Sun and Spear, Peach and Petal

by SteeleStingray

Summary

Damen Martell is skilled, he is hot-blooded, he collects his bastards like stray kittens - and he is the Prince of Dorne. However even he has regrets; like when at fifteen he accidentally crippled the Tyrell heir, Auguste, in a tournament, pissing off the whole of Highgarden. Damen has not seen him since...

But ten years later, he receives an invitation from his friend to return and compete again, hoping to repair the rift between their families. But Damen is about to make things even more complicated when he falls for the prickly and still-angry younger brother, Laurent Tyrell.

Based on the art by @reh-sa
(I.E.:You do not need to have read the ASOIAF books/watched the show to read this)

Notes

I couldn't stay away for long! I've missed this and I've missed all of you!
Ok, so big news: I, along with 3 others, have officially taken over the Captive Prince Big Bang, so I will be quite busy writing my own fic for the Bang, as well as moderating the
event, and writing this story. So I'm torturing myself haha!
But through the Big Bang, I've been chatting with the awesome and talented @reh-sa and I feel in love with her ASOIAF AU drawings. It got the creativity flowing and I asked her permission to write it, so here we go!
Worry not, if you don't watch GOT or read the books, I've tried to make it pretty simple. All you need to know is that Akielos is now Dorne and Vere is called The Reach. Hopefully, I don't make things too confusing!
I will be switching the POVs (like the author does for the books) for each chapter and later chapters will be quite a bit longer so...prep yourself for longer waits between chapters.
If you have questions, or want to keep track of my updates, check out my tumblr: steelestingray.tumblr.com.
Also if you want to see the art that inspired this, head on over to reh-sa's blog: here

ENJOY!
Ser Nikandros of House Gargalen walked uninterrupted through the wide-open halls of the Tower of the Sun, the royal seat of the House Martell. The halls were mostly empty now as it was midday and even the breeze that blew through was oppressively hot; most of the inhabitants had retired to their rooms to have a servant fan them or to the baths to escape the heat. Nikandros himself did not mind the heat so much, especially not now when he had a duty perform.

He was a man in his early thirties, still in the prime of his life.

His back was straight and proud from years of being a soldier, his body strong and muscled from days of exercise. His hair was wavy and black and long to his chest and his skin was the typical coppery brown shade of a Salty Dornishman who spent a good deal of time by the coast. His face had prominent cheekbones half-hidden by a perfectly barbered beard and a nose clear-cut and sharp as one of the daggers made in the royal smithy. Aside from his healthy figure, his most striking feature were almond eyes the same color as the pale grey stones of a riverbed; those eyes, along with his stoic, strong personality, had gained him the nickname among his men ‘Ser Stone Eyes’.

He also had the distinction of being the head of the Dornish guard and one of the closest confidantes to the Dornish prince. Incidentally, that was who he was going to visit on this scorching afternoon…

Normally a servant or a simple courier would carry out this sort of duty but someone had had the sense to actually look at the wax seal this time. Upon seeing the intricate rose that had gone so long unsent across the border, Nikandros was called immediately to give the letter to Prince Damen.

Prince Damen’s personal quarters were on the prime eastern side of the tower so that he could see the ocean and the sunrise from his spacious balcony. It was his only private place in all of Sunspear and it was the best place to find him, outside of the practice grounds. There were…other places he could be, but Nikandros had been with the prince since they could toddle; if anyone could track down their slippery, delinquent prince, it would be him.

When he arrived in front of the massive doors—carved elegantly with the House symbol of a golden spear piercing a red sun—he felt a moment of trepidation, though he shook it off not a moment after.

Gone were the days, he reminded himself, when he would open these doors to chaos. Nikandros was truly grateful.

Prince Damen had turned over a new leaf.

Still there was that residual twinge of annoyance as he knocked on the door, was bid enter, and fully prepared himself to be confronted by at least one naked person bent over a piece of furniture. Only blissful silence this time and Nikandros walked inside with only a few other, minor concerns.

It was a fine set of quarters, even in this tower filled with fine rooms.

The Prince’s quarters consisted of four rooms that connected to each other via arches cut in the stone walls and they were laid out in a line so each room had a balcony with a view of the sea.

In the laid back fashion of Dorne, the first chamber was the lounging area where the Prince would
entertain personals guests or a lover, where he could rest and eat at his leisure. Silken pillows dotted the floor, a deep pitcher of wine, refilled every hour, stayed cool in a bed of crushed ice and all of the furniture was semi-reclined. A thick stick of neroli incense was burning on one of the low tables. Despite the apparent simplicity of the designs, Nikandros knew each one of the objects in this room had been commissioned by the finest of craftsmen.

To his left, past billowing, gauzy curtains in the color of a sunrise, would be the Prince’s bedroom and personal baths.

Nikandros’ business was to the right.

Past the only other doors in the rooms, was Damen’s personal study and it was where he entertained formal guests and conducted business of state. No lovers were permitted past that point and Nikandros was relieved that Damen was inside.

With the confidence of an old friend, he entered this room without knocking.

Prince Damen’s study was more austere, the way Nikandros liked. Expensive bookcases paneled with glass had been made to protect the Prince’s books from any sea salt that came in through the balcony and there was a fine rug beneath his writing desk, another under his personal table. Thick candles sat on every available surface, in case the Prince wished to work during the hours of darkness. He was not behind his writing desk.

Nikandros caught a flash of red from the corner of his eye and breathed relief. The balcony.

“Prince Damen.”

At twenty-five years of age, Damen Martell was famed throughout Westeros and a first glance could easily discern why. He was the size and stature of a hero from a story and it was clear from his bare, broad chest and massive forearms that he was not a man to be physically trifled with in a dispute. Nikandros, who was above average himself, looked lean in comparison. In the not-so-distant past, Damen had been hotheaded and wild but right now he was calm and level and looked delighted to see his friend.

“Nikandros we’ve known each other for more than twenty years. You can just call me ‘Damen’.” Damen smiled and Nikandros couldn’t help but smile back. His good humor was infectious and it had cost Nikandros dearly in the past. “For the love of the gods, we are in the privacy of my own rooms, at least allow that.”

“Damen,” Nikandros relented as he joined Damen’s side and watched the sea; arguing with this man was like trying to get the sun to burn less hot. He was damn stubborn.

“To what do I owe the visit?” Damen asked, clapping Nikandros on the shoulder. “We saw each other at dawn on the practice sands; did something happen in between that time?”

“You could say that.” Nikandros admitted.

From the recesses of his jacket Nikandros pulled out the letter and handed it over to his prince. The official courier had come just after the midday meal—traditionally taken in one’s own apartments—and Nikandros had intercepted him in the hall. He had taken one look at the heavy cream paper and the perfumed seal and knew that things were about to get very complicated indeed.

“You didn’t read it?” Damen asked, noting the intact seal. Nikandros gave him a long look, which caused Damen to smile again; even though the envelope was not addressed to any person, the seal could leave no question as whom it was meant for. “My curiosity would have gotten the better of
me.”

“That is the seal of the House Tyrell.” Nikandros responded, wondering if Damen had momentarily lost his mind.

“Is it?” Damen looked closer at the pink wax, “I thought for sure I had seen this image before in a brothel. Tyrell roses and women’s roses do look similar, you have to admit.”

Nikandros coughed. “Lewdness aside, you might do well not to mention that thought again outside of the privacy of your bedchambers.” He recommended as Damen searched his face for a laugh. “If this letter isn’t rude, I’m sure on hearing your thoughts they would supply you with one immediately.”

“It certainly has been a while…” Damen admitted, some expression very much like guilt flickering across his face. For someone as proud and confident, it was unusual to see.

“Ten years…” Nikandros put a hand on Damen’s shoulder in a show of support. He too could not forget that day. He had been there as well, watching as the spear flew too low, as blood sprayed into the air and people screamed in the stands. He remembered Damen’s dark face being white with shock and grief, and the silent tears as the fifteen-year-old prince reeled from what he had done… “Enough time to heal old grievances.”

Damen smiled at him again, softer and sadder. “I suppose you’re right. Perhaps they don’t hold grudges like we do.”

Though Nikandros would never admit it, he was awash with anticipation over the contents of the letter, and he had to keep his expression very calm as Damen steadied himself and broke open the letter. He waited patiently as his Prince read…and read again, a look of confusion bordering on amazement replacing the anxiety. Nikandros longed to ask him what it said but forced himself to remain patient.

Like rays of the sun, warm and bright, a smile split across Prince Damen’s face and he finally nodded in approval as he handed the letter over to Nikandros.

It took Nikandros a few moments to decipher the overly elaborate writing style before he could begin to read.

‘Prince Damen Nymeros Martell of House Martell, Lord of Sunspear,

Ten long years have passed since our last meeting in Riverrun during the Great Games and, despite my firm protests that all ill-will has been banished from my heart, I am afraid my family members have not yet found forgiveness in their own. I have penned this as the Great Games are to be held in the Reach this year, specifically my home in Highgarden, and shamefully no mention was made of inviting Dorne. I feel the slight perhaps more than anyone else—perhaps even more than you might—so I seek to make amends.

Without the knowledge of my elders, or anyone in The Reach for that matter, I am personally inviting you and your men to Highgarden in three months time. You will be lodged with honor in my home and I will personally present you to my father as one of my dear friends.

