

THE ride from the dragoons' encampment to Twinside was tense; Dion barely spoke. Terence knew his silence was due to his father's surrender of the throne. Others might have thought such a reaction to the announcement to be because Dion envied his brother's favoured position; Terence knew that was far from the truth. Dion had never expected, nor really wanted, to be made emperor. His anger was because of the negligence Sylvestre had shown in entrusting the empire to the boy. The realm was unstable enough, and a child emperor would hardly help Sanbreque retain the hard-won trust of her people.

Then there was the story Joshua Rosfield had told of Ultima – indeed, the fact the man had appeared at all, eighteen years since his supposed death. There was nothing about it that seemed not to be an ill omen of some kind. The situation was so troubling that Terence knew there was no point trying to find a way of rectifying it, and yet, as he rode, he found himself poring over each of these issues nonetheless in search of an answer that wasn't there. The thoughts bounced around his mind as if shaken and dislodged by each thud of his steed's clawed feet against the ground.

At long last, they arrived at the palace; Terence stabled the chocobos, and returned to his prince's side.

"I have requested an audience," Dion informed him grimly.

"You cannot see His Radiance now?" said Terence. Really, Sylvestre would have renounced the title, but the thought of

using it to refer to Olivier instead seemed distasteful.

“Not without an appointment,” said Dion. “Besides – they are celebrating the coronation. I should rather stay away from the audience chamber until they have finished.”

Not for the first time, Terence found himself wondering how Sylvestre’s accession to the throne must have altered his relationship with Dion. The thought of having to make an appointment to speak to one’s own father seemed ludicrous. He decided not to comment on it.

“The Phoenix is also on his way here,” said Dion distractedly. “I bade him and his maidservant follow us.”

“Will they arrive soon?” said Terence.

Dion shook his head. “I doubt they know the direct route. They will have taken the public roads.”

“We have time to spare, then,” said Terence. “You might use it to consider your plans.”

“Might I?” said Dion, and the gloom briefly seemed to lift from his face. “I have plans, you say?”

“You hardly said a word the whole journey,” Terence pointed out. “I know you were devising something.”

“You are right, as always,” said Dion, but then he paused and averted his gaze before continuing. “Terence,” he said at last. “I do have a plan. But you may think me monstrous for it.”

“I have never known your judgement to lack, my prince,” said Terence.

“Come,” said Dion quietly, and they began walking the long corridors of the castle.

The castle at Twinside was different from how Whitewyrm had been: its stone was less blindingly white and hence far more unremarkable. The relative darkness that resulted made the place seem much more austere. It was less suited to Sanbreque than the old palace – or maybe less suited to how the empire had been in its glory days. Now, perhaps the darker stone was fitting.

“I believe that His Radiance’s wife is the cause of our troubles,” said Dion as they walked.

“That would seem likely,” said Terence, remembering all the occasions when Dion had sought him out after audiences with the empress. Often, he had been almost visibly trembling with rage, a rage that had only dissipated after some time in Terence’s embrace.

“And the child is nothing but her puppet,” Dion added.

“So crowning him emperor is merely a way to ensure her own power,” Terence suggested.

“Exactly. If he were to be removed from the throne, the threat would remain. Yet ridding ourselves of her influence alone is now impossible; our *emperor* would put a stop to it. You see?”

The explanation had been vague, but Terence knew what he meant. “Remove one without the other, and it is meaningless. They must both fall together.”

“That’s just it,” said Dion. “And there is only one outcome that will see them gone for good. Terence – is it terrible of me to think these things? I want them dead, and I would see it done by my own hand – but surely a man should not plot against his own brother?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” said Terence thoughtfully. “There were the twin emperors, Augustin and Auxence, weren’t there? We learnt about them in our histories, didn’t we – they turned against each other, and died at each other’s hand.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Dion; his mind was clearly elsewhere.

“I would use the dragoons in this plan,” he admitted after a pause. “Have them hold the city captive, so those inside the castle know it is futile to resist. Then I would pay a visit to His Radiance, spear in hand. Tell me this is madness, dear Terence. Tell me our men would never agree to be involved in something so bold.”

“I think our men would be eager to see the empress deposed,” said Terence truthfully. Anabella was popular among none but her own Black Shields, and even they began to speak somewhat differently about her when they had drink taken. For most in the empire, even the privileged dragoons, her name was synonymous with misery and fear.

They turned a corner, and he found himself adding, “I do not recognise this. I am unfamiliar with this part of the castle.”

“There must be large parts you haven’t visited,” Dion concurred. “We have never had much time here, have we?”

It was true – the palace had only been established at Twin-side for five years, and they had spent much of that time on or close to the battlefield. “I knew Whitewyrm far better,” Terence said.

Dion smiled wistfully. “Ah, yes. Whitewyrm.”

“They were sweeter times,” said Terence.

“Yes.”

They approached each other then, carefully, in the way they were accustomed to doing when another could easily surprise them. But the corridor was empty, apart from the two of them; everyone else in the castle was attending the coronation celebrations.

“You are still sweet,” Dion murmured, holding Terence close.

“The result of your company, my prince,” said Terence.

They kissed, just briefly; Terence barely felt it as more than a short moment of contact, a tiny reassurance. His lips knew Dion’s so well that it sometimes felt more unusual for them to be apart.

“You know I will follow you in whatever you choose,” he said.

“I know you are more loyal than any man should be,” Dion replied. “I would hear the thoughts of our dragoons.”

Surely they will be less accepting of a man who plots to kill his brother.”

“I shall ask them,” said Terence, “but I feel sure they will agree.” A thought occurred to him. “I have changed my mind. This is a little like Whitewyrm.”

Dion frowned. “In what sense?”

“I remember,” said Terence, “there was a time when the palace was almost empty. His Radiance was away travelling – it was the winter solstice, I think. Most of the household had gone with him. And you and I stood in a hallway that was quite like this one.”

He steered Dion backwards towards the wall, gently pinning him there with both hands; it was the same thing he had done on that occasion, seven or eight years ago. Then he reached forward to kiss Dion again, returning first to his lips, but then passing over the rest of his face, depositing quick kisses over his prince’s nose and cheeks before leaning in, slower and more precise, to plant a few more on his neck.

“Oh,” said Dion. “Of course – I remember it too. It would be hard to forget your kisses, Terence. Even should I lose my sanity and let Bahamut take me over, I think I should still recognise them.”

“They will always be there for you,” Terence murmured back. “As will I.”

“Perhaps we might put aside the discussion of my plans for the time being,” Dion suggested between careful kisses, “and

retire to my chambers.”

“Whatever you wish, my prince,” said Terence, and they continued along the corridor, hand in hand.