without awaiting any response; Terence stood and approached Dion’s bedside, drawn there as if by some crystalline magic. He took hold of him with both arms, drawing his prince tight against his body; he kissed Dion’s face, and his hair, and let Dion do the same to him. They were so intertwined, so synchronised that Terence could barely tell where he himself ended and where Dion began.

“I will be by your side forever,” he promised. “I swear it in Greagor’s name.”