At your earliest convenience, please send me the number of men and women you wish to bring with you as well as their chosen competitions. I await your answer with all hope and goodwill. I hope to see you again soon, my friend.

Auguste, Heir Apparent of the Reach and Lord of Highgarden
Unbidden he remembered the fine-boned teenager still beardless, hair long and the color of honey with his arm around Damen’s shoulder…

As he read the letter, Nikandros felt a sinking in his gut, rather like he had swallowed a cold stone. First, he was concerned that no one else in Highgarden knew that this invitation had been made. Secondly, he was concerned because Damen’s smile had gotten even brighter and was bordering on outright wickedness. Nikandros had seen this look before.

In a swirl of scarlet silk, Damen was already halfway inside his study, Nikandros trailing not far behind.

“Damen—.”

“We’re going,” Damen said smoothly, in a tone that left no room for arguing. When he sounded that commanding, when he sounded like the prince that he was, no one could shift his judgment. Still it fell on Nikandros to try.

“Damen, please think of the repercussions.” Damen withdrew a piece of paper with a flourish and sat behind his desk. “When we left Highgarden, most men threatened they would see your head cut off before you returned to the marble halls.” Damen removed a tray of crystal-cut inkpots in jewel tones of black, blue, red, and green. “Five years ago they boycotted the last Great Games in Storm’s End, simply due to your attendance!” A sleek black quill was produced and dipped in the black ink. “Forgive my impertinence, but are you even listening me, Your Highness?”

Damen looked up finally at the rare use of formalities and he was still beaming.

“Of course I’m listening. I value your opinion. Please continue, it helps me focus.”

Nikandros sighed deeply as he sank into the chair opposite Damen. Already he could feel the headache coming on from all of this unnecessary stress. “Damen…please, for one moment consider what might happen should you accept. Aleron has yet to forgive you for crippling his son and, regardless of what Auguste himself thinks, I doubt the rest of Tyrells have reason to forgive you either. If we go to Highgarden, you will be risking your life and the lives of any who plan to join us.”

“We are Dornishmen, Nikandros.” Damen said pleasantly. “We are not my men to shy away from a fight.”

“We are also known for being recklessly bold.”

“You’ll come with me.” Damen said with complete and utter confidence in Nikandros’ answer.

“Of course I will.” Nikandros said. “I will be waiting there next to you on the scaffold, whispering that I foresaw this exact chain of events and you chose to ignore my warning.”

Damen laughed. “Why is your duty to be so negative about all of my plans?”

Nikandros leaned back in the chair, already becoming resigned to these decisions. “My only duty is to keep you alive. Imagine my negativity as you consistently work towards whichever option is the most dangerous whenever the opportunity presents itself.” When Damen looked as though he might argue, Nikandros lifted one eyebrow. “For any example you offer, I have ten other separate instances that support my argument.”

“We should ask the court tonight at dinner who would be interested in riding with us to Highgarden.” Damen unsubtly changed the subject when he realized Nikandros did have enough instances to prove his reckless nature. “We’d need to bring nothing but our best. Pallas Santagar, I’m
sure, and Kastor…”

So much for keeping the contents of the letter secret for so long, Nikandros thought. If the Tyrells had any spies in their midst, things could get very ugly indeed. “We should limit our numbers so as not to impede on their hospitality.” Damen smiled as he wrote over Nikandros’ sarcastic tone. “Perhaps two dozen men…and anyone else who wishes to risk their life to watch the Games.”

Damen finished writing whatever greetings he intended to send to Auguste and then put down his quill with a triumphant smile. “Anything else I should be aware of?”

Nikandros did actually have a long list of things that he wanted to talk about with his Prince but he decided to focus on the topic that had plagued the noble houses of Dorne since Damen had turned sixteen. Because it was so important and was considered a duty expected of him, Damen hated discussing it. Nikandros felt personally bound to bring it up at every possible moment when the mood was good between them.

“If we go…my one request is that we bring Lady Jokaste.”

Immediately Damen’s expression of good humor devolved into one of blatant annoyance. “Nikandros…”

Damen was a bachelor prince. Not that he was unmanned; oh, that wasn’t an issue in the least. It was just that he had not even announced a potential marriage partner since he had come of age. Independent as he was, Damen had not looked into political arrangements within the other noble houses of Westeros—hell he had not even made suit known amongst the noble houses in Dorne.

The only woman he had shown any sort of preference for was one Nikandros was not fond of. A minor second cousin of the heir to Starfall, Lady Jokaste Dayne was the only one—man or woman—who had managed to get close enough to the prince to inspire rumors.

Being Dornish herself—though she was a lesser noble from the north and, therefore looked nothing like Damen or Nikandros—Lady Jokaste was just as hot and sensual as her lover. From what Nikandros had heard from rumors in the practice sands and whispers in the marble halls, Jokaste was a regular visitor in the private quarters of the prince and his bastard brother, Kastor Sand.

Nikandros disliked her fickle affections, although they were somewhat commonplace in this court that loved beauty and clothes that were laughably easy to remove.

But Damen’s preference for her was enough for Nikandros to suggest that his push his suit. Damen balked at every turn.

“Nikandros—.”

“You need to announce something, anything.” Nikandros said quickly before Damen could argue any more. “There are no questions as to the ability of yours to make children. There are also no fears that your tastes run purely to boys—.”

“Men.”

“Semantics. Regardless, it does not reflect well on Dorne if we isolate ourselves from the politics of the other houses. If you absolutely refuse to take a betrothal from one of the other noble houses, at least pretend to search the houses of Dorne. The future of Dorne rests on your noble shoulders and if you will not make a political marriage then give us an official heir. You like the Lady Jokaste well enough.”
“Well enough.” Damen said slowly as he got up and poured himself wine into a crystal goblet. Nikandros could see now why Lady Jokaste did not seem to want to commit to either brother.

Not one of them completely trusted the other. But marriages had been built on less.

“Well enough.” Damen said slowly as he got up and poured himself wine into a crystal goblet. Nikandros could see now why Lady Jokaste did not seem to want to commit to either brother.

“Then for the love of the gods, invite her with us. She’s beautiful; that will impress any visiting dignitaries. She’s ambitious, so that will serve the future of your house well, and she likes your little snakes well enough. You could do worse.”

“If she heard you give such an honest opinion of her,” Damen said offering Nikandros a twin glass, “I would not trust any wine that is not your own.” Nikandros could not help himself and looked carefully at the dark violet-red surface before he drank.

“Bring her with us.” Nikandros insisted, as Damen drank. “You should announce a possible betrothal…as your duty to Dorne.”

His smile was angelic. “And what about you? When will you get married?”

Nikandros was not amused. “My one and only love is my duty to you and to Dorne.”

“I accept your proposal.” Damen said immediately, placing his wine glass down. Nikandros couldn’t help but laugh, a bit of wine spilling out of his mouth. “Shall I draft up the marriage contract now or should we contact your parents?”

“Damen.”

“I’ll think about it.” Damen finally gave in and he was smiling so Nikandros knew he had not been pushed too far. “But the point stands: in three months’ time we are going to Highgarden.” He raised his goblet of wine and it caught a shaft of sunlight, sending burgundy and white prisms shining across every surface of the room. It was the Prince’s promise, the way he liked to live life: danger and intensity cloaked in shining white light.

It could hardly be resisted and Nikandros lifted his glass without even a second thought. The sound of crystal hitting crystal and Nikandros cemented his dread and annoyance into grim determination before he drank.

“We’re going to Highgarden.”

According to the letter Prince Damen sent to Prince Auguste, the list of highborn men and women going with them to the games did not go over fifty in number but, despite the best efforts of Nikandros and Damen to keep their plans shrouded in secrecy, some of the loose-lipped lesser nobles and smallfolk had gotten wind of the competition. A week before they were set to ride out, many local champions and their friends began to show up in Sunspear in preparation to ride behind the prince. Though only one in a thousand might hope to actually be good enough to compete against the nobles, most were just looking for adventure in the smaller tourneys that would be held for two weeks outside the limits of the city. Riding on borrowed horses or wagons lent by their families, they bubbled with excitement over potential parties, attractive foreigners, victories and names remembered in a burst of glory. Only held every five years, for some it was their first time attending and the city itself was beginning to buzz with excitement and hopes for their strong, handsome prince. So much for keeping Auguste’s plan a secret…

At least they had gotten no furious messages by raven, warning them to stay away, so Nikandros dared to hope that Auguste was keeping the secret much more effectively than Damen was.
The morning they were set to ride out, the sun rose hot and lazy over the city and the Tower of the Sun was abuzz with energy.

Nikandros was currently waiting in the stables, watching some of the young stableboys properly outfit the royal steeds that he and the other nobles would be riding over the week it would take to reach the castle at Highgarden.

Of all the horses, Damen’s enormous black charger was the most resplendent. It’s coat and mane shimmered much like the ocean at night, with chips of bloody rubies and deep orange topaz embedded in the dark leather of its’ harness and bridle. Silk in vibrant shades of scarlet, orange, and coral had been packed away for later, and after leaving the desert they would be draped across the fine, muscular horses in an imitation of the panoplies used further north, though these allowed the horses to run without constraints. With all the horses similarly outfitted, Nikandros felt they would be an impressive sight as they rode into Highgarden.

“Horses are ready, Ser.” One of the young boys, a Stony with sandy yellow hair, said. “Shall we bring them into the main courtyard?”

“Yes, order them all brought out.” Nikandros said in his most commanding voice.

He led the way, with the reins of his own horse firmly in his right hand. Even this early in the morning, Nikandros could already feel heat coming off the pinkish marble of the courtyard through the leather of his best sandals and the wind blew eastward through the palms. It was almost as if the gods were supporting the beloved Dornish prince, pushing them out with the heat on the breath of the wind. Damen was enjoying said breeze from where he was standing by the marble balustrades.

Standing next to him, smiling was Damen’s bastard older brother, Kastor Sand.

He had grown up in the palace, despite his mother being one of the smallfolk, and he and Damen were quite close. Though lesser in stature, intelligence, and strength than his younger brother, Kastor was a genial, well-liked fellow. If he felt overshadowed by the commanding presence of Damen, he kept that thought to himself.

“Nikandros!” Damen called brightly, hailing his friend.

“Good morning, Ser Stone Eyes.” Kastor said with the light mocking that came with years of knowing one another. Nikandros grimaced at the nickname.

“Damen, Kastor.” He greeted. “You are ready to ride?”

“Yes.” Damen left his perch in a whirl of excitement. “We can wait here for the others to arrive and we can ride before the sun is high in the sky.” Kastor nodded in agreement. “Did you sleep well?”

“Honestly, no.” Nikandros responded.

Within the half hour, the rest of the noble men and women who would be accompanying them along the way joined Damen, Nikandros and Kastor. Prince Damen was far and away the favorite to win any competition, but there were a few others who could dazzle in their own right.

Ser Pallas Santagar of Spottswood, for example, was a handsome, young man with the body of a champion. Adorned in the deep blue of his house and a belt made from the skin of a spotted leopard, he stood to win any competition that his Prince would not compete in. Same for Aktis Vidre of Sandstone; from the desert sands, his skin was bordering on completely black and he had the long, wiry arms perfect for archery and spear throwing.
Almost every noble house had sent a man or woman to compete for their honor and for the honor of Dorne.

Then came the noble spectators. Just as important for these types of games, where every noble house would send their richest and most powerful, beauty could be just as potent a weapon. So some of the lesser cousins and those sixth and seventh siblings who were not set to inherit anything worthwhile came in hopes that some wealthy or powerful foreigner with standing would catch their eye.

The most eligible and beautiful men and women Dorne had to offer were attempting to look like a tableau near the flowering bits of the courtyard…practicing. They were lovely in every shade, such variety that one might never consider them countrymen. And at the forefront of this group, in the place that she liked best, was Lady Jokaste Dayne.

As per Nikandros’ request, Damen had agreed to invite her along personally although no further mention had been made of a proposal. Nikandros still held out hope though he knew Damen’s stubborn nature better than almost anyone else.

She did not walk so much as glide across the marble, her golden waves were almost impossible to look at under direct sunlight, and the sun caught the glimmer of pearls woven into her hair as she walked over to greet her prince. Her kiss to his cheek was a little too close to the corner of his mouth, but Nikandros realized that part of her charm was being so bold.

She acted as though she were already the princess of Dorne.

“Lady Dayne,” Damen said smiling down at her. “I trust you are ready for our journey?”

“I am, Your Highness.” Her voice was husky and tempered, betraying no hint of undue excitement. She kissed Kastor’s stubbled cheeks as well, causing whispers from the non-athletic group; she certainly could cause a scandal with her lukewarm preferences…or maybe she hoped to arise jealousy in one of the brothers? “Will you assist me?”

Once again with the boldness. Normally no one would mount their horse until Prince Damen was comfortably seated on his own. But Jokaste flaunted these norms.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Damen assisted her with only one hand onto the back of her horse and she arranged herself to her best advantage, a veil put in place to protect her pale skin from the scorching sunlight. Kastor watched her do so very intently.

Damen was too busy mounting his own horse to watch his paramour shift her skirts, but he smiled in her direction when he was comfortable.

Immediately after, there was a flurry of activity as everyone else moved to mount their horses. Nikandros got atop his own and nudged it closer so that he was at Prince Damen’s right side, where he belonged. Kastor took up the left side. Lydos Greenhill of Yronwood fell immediately behind them as he had been chosen as the main standard bearer, the red and gold pennant currently hanging slack by his shoulder. The entire group waited, poised and perfect as an oil painting, as they waited for the command.

Only one man could give it.

“To Highgarden!” Damen called out and he spurred his horse into a lively trot, out of the gates of the Tower of the Sun and into the labyrinthine streets of Sunspear.
Truly, the people living in the palace were incapable of keeping a secret, Nikandros realized, as they found crowds waiting packed in every alleyway and corridor, leaning out of second and third story windows in hopes of seeing their prince. Damen waved to them as they rode and the people yelled in delight.

He was a beloved prince.

Older men looked on him with respect and hope for House Martell, little children waved sunspear flags made of cut paper and looked up to him in awe, a giant prince like the ones from their storybooks. Young men dreamed of being like him…or having him on top of them…or both. Women swooned and threw petals: orange and cherry blossoms, heavy rose petals in all shades of red, fuchsia, yellow, and sunset cascaded down on their head and shoulders in fragrant rain.

It was like this through their entire ride through the city and the cheers to bring glory followed them out of the last Threefold Gate and out into the outer lands of Dorne.

Behind them were the flow of local champions, the merchants and their wagons, and some street children who were throwing the petals in colorful arcs and begging for spare coppers. Damen paid them no mind.

Instead his dark eyes were focused on the road to the east. A day’s ride to Godsgrace, two more to Yronwood, Lydos’ home…Nikandros could see his mind calculating the path they would take. He broke into a wide smile and Nikandros wondered what caused it.

Was it simply the sight of his homeland or the promise of a good, long ride? Was it the idea of seeing his long-lost friend? Or was it this illicit adventure? In all honesty, it was probably a mixture of all of these things and more, but that infectious smile reminded Nikandros of why he would follow this Prince off a cliff or…in this case, into a castle armed with thorns.

“Are you ready?” Damen asked Nikandros, his voice high and excited as a young boy’s.

“At your command.” Nikandros responded, gracing Prince Damen with something not many men had the privilege of seeing. Ser Stone Eyes smiled.

“RIDE!” Damen called and spurred his horse hard in the flanks. High-spirited as it was, the horse merely rippled at the sensation before breaking into a gallop. Damen whooped with glee and Nikandros urged his horse into a similar pace, his smile still in place. They could be racing toward their deaths but…for now it was so exhilarating that Nikandros forgot his concern.
2. Laurent

Laurent Tyrell was a man furious at the world. Servants, courtiers, squires and noblemen leapt out of his path as he stormed through the sunny, bright halls of Highgarden in search of his older brother.

He was unusually ill prepared this morning. He had not finished lacing his boots or pants and the strings of his shirt hung slack in their eyelets. His loose, deep blue jacket billowed out behind him in silken sails, crowned by the banner of his long golden hair. Down past his chest it was usually braided and tied up, pressed tight against his skull so that no errant strands could unfurl onto the pages of his book and obscure his vision; but today he was so angry and in such a rush that he had left it loose. Many men he passed stared unabashedly, openmouthed like the ugly dead fish that were bent into a curve and served at dinner alongside carrots and cucumbers carved to look like flowers.

When Laurent caught their gaze, he glared in response.

While he was not fond of the staring, it was preferable to being pressed against the wall and touched. He was only making himself angrier thinking of these things and he crushed the piece of paper tighter in his fist as he rounded the corner. He heard bells and it took everything in his body not to scream.

Auguste’s chambers were on the eastern side of the palace and Laurent ground to a halt in front of the elaborate white weirwood doors, carved in their house sigil. Laurent bruised his hand pounding on solid wood.

“Come in.”

Laurent kicked the door open with his boot and walked into Auguste’s rooms.

At the familiar sight of his brother, Laurent forgot his fury for a split second.

Auguste Tyrell was lounging in one of his cherry wood loveseats, reading a book in the sunlight of
the early afternoon. It was his favorite spot in the castle thanks to the enormous windows, which
gave him a view of the royal gardens and the rose hedge maze. He looked up when Laurent entered
and smiled, wide and friendly. The smile hit Laurent like the blow of a whip.

Aside from their matching eyes—blue as the sky, blue as that wine that was brewed in the ports of
Essos—he and Laurent looked very little alike. With his long hair, Laurent had been mistaken for a
girl in his younger days and even now his chin stubbornly refused to sprout growth and his features
remained delicate and androgynous; Auguste was a prince from a ballad: gentle, masculine, and
handsome. His hair was a dark honey gold and it was cropped quite short to his head, his chiseled
jaw was covered in a light stubble of hair the same color, his skin was dark gold from sitting out in
the gardens, and when he was standing he was tall and lean. But he didn’t stand for too long these
days…

Laurent saw the sturdy cane propped against the far side of the loveseat…knew that underneath
Auguste’s pants on his muscular left leg was a deep twisted scar that caused him to limp and did not
allow him to stand for more than a few minutes at a time. There was the inescapable fact that he was
still unmarried with no proposals being presented, a constant source of stress in The Reach.

The anger came rushing back.

Laurent stormed over to his brother, though the lush red carpets kept him from stomping effectively.
Still, his face must have looked like a summer storm because Auguste looked up at him in concern.

“Good afternoon Laurent. Would you like to sit?” Auguste shifted his left leg with his hands so that
Laurent could sit if he so chose. “Are you quite alright? You look a little upset…”

“Brother.” Laurent cursed himself inwardly. Now Auguste knew he was mad. Laurent only called
him ‘brother’ when he was truly in a state.

Laurent extended the half-crushed scroll he had confiscated from the courier. He had been given
express instructions to deliver the message to Auguste and no other, but…he had looked so
suspicious, Laurent could not in good confidence let someone like that visit his infirm brother.
Though the Tyrells were not in a position of political prominence at the moment, Laurent trusted no
man and he would not risk an assassination attempt. Laurent had frozen the young messenger solid
with a glare and a simple command that made it abundantly clear neither one of them would be
moving until Laurent was given the note. It only took a few moments before the man caved.

Inspecting it, Laurent had not recognized the handwriting and there was no seal, only a thin cord of
red twine keeping it tied in place. Odd…

“Where is this from?”

The courier had shuffled in place, his face flushing a most unbecoming shade of scarlet. He seemed
so reluctant to say that Laurent was about to call the guards and have the fool open it in front of
them, when he finally found his voice. His response froze Laurent in surprise and anger.

“I-It’s from…D-Dorne, Your Lordship…”

In that moment, it all came rushing back to Laurent’s mind.

He was ten years old and attending his first games in Riverrun, where his shining, golden older
brother was set to compete in most of tourneys. Laurent remembered running through the crowds,
escaping the attention of his guardians in favor of playing with other boys his age and attempting to
garner the attention of the older ones.
He distinctly remembered the smell of baking trout, caught fresh from the water that morning and cooked on a grate over coals; he still had problems with the smell, as it reminded him of that horrible day.

The stands had been packed as he scrambled to the front to watch his perfect, shining brother mount the slim white horse he would ride for the okton. The targets had been lifted into place and people waved colored silks and shouted encouragement to favored riders, one of which was the prince of Dorne. Laurent had tried to bar his face from memory; he could only recall a jet-black horse that danced in place, eyes rolling white—a beast Laurent envied him—and an enormous dark figure seated astride, tall and bare-chested. In the memory of a child, he appeared as an enormous monster of a man though he was actually a young man of only fifteen.

The okton was a dangerous sport popularized by those across the Narrow Sea. Played on horseback with four men, the goal was to throw spears at a series of targets set in a figure eight while riding full speed. Any misstep, any poor throw could result in death...in fact, word was that in Essos in order to win, three of the competitors had to die during the okton.

A whirl of colors, the yells of the audience made the world seem like it was bursting at the seams. His heart was rising to his throat in excitement. How it could all change so quickly...

Yells turned to screams and the only color that took over his vision was the crimson of spilled blood. His tiny legs had been uselessly slow as he ran to his fallen brother over the bloodstained sawdust.

It was imagery that haunted him in nightmares: his beloved brother, white faced and limp, seemingly dead, cradled in the arms of the man who had thrown the spear. The one who had potentially killed him.

Thank god it had not.

But upon hearing from the physician that Auguste would be crippled for the rest of his life, Laurent had run out into the hall and slapped Damen Martell so hard across the cheek that his hand burned and fat tears poured out of his eyes. The Dornishmen had not been back since.

All of these things rushed through his mind in the span of the time it had taken the foolish messenger to finish his sentence. Without hesitation, Laurent drew the small knife at his hip and sliced easily through the red twine. The messenger looked as though he was about to protest but Laurent silenced him with a simple look.

The paper was dry and hot in his hand as he had scanned the unfamiliar handwriting. At first he could not comprehend the words. A second reading helped him understand but then he did not believe it.

"M-My Lord?"

"I am taking this to my brother. You are dismissed." Without meaning to, Laurent crushed the parchment in his fist.

And so here he stood, across from his brother demanding answers.

Auguste took the paper and it took considerable effort for him to smooth the wrinkles out of the page. Laurent knew what Auguste was reading as his eyes moved: fifty men...coming to Highgarden... at your request...Signed Prince Damianos Nymeros Martell, Lord of Sunspear and Prince of Dorne.

Laurent’s breath was shaking as Auguste finished reading and looked up. “Brother, what is the
meaning of this?”

Auguste sighed deep. “Sit down, Laurent.”

“What have you done?” Laurent knew his voice was high pitched and shrewish but he could not help himself. “Please tell me this is a joke and that you have not invited those…those…barbarians into our home.” Auguste made no motion to defend otherwise and Laurent felt his control unravel. “Brother! What have you done?!”

“If you will sit down, I will attempt to explain,” Auguste said, patting the spot next to him.

Laurent wanted to bolt. He wanted to burn the letter and raise the castle to arms. But he tempered himself and forced his knees to bend so he could sit next to his brother.

“I’ve invited the Dornishmen to our home.”

“That has become readily apparent.”

“Now as for the why—.”

“He crippled you, Auguste!”

“That is also readily apparent. Now, as I was saying. I am tired of everyone holding a grudge on my behalf; I have said a thousand times that I bear no ill will to Prince Damen or any of his men. They should not be denied the right to compete over a ten-year old accident.”

“Was it an accident?” Laurent shot back, drawing up a common conspiracy that had haunted dinner conversations since it became clear that a full recovery for Auguste was out of the question. “As I recall, there was a rather contentious betrothal that fell through once you were hurt.”

“And she did not end up marrying Damen, in any case.”

“He almost killed you.” Laurent snarled. “And not a word of apology from him.”

“An accident.” Auguste insisted. “If I took a bad fall from my horse the same could have happened. Would you want to put every horse then to the blade? Ban them from the Reach? And this man is no beast; he is my friend. I miss my friend and I want him by my side during these games.” Typical Auguste, he was unwilling to see anything but good in people.

“You’re right, I know beasts that are smaller than him. The bannermen won’t stand for this.” Laurent was already beginning to give up on his anger in the face of Auguste’s sincere plea.

“Then they can sit for all I care.” Auguste smiled with complete unconcern.

“Why now?”

“Because…it is right. Ten years is long enough for scars to heal, in my mind. We do ourselves no favors by holding grudges and denying ourselves allies. The Prince of Dorne and I were quite close in our teenage years and I thought now would be an excellent time to remedy relations before we have a centuries-long blood feud that no one can remember the start of.”

“I have some concerns.” Laurent insisted.

“Well if we’re to talk at length,” Auguste put his book down on the low table, “would you be so kind to get us some wine? I know you love to hear the sound of your own voice.” Sharing a similar barbed wit, Auguste smiled until his eyes crinkled to let Laurent know the jest was not cruelly meant.
Laurent returned the smile and began to stand. “Yes, because a pitcher of wine will truly improve your decision making.”

As Laurent poured the wine into two hammered silver goblets, he began to think of all the problems Auguste had caused with a single letter. His personal physician recommended against undue stress and this situation seemed to be nothing but a potential fountain of stress. Laurent wondered how Auguste would take it if a fight broke out; he wondered what would happen if he were to challenge the Prince of Dorne to a duel the moment he set foot across the threshold.

But…he did not want to make Auguste upset.

He was protective over his elder brother, to the point that he felt like he was the older brother. When noble guests groped him and made obscene propositions…Laurent gritted his teeth and bore it. If he told Auguste, he would be furious and feel honor-bound to challenge the cretins. That would not help anyone and it would only hurt Auguste more.

As deep as his grudge ran…he knew he would give in to Auguste’s plans eventually. It was better in any case to minimize damage on either side. And if things came to blows, then he would injure the Dornish prince himself. Perhaps he could do so in the games or even poison the man at dinner so he could not compete in the first place. There were so many options.

Pleased with his new resolve, Laurent returned to his brother with a glass in each hand.

“What are your concerns?” Auguste asked, accepting the glass.

“When will we tell the bannermen? And how?” Laurent sipped lightly; in his experience having too much to drink was to put his body in jeopardy. “Unless you plan to sneak them through your window and hide them in your closet.” Laurent looked over at one of Auguste’s elaborate wardrobes, “Fifty might be a tall order but…they don’t need all of their limbs.”

“Keep talking like that, and I might have them stay in the quarters adjoining yours.”

Laurent glared at him over the glass.

“I suppose sooner rather than later. That way everyone can get accustomed to the idea. Perhaps at dinner tonight we could introduce the idea.” Auguste offered. Laurent grimaced a bit; he would have liked a little more time to plan. Perhaps have some little birds spread rumors to ease the idea in.

“Are you prepared for a potential uprising?”

“I’ll bring my sword.” Auguste assured. “Or maybe I could rap Ser Guion’s knuckles with my cane.” Laurent choked as he went for a drink of wine.

“That might actually be worth this entire ordeal.” Laurent admitted.

“Any other questions?”

“Have you kept in contact with him during all these years?”

“Only a little.” Auguste stared contemplatively at the surface of his wine. “He seemed very ashamed of what had occurred and…we fell out of contact around my twentieth year. I thought…it would be best for everyone involved if we…put our friendship to the side. For the sake of our families.”

Laurent felt a strong pinprick of guilt.
“Will I be forced to speak with Damen at any length, sit next to the Dornishmen at dinner, or interact with them in any way other than at the end of my blade?”

“I would hope that you would at least try to play a good host.” Auguste said gently.

“If I get the chance to kill him, I’ll make it a quick death.” Laurent promised. “That is me being a gracious host. Happy?”

“I’ll survive.” Auguste said. “Thank you for…at least considering this.” He set down his wine glass so he could plant a scratchy kiss on Laurent’s forehead. “Thank you for caring for me so. I know it’s…difficult, but this is important to me.”

“I love you, Auguste.” Laurent assured him. He leaned against his brother’s firm shoulder.

“I love you too. And don’t worry…you will only have to be around Prince Damen for a few weeks. Surely life will return to normal afterwards.” Auguste leaned into him as well and the two of them prepared to spend the rest of the afternoon together. Planning for the storm of next month.

The day of the arrival of the Dornishmen arrived altogether sooner than Laurent would have liked.

Of course they could not keep the secret forever and in the beginning, there was outrage at the very idea. Some even threatened to boycott the games altogether.

However as a month passed, most of the Tyrells and their bannermen had given up on arguing against the idea. It was hard to maintain a burning level of anger when faced with someone as placid and gentle as Auguste. He listened to every complaint with a persistent smile, nodding whenever the person made a compelling point, and then turned and did whatever the hell he wanted.

An entire wing of the western part of the castle was cordoned off for the use of the Martell faction and spices were ordered from the border of Storm’s End to cater to their flavorful palates. No inconsistencies were to be had; Auguste’s express instructions were that they should be treated with equal dignity and honor as any of their other guests.

So the rest of Highgarden took it upon themselves to make sure that the Prince of Dorne was overwhelmed with the beauty and hospitality of the Tyrells.

The gold-flecked marble floors had been polished to a glassy shine, the hangings, furnishings, and every room had been dusted and aired out with sprigs of lilac and lavender; and the crown jewel of Highgarden, the lush gardens themselves, had been pruned, watered and shaped into perfection that some would even hazard to call ‘paradise’.

Every man and woman with the proper funds commissioned new clothes for the occasion. Laurent saw endless yards of silk, muslin, brocade and cambric go to the royal seamstresses and turn into costumes in the garden colors popular in The Reach.

He could not care less about such things. His only new outfit was on Auguste’s insistence and he swore he wouldn’t wear it while the Dornishmen were in his home.

The day the barbarians were set to arrive, Laurent did not even bother to tie up his hair and left it loose and wavy. He would extend no effort on his part.

The castle was abuzz with activity, servants putting the finishing touches on massive, frothy gold and white bouquets as Laurent walked leisurely to go spend the morning in the relative calm of his
brother’s rooms.

“You know I am not happy about this.” Laurent said as he helped his beloved brother with his
bootlaces. Normally, a servant would be in charge of this, but…Auguste had done this for Laurent
when he was a child and he found it a labor of love. It was some precious time where they could be
open and candid with one another. “I will be civil but I refuse to be kind. I will greet him with
courtesy but do not expect me to simper and play a good host, as my feelings on the past remain
unchanged.”

Auguste smiled. “Do so for my sake.”

Laurent looked up, his anger waning in the face of Auguste’s gentle plea. “You are cheating.”

“And you are far too sweet to be holding a grudge for so long.” Auguste responded. Laurent ducked
to hide his small grin; a deep secret only a few knew, and even fewer would believe. Laurent felt
familiar hands shifting his hair behind his ear. “Bear with it for a few weeks; that’s all I ask.”

“Done with the laces,” Laurent responded, unwilling to promise a good mood.

Auguste stretched his foot, testing the feel of it in the unfamiliar boots. Normally he wore slippers of
fine leather, common in the Free Cities and the warmer ports, but today they were both attired in
more traditional garb.

Auguste wore a loose jacket of white silk, the lapels and hems embroidered with elaborate golden
roses over a tighter champagne-colored blouse. A thin golden circlet rested on his noble brow and a
dark cane tipped in gold completed his look. He looked noble. With his injury, loose, flowing
clothing had become more popular in The Reach, but Laurent took to wearing even more traditional
clothes. His clothing was also embroidered in gold, but the cloth was of a blue to match his eyes and
it clung tight to the lines of his body; this more sober appearance would serve to set Auguste apart,
make him more open and inviting.

Auguste stood smoothly, but Laurent saw how deeply the tip of the cane pushed into the carpet and
he offered his arm instinctively.

Rather than being offended by the gesture, Auguste smiled at the offer and took Laurent’s arm,
leaning on him heavily. Laurent had taken up sword-fighting and exercising his upper body not long
after the incident just so he could assist his brother this way…as well as deter some of the touchier
courtiers who cornered his slim teenaged form in the halls after dinner.

Not such an easy target now, although now he had heated himself into a prickly bad mood.

“Relax, little Laurent.” August insisted knocking his head against his brother’s. “You are ruining a
perfectly decent face with your expression.”

Laurent could not help himself and smiled wide. “That is the most I can expect from you? ‘Decent’?”

“More than decent.” He admitted. “Ready?”

Laurent nodded and the two of them exited into the corridors. The servants had finished their
decorating in the time it had taken Auguste and Laurent to dress, but now the nobles were populating
the halls, walking so quickly they were all but running. Highgarden loved a spectacle and a group of
wild, desert foreigners was enough to have everyone up early in order to congregate in the main
courtyard. It was unseemly.

The women were wearing some of their best clothes, attempting to look effortlessly lithe and fresh,
while the young men strapped their family swords to their hip and tried to look as though the entire event did not interest them in the least. It was as if they had forgotten that their highly anticipated guests had hurt his brother; he could have scratched their eyes out over their callousness.

At least they had some respect, and parted as Auguste and Laurent made their way at a much slower pace.

Auguste was beloved and handsome; Laurent saw the shine in people’s eyes. When he walked around like this, arm in arm with his brother, it was easy to forget all the pain he endured on a daily basis. There were respectful bows in his direction as the crowds flowed around them.

As they neared the main staircase, Laurent heard the sound of bells. “Will your bird be joining us? That would be a welcome I would enjoy seeing.”

Auguste smiled at some of the small, winding hallways servants and children used to run about unseen. “I think he would consider these men beneath his attention. And while he might not be in the crowds…I’m sure he will be watching. Always watching us.”

“Ominous.” Laurent replied.

It was no joking matter though. Those bells were a reminder that there were very few secrets in Highgarden.

The main courtyard of Highgarden was down an enormous flight of white marble stairs, the bannisters on either side made from solid gold and wrought in the shape of vines and thorny tangles of roses. The path to the main gate was composed of small white stones and was flanked on either side by the tall rosebushes famous in The Reach, the buds and blooms matching the pebbles beneath them. At the far end was a gate made of gold in the shape of a rose, with interlocking thorn branches serving as both a lock and a deterrent to any unwelcome guests. At the foot of the stairs, the path became a circle around another rosebush, this one veritably foaming with the golden flowers adorning their house sigil. Everyone crowded at the top of the stairs to get a better vantage point of their arriving guests and they matched the gardens in swathes of green, white, gold, and red.

The crowd parted respectfully for Auguste until he was at the very front of the throng, looking down at the insurmountable obstacle before him.

Laurent did not move. He felt his body quiver unnecessarily, his heart beating hot. He had not felt so unsettled and angry since one of the lords from The Vale of Arryn had tried to drunkenly press his suit by attempting to relieve Laurent of his trousers in the library. He worked very hard to make his expression smooth and unperturbed.

“It is customary,” Auguste finally interjected with all gentleness, “that someone waits at the path to greet honored guests.”

“Yes, but these guests have no honor.” Laurent said staring at the white expanse.

“If you do not go down to greet them,” Auguste continued, “then I will be forced to.” Then, with a smile at Laurent’s cold stubbornness, “And I don’t know how well you would like to see me carried back up like a maiden in the arms of your sworn enemy. I would much like to hear a song about it actually.”

Laurent’s façade broke and he had to look away to hide his smile. “Damn you, Auguste. Stay where you are. I’ll go down in your stead, but you must know,” Laurent withdrew his arm, “I only do this out of love for you.”
“Precious brother.”

“I’ll not smile.” Laurent promised, his one last obstinacy as he began to walk down the stairs. On the way down, he had plenty of time to compose his expression back into a mask of cold disinterest.

His boots crunched against the stones of the path and, this far down, it drowned out the sound of the conversation of his noblemen. He was going to face this horde of barbarians alone and unarmed. He had not brought his sword; just as he would refuse his smiles, his good humor, he would not give them the satisfaction of his fear.

Laurent walked past the golden rosebush to the crux of where the path became straight and stood patiently. For a short while he wondered if the sky was so blue in Dorne, if the air smelled so clean and sweet…

He could have been standing for minutes or hours deep in the pool of his own thoughts before he heard the shout from the guards all the way at the end of the path where he could see the tiny golden square of the gates.

“Martell bannermen approaching! Open the gates!”

Laurent took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders and gazing with all intensity at that square of gold.

He did not see much at first, just the same bit of gold attempting to blind him but then…it darkened completely and he saw dust rising in a hazy cloud. So, they had brought the dirt of the desert along with them. As the horde approached, Laurent could begin to see colors and shapes of horses and riders, as well as the fact that they were riding as thought it was a military charge. Laurent could feel the stones shuddering under his feet. Rather than give an inch, he dug his heels into the stones and wondered if they would trample him underfoot.

As they approached, Laurent saw the shimmering red-gold standard of House Martell and heat rose in his heart. The riders did not slow.

They were so close now he could hear their whooping laughs and shouts, the jingling of their metal bits and spurs. Still they did not slow and Laurent refused to move. The earth seemed to shake under his feet but he was still.

At once they were upon him.

Like a rush of flame, suddenly Laurent felt as though he could not breathe for the heat. His hair flew out behind him and he was duly aware of the horses circling him in a fortress of fiery red-orange and the glinting gold strands of his hair. It was like being encircled in fire and only his extreme concentration kept him from collapsing to his knees.

As soon as he caught his breath, it was over.

What he thought were flames were actually lengths of silk in sunset colors draped across the backs of the high-spirited horses, the glint coming from stones and gold cleverly adorning the saddles, bits and bridles. The horse rearing in front of him was a beautiful creature, enormous and glossy black, and Laurent could not help but notice that it looked eerily similar to the horse he had wanted as a boy in Riverrun. He looked up…and then up, even further than he thought would be necessary.

The man in front of him blocked out the sun; even seated on horseback, Laurent could tell he was far and away the tallest person he had ever met, not to mention the breadth of his shoulders. One muscular bicep looked as though it might be thicker around than a woman’s waist.
“An oasis,” He could hear a smile in that deep voice. The accent of the desert and the seaside was thick as honey on his tongue.

“I am Laurent Tyrell,” He found his voice and the ice within cut through that unbearable heat, “Second son of Highgarden, brother of Auguste Tyrell. And I am here on his behalf to bid you… welcome to our home.” He spat it out like poison.

“You bid me welcome.”

Laurent inclined his head, feeling a dozen burning stares on his body. “All of Highgarden has come to welcome you.” There could be no doubt now that the behemoth in front of him was Prince Damen.

The ground jolted as the man dismounted and stood before Laurent, the top of his chest at eye-level. His smile cut wide and white, his voice even lower in the soft, indecent whisper of a lover. “But do you welcome me, Laurent Tyrell?”

He was entirely too close; Laurent could feel the heat rippling off his bare skin attempting to melt the chill of his hatred.

He took stock of the man.

Damen Martell was just as tall and enormous as the first impression. He wore no shirt—only a red scarf tossed lazily around his neck and head to shield him from the dust of the road—his loose brown pants were tucked into fine burgundy and gold boots. His belt was the leather of snakeskin, patterned in brown with chips of black. Gold glinted off the sweat of his coppery skin and small gaudy accents: a drape of golden cloth over his left shoulder emblazoned with a scarlet sun, an armband of hammered gold on the right arm, though this time the sun was carved of rubies; two thick gold chains wrapped across his chest, a drip of pearls edged in gold hung from the peak of his wavy black hair, and obscene gold hoops threaded through his dark nipples.

Up close his smile was only made whiter by the deep, rich color of his skin, and a dimple cut deep in his left cheek. Strong-jawed, beardless, and possessing warm, smiling eyes in the exotic red-brown of the desert, he was so handsomely built and fine of face, men and women were going to be tripping over themselves to garner his attentions. Laurent was not swayed.

He looked so…foreign it was an affront to the eyes. Handsome as he was, kind as his smile, Laurent could not stand the sight of him.

“No.”

Damen laughed a little at his cheek. “I am Damen Martell, Prince of Dorne. Thank you for coming to greet us, Laurent. May I call you ‘Laurent’?”

“No. Please follow me.”

They began to dismount then, the wild Dornishmen, the lords and athletes who would be competing against him and living under his roof. Though not of the size of their prince, they were just as wildly attired and would be easily recognizable.

As stableboys came forward to take the reins, Prince Damen attempted to keep pace with Laurent, making conversation, while his entourage followed behind them at a courteous distance. Damen was of an infuriatingly sunny disposition.

“I remember you, you know. You were so small last we met but your hair is the same and your eyes.
Your eyes are beautiful.” He spoke low and fast, as if the two of them were whispering sweet nothings in the gardens. “Like the sea at midday. Have you been to the seashore? It would be my honor to take you to the shores of Dorne.”

Laurent smiled. His honeyed, straightforward nature was no match for the barbed wit of Highgarden. “I remember you too. I remember the feeling of my palm striking your cheek. Surely that is more pleasurable than any view of the sea.”

A curl of warm breath caressed his ear. “If your sharp words can bring such joy, I can only imagine what a slap would bring.”

How odd. Someone aside from Auguste who enjoyed the insults. He refused to give Prince Damen a glance. “I’m disappointed. You, a prince and a knight, speak like a fool from a ladies’ poem.”

They were climbing the steps now. “Sweet Tyrell, all men are fools, and all men are knights, where beauty is concerned.”

Ah, clever man, quoting a story that only served to support Laurent’s opinion and showcased his easygoing nature. He had to try very hard not to be charmed by the quotation and turned his smile into an amused quirk of the lips. Luckily, he and Prince Damen had reached the top of the stairs and Damen’s attention was otherwise engaged.

The moment he stepped up onto the main entrance hall, it became wildly clear to everyone present just how enormous the Dornish prince was. Men who had brought their swords in unspoken statements of animosity looked at each other, not one of them willing to challenge or speak out of turn, the cowards. Women took stock of him and primped infinitesimally with a toss of the head or a coy smile. Damen, however, only had eyes for one person.

“My friend, welcome to my home.”

With an expression torn between sorrow over seeing the cane and ecstasy due to Auguste’s welcoming smile, Damen moved forward to embrace Auguste and the two whispered low and intimate as the best of friends again. It was hard to say whose smile was more delighted and Laurent felt that perhaps this inconvenience was worth it for Auguste’s joy.

When they had finished speaking, Auguste turned back to his rapt court to make introductions.

“Everyone, it has been too long but…I would like for you to join me in welcoming our guests, Prince Damen of Dorne and his loyal companions. They will be living here at our pleasure and I hope you will do your utmost to make them feel comfortable here.”

Surely the whores would be of more assistance in that respect, Laurent thought to himself.

Auguste seemed pleased that no one openly challenged Damen to a duel. “Ah! And what a fine example I am setting. My friend, you must be tired from your long journey. Please join me in my chambers and I will have servants show your companions to their rooms.”

Damen’s thick arm was probably much easier to lean on than Laurent’s wiry one, and Auguste walked with such happiness in his step that for a moment his limp was not pronounced. Their heads remained close together so they could continue to talk as they walked through the halls.

When they turned, arm in arm, Laurent felt a quick pang of something very much like jealousy. So odd, he should have felt relief that Auguste was not forcing him to interact with Damen any more than was necessary. But it was like he was ten years old again and he could not garner the attention of the older boys. It was not that he wanted attention from Damen, not that at all.
Within a few moments the women of Highgarden had already begun to whisper amongst themselves and Laurent caught bits of their opinions.

*He is built like a dream.* True, but he had wounded Auguste. *A voice like fine wine, like a perfect low note on the strings.* Which he only used to say foolish things. *A smile that could melt you where you stood…* That, Laurent could not oppose but he chased the thought from his mind. Their words pricked at him, an annoyance he couldn’t place.

Steeling his resolve, Laurent walked towards his own rooms, determined to avoid the charming Dornishman at any cost.

He took refuge in the gardens before dinner, in hopes that the sheer size and complexity would deter their new guests from exploring. To a small extent he was correct.

There was only a pair of Dornish bannermen who were under the intense, flirtatious gaze of a cluster of women from the Reach. Their twittering laughter was a great annoyance to Laurent as it reminded him of their comments of the prince, and therefore brought the man to mind so much so that he could not concentrate on his reading.

He snapped his book shut with the intent of stalking past them with a cold glare to showcase his displeasure as searched for a new spot to read.

But the entire garden fell to a hush when a slim arm took his.

When he looked over he understood why. The young lady, who had been so bold as to take his arm without first asking permission, was undoubtedly the most beautiful woman at court and all other women nearby took note of the new imbalance with a great deal of concern.

In fact, she looked as if she could be a cousin of his: her honey-colored hair long and wavy, her wide eyes a light blue-gray, and a distinct look of cunning perception in the way she looked at him. But she was as tacky as her prince. The pearls woven into her locks were cheap seed pearls, her dress was a wild mess of sunset colors and was slit down deep in the front and the back, revealing huge swathes of smooth, creamy skin.

“Your Lordship,” She introduced herself with a feline grin, “I am Lady Jokaste Dayne of Starfall. I hoped you could show me around your exquisite gardens.”

Laurent had no qualms with this woman; in fact, he quite enjoyed talking with women. “Of course.”

The gravel crunched under their feet as Laurent led her at a leisurely pace through the least complex of the garden circuits. Recently grown, it reminded Laurent of his mother: all gold and white with blooms of indigo that bordered on blue. At first, Lady Jokaste was pleased enough to just walk and enjoy the surroundings without speaking.

“Your have not the looks of a Tyrell.” She began bluntly.

Laurent thought of the common look in the Reach: hair in every spectrum of brown, eyes ranging between green, hazel, and brown. Nothing much like him.

“My mother,” he explained, “was half Targaryen. She might have had a drop of Lannister blood as well to turn the white hair into gold. Forgive me for saying, but you have not the looks of your prince.”
She smiled, peachy and pretty, at the word games they were playing. “Clever, clever. I am from the mountains of northwest Dorne and we are considerably…lighter than our desert and coastal counterparts. They call us Stony Dornishmen; the prince is from the seaside so his looks would be that of a Salty Dornishman and the darkest come from the deserts, Sandy Dornishmen.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t know much of my homeland, do you?” Laurent chose not to showcase any ignorance, any weakness towards the woman but she seemed undeterred by his silence. “Allow me to tell you of some of the people that have accompanied me.”

Dramatics, all dramatics and Laurent listened quietly to the names and titles and relationships as he attempted to categorize them and save them for future reference. It was enough for him to understand that she was Prince Damen’s lover, or she had been up until very recently, and that her feelings for him seemed lukewarm at best.

His attention caught when Jokaste pointed out someone specific from where he was lounging casually under a marble arch, scanning the gardens. Even from so far away, Laurent could see a very strong similarity between the man and the prince of Dorne, so he was not at all surprised when Jokaste introduced him as:

“Kastor Sand, the prince’s bastard older brother. He was the one who finally convinced Damen to bring me with them to Highgarden.” Her eyes glittered with something Laurent could identify but not empathize with. “He’s probably looking for me right now.”

His eyes did flick up and hold on the two of them as they came into view.

Jokaste, on the other hand, did her absolute best to pretend as though his gaze didn’t affect her in the least. But she was courting a prince and—Laurent quickly realized—his bastard brother as well, so she was the most skillful flirt he had ever seen.

Without seeming to move, as if the wind itself had decided to help her showcase her assets, her curtain of lovely hair was tossed back, the light catching the shine of the pearls in her hair, revealing her graceful throat. Kastor Sand looked after her like a man starved. It was masterfully done.

“That was lovely,” He remarked softly, only letting a bit of dryness seep into his tone.

When she smiled at him it was soaked in wickedness. “Really, you noticed? That means a lot coming from someone with…your tastes.”

Oh, but she was quick! Laurent heartily liked her though he did not let his expression change. “My lady, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

She snorted, very unladylike. “Please, my eyes are my best feature, and they work as well. And I can see as well as anyone that you have no interest in fluttering eyelashes and lush hips. Tell me: which tall, attractive stranger took your maidenhead?”

Laurent looked at her long. They could be cousins.

He was sure she could empathize to his ‘experience’ more than she knew. Fumbling hands reaching without permission, kisses that silenced protests, unwelcome propositions, and arms that formed barriers preventing easy escape. He knew the feelings of disgust and repulsion probably as well as she did and had learned early to hide when lecherous men came riding through the gates.

Instead he changed the subject. “Your hair would be your best feature if you did not twine it with
beads.” Her eyes flashed at his return barb. “Are you promised then? To either of them?”

This was obviously not one of her favorite subjects.

“Ah…the ease of a highborn lord,” There was a distinct note of bitterness to her tone, “I am the daughter of a third cousin of Lord Dayne and…it might be too much to even hope for a match like that, though my ambition compels me. As for the other…even the lowest star does not fall so low as to hit the sand…”

Laurent heard a rustle of leaves and a soft tingle of a bell and he too was struck by the information that he had just been given.

So Lady Jokaste had been sent to further her house ambitions, and not on her illustrious name, but purely for her beauty. Such was the fate of many ladies with a pretty face and not much else. But the other information was more scintillating; from her tone and the hard clench of her features, it was clear she was more in love with the Prince’s bastard brother than the Prince himself; it was duty and ambition, rather than passion and attraction that drove her to one brother rather than the other.

Lady Jokaste watched him carefully and she must have realized that she had given too much away on a first meeting, because she carefully withdrew her arm. Luckily, she was given an excuse in that they had reached the end of the footpath.

“I have taken up enough of your time, I believe.” A slight incline of the head and a smile that showed she had enjoyed his company just as much as he had enjoyed hers. “I will see you again soon your Lordship. Perhaps some night you can escort me to dinner…provided you can stomach touching a beautiful woman for more than a brief walk in the park.”

“That I can,” Laurent snapped back, “provided you own and wear a dress in a tasteful color this time.”

With a giggle promising future battles, Lady Jokaste glided back up towards the castle with all eyes on her. Kastor Sand emerged from the hedge maze and watched her go; Laurent thought that it might not be so bad to marry someone like her. Truly they would never be intimate in such a union but at least she would be interesting to spend time with.

With the short walk, Laurent decided he could spend another half hour reading before he went to prepare for dinner. Perhaps going to read in his quarters would lead to fewer interruptions.

The group of women had stopped making doe-eyes at the Dornish bannermen and were talking with themselves under the boughs of a cherry tree. The men themselves were leaning against the white marble pillars of an arch and watching everyone go by with predatory interest. Laurent had seen the look many times before and he dreaded being the subject of it…but he had to walk past them to get back to the castle.

Their gaze burned on him like brand and he knew the words were coming before he heard them spoken aloud. Meant to be a whisper between friends, it was ‘murmured’ just loud enough so that Laurent could hear.

“Oh stop my heart, pretty boy. I’d love to see that blond hair spread on my lap.”

Laughter like a volley of arrows and the second joined in the ribald talk “Look this way, sweet thing, and I’ll show you something nice and long.” Laurent gripped his book tight. “Don’t be so stuck up, sweet boy.”

“Skin is so white. Like cream…do you like sucking milk and cream?”
Laurent continued to ignore them, not wanting to start a fight the first day, especially when he had
not brought a full-sized weapon with him. He was not foolish enough to go about unarmed but…
with a cold trickle of anxiety he realized their voices were getting closer. They were following him.

He was no longer fifteen; he did not allow panic to grip him. He just needed to stay in populated
areas and, if they did not relent, make a scene. He would not let them terrorize him. They kept
propositioning him, following at a leisurely pace, though he felt as though they were breathing down
his neck.

Unluckily, the people thinned out near the entrance to the palace and Laurent could stand the
indignation no longer and whirled. They were smiling, which made him even angrier.

His smile was icy brittle. “You are so convinced I could find pleasure in your company? From what I
hear the Dornish are less inclined to intelligent conversation and good fucking than chickens and
pigs. Perhaps I could show you to a barnyard; maybe you could learn something.” That got rid of the
smiles.

“You’ve got a poisonous mouth, little Tyrell.”

“And you have no honor, little Dornishmen.” Laurent said, carelessly motioning to the man’s crotch.

They were on him in a moment—how amusing that a quip about honor would be enough to inspire
action—and he was ready to try and twist out of their grasp when someone shouted at them from
across the knoll. “What do you think you are doing?” Laurent clenched his teeth; he recognized the
voice. Did it have to be

Fire in the gardens, Damen Martell walked with unspoken fury, one of his steps worth three of any
other man’s. Luckily, he was not with Auguste, only his impassive captain—Ser Nikandros, Laurent
remembered Jokaste calling him—but unluckily, his expression was one of barely restrained fury. It
was actually quite terrifying.

The bannermen dropped Laurent’s arms immediately and he felt the imprints of their fingers
lingering. It would bruise. Heads hung low, they refused to look up as he came abreast of them.
Despite what he felt for the man, Laurent couldn’t help but be impressed by the effectiveness of it.

Laurent glared, but Prince Damen seemed utterly oblivious to that fact. His eyes were blazing as he
regarded his men.

When he spoke again, it was in a low snarl so passersby could not eavesdrop. It did not decrease the
feeling of danger, however. “I asked you, what do you think you are doing? Shy violets now, are
you? Speak.”

When no one made a motion to explain, Prince Damen turned to Laurent and his expression softened
slightly though his accent was still thick with anger. “Laurent Tyrell…please be so kind to explain
why my men have placed violent hands on you.” He reached out one enormous hand and gently
scooped up Laurent’s arm. Surprisingly deft, his hands tugged at the laces of his sleeves and the
fabric fell open like flower petals. He ran gentle, warm hands up the exposed white skin, raising
goosebumps and Laurent saw as well as he did the angry red finger marks.

Raising his chin at the indignity of it all, Laurent relayed in monotone exactly what had gone on and
how he had planned to twist free so as not to harm a guest. Such a thing would be dishonorable.

Prince Damen’s handsome face grew more and more murderous with each successive detail though,
to his benefit, his grip did not tighten. Nikandros remained absolutely impassive, but Prince Damen’s
men had gone mottled with fear and shame.

When he finished speaking, there was a long, pregnant silence.

In the next instant, Laurent did not envy the Dornish bannermen their position as their prince whirled on them, eyes as blazing red as his clothes. In his fury he actually looked even taller and larger than before, and his voice came out hot and angry.

“This is how you repay my kindness, the Tyrell’s hospitality?! You, supposedly the pride of Dorne, the reflectors of my leadership? You shame yourselves and me and your houses. That I have brought such animals bearing my name into Highgarden. You speak to Laurent Tyrell as though he were a common whore; he would be within his rights, in my eyes, to cut you down where you stand for the insult. I ought to strip you of your titles, no—for what you have done,” He shook his head violently, dark waves bouncing, “for what you have *said* to Laurent Tyrell, I should take your tongue and one hand on this green.” His hand reached for the hilt of the sword at his hip and Laurent knew he was not bluffing. “But I will not on this day. You are to leave The Reach immediately. Go home to your families in shame.” He spit at their feet and they did not dare flinch or look up. “Upon my return… for each day Laurent Tyrell shows the marks of your violence you'll receive five lashes, one for each finger. Maybe then you will think before you open your foolish mouths. Nikandros, get them out of my sight.”

Dismissively, he turned, knowing his orders would be obeyed. Laurent felt his whole body tremble with the feeling of vindication and amazement as the two were led away by their stone-faced superior. Prince Damen watched them go as a half-sated viper might eye a bird, deciding whether or not to strike again.

When they had disappeared from view completely, Prince Damen turned back to Laurent, his eyes low as he took up Laurent’s arm again. It felt a little exhilarating, if Laurent was honest with himself, to have someone so large and dangerous wait on him. Prince Damen’s fine, dark hands threaded the gold laces through the eyelets of Laurent’s sleeves. “Forgive me. I would not have had that done to you.”

Laurent yanked back his hand the moment it was tied tight. “I did not want you here either.”

When he looked up, his light brown eyes rooted Laurent in place. His smile caused his cheek to dimple in a way that some might call ‘devastatingly handsome’ but…Laurent despised him. “Your brother mentioned that when we spoke—.”

Conflicting feelings overcame him, but his love for Auguste won out in the end. “Don’t talk about my brother.”

“I am sorry for what I have done.” Prince Damen insisted, looking as though he wanted to take Laurent’s hand again to keep him from running. “And for what they did to you. Personally, I apologize.”

Laurent’s heart skipped a beat at the feeling again. He had to force his words to sound angry. “I am used to it.”

Prince Damen’s look darkened for a moment as he took in Laurent’s meaning and perhaps imagined all the things that could have happened to him. Normally Laurent would never admit such a thing aloud but he hoped it let this Dornish prince know he was made of sterner stuff than most people expected.

When he took too long to respond, Laurent attempted to push past him. At chest-level, he saw Prince
Damen was now wearing ruby studs in his nipples and navel. It was obscene, it was…

“Wait!” The plea was so intense and heartfelt, Laurent stopped halfway up the stone steps and looked back. Prince Damen’s eyes were wide and shining as he stared at Laurent. “You need not forgive me. You do not need to give me your favor or your smiles but…” His wide smile was back and Laurent wanted to scream over how such good looks were wasted on someone so…so… “if you would accompany me to dinner and sit by my side, I would be,” he took a moment to search for an appropriate word, “grateful.”

Laurent did, in fact, grant the prince the honor of a smile, feeling a twinge of guilt as Damen Martell prepared himself for a positive response.

“No.”
3. Damen

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, has it been a month since my last update???
I'm so sorry for all of my readers for keeping you waiting for this for so long, but I've been working hard on my big bang (which will be released on the 21st!); I hope this chapter lives up to the wait and it's long (like 30+ pages)! This time it's Damen's turn. Since the POV switches, I drop little hints about the future and feelings and Damen mostly focuses on feeling and touch in his chapter. Not as descriptive unless it comes to Laurent. And yes, he has like every type of nipple and navel ring you could ever imagine and I have a feeling he switches them out daily, depending on his outfit and mood.
Also 2 disclaimers for this chapter: First, I am no great songwriter, so please don't be too harsh on the lewd little ballad I've written ;) Second, this chapter has some small TRIGGER WARNINGS from the tags so please keep that in mind as you go into this chapter.
Next chapter (which will hopefully come out sooner than this one) will start the games AND have a new POV! I wonder if you guys can guess who it is...
Enjoy!

3. Damen

Laurent Tyrell visited Damen of his own volition only in dreams. Fully clothed and only sparing a coy blue glance, half a smile, rarely a whispered name, they were some of the most erotic dreams Damen had ever experienced. He awoke parched and the sweet, chilled wine of Highgarden, swallowed in cupfuls, did not seem to help in the least.

He was a man engulfed in flames and only one thing could douse them.

On his ride to the Reach with his men, Damen often thought that seeing Auguste Tyrell would be the highlight of his trip—indeed seeing his friend had been a great joy—but in the first four days, his mind was also consumed with thoughts of another. And nothing else could bring him greater joy, much to Nikandros’ chagrin.

Even now it was the dead of night in his own lavish rooms, all silk and dark and silence, and he could only drink wine and pace on his balcony.

He remembered the first sight of Highgarden, when the first to stare him down was not his old friend, but a sharp golden beauty who did not flinch even at the approach of half a hundred horses. Nikandros had looked at him with desperation in his pale grey eyes but it was far too late for Damen. Each subsequent interaction had been comparable to shade-of-the-evening, the same color as Laurent’s bewitching eyes: first a little twist at the bitterness, but then... then it was intoxicating and all you wanted was more of it, you wanted to drown in it. Damen removed the bottle of wine from where it sweated in a bath of crushed ice and poured himself another cup.

He looked out onto the garden view and saw spots of gold shimmering through the tangles of thorns and thought on Laurent more.
It was hard, honestly. In the three days he had been in Highgarden, most had been spent by Auguste’s side. His friend was just as he had remembered: sweet and smiling, though now he was placid as blue lake, where in the past he had been Damen’s equal in fire and vigor. Regardless, the two of them spent hours talking and reminiscing when Damen was not engaged with the other men and competitors of court. However, it was hard for Damen not to turn every conversation to the topic of Auguste’s elusive brother, the subject of which he would never tire.

“You look angry,” Auguste had remarked after Damen had returned to his side from being refused in his offer to escort Laurent to dinner.

“My men,” Damen began, “some of my dishonorable men said foul things about your brother within earshot.” Damen noticed as Auguste’s smile wavered and he gripped the chair with white knuckles. “I had them sent out of the city immediately.”

Auguste breathed, though Damen could sense former fury underneath his practiced calm. “I see. I thank you for that. I would have hated for my brother to be shamed for spilling a guests’ blood in our home.”

“They would have deserved it.”

Auguste had turned his head so he was staring outside, regaining his composure, Damen realized. “My brother…has faced many hardships. And he will not tell me for fear of my condition; in many cases I would be honor-bound to fight for him. And, rest assured, woe to any man who besmirches my brother’s honor. So I thank you, my friend, for defending him when I cannot.” Damen had felt the guilt so acutely then. All of this could have been avoided if his aim had been truer, and the thought must have shown on his face. Auguste smiled. “Enough bitter talk; what’s done is done and we can focus on the coming weeks.”

Damen could let his thoughts linger now.

From Laurent’s poisonous remark to Auguste’s insinuated fury, men had put their hands on Laurent Tyrell before and the thought was fire in his chest. He should have killed his men on the grass.

“Have any men courted your brother honorably?” Damen had pressed him during dinner conversation.

Auguste had smiled in that ambivalent way he did when he wanted to dance around the truth. “The little birds that whisper to me care very little for honorable courtships. They only deliver on the illicit. Speaking of, have you had some of the roast pheasant?”

Courtship…looking up at the moon now, he thought of how he had taken easy courtship for granted. He wondered if it was due to his royal blood and the gifts he could provide that made him popular with any other beauty but Laurent’s ability to hold a grudge proved an insurmountable obstacle.

His second morning in The Reach, Damen had sent a messenger to Laurent’s chambers bearing a velvet-lined box, inside a rose pin carved from deep red Dornish coral, so cunningly created that the individual petals were thin and fine as real rose petals. It currently sat next to his bed alongside a terse note of refusal written in Laurent’s fine hand. The next day expensive chocolates fashioned in the shape of suns, moons, and stars, seasoned with orange zest, cinnamon, and chili met the same fate. There were the bolts of cloth and the beautiful stones but… Every invitation to accompany Laurent to lunch or dinner was also met with cold dismissal and a servant who looked to be on the verge of a fit of nerves.

He was going to have to rethink his approach.
Auguste mentioned in passing that Laurent loved riding and reading and Damen wondered how the boy would react if Damen sent a horse through the halls into Laurent’s chambers. But he did have an elegant seat on a horse and an even more elegant form on the practice greens.

Damen had watched him fight with the greatest interest. Laurent was slippery and fighting with him was as complex as a game of cyvasse. It was no surprise that he rarely lost. It was something they held in common though...Damen had yet to discover who would prevail in a duel as Laurent ignored any Dornishman’s request.

Damen could count the number of conversations he had had with Laurent on one hand. Their frosty introduction in the main courtyard and Damen’s apologies for his men’s actions had been the first two. The third conversation had happened in the stables when Damen had come across Laurent stroking a familiar silken black snout. Damen watched him for a moment and listened as Laurent murmured to it in a baby-sweet voice.

“A fine mount, no?” He asked, unable to help himself from smiling.

Laurent’s head snapped to the side but he did not jerk for fear of startling the horse. His eyes narrowed with dislike. “A pity it is wasted on the rider.” Damen moved forward and was surprised to see his spirited horse so docile. “Is this the beast that you rode when you crippled my brother?”

That made the smile falter as Damen felt the familiar chip of guilt twist in his heart. He took a moment to compose himself. “Erm...no that was this one’s father...Blackie.” Laurent clapped a hand over his mouth, about to laugh in spite of himself. “I never claimed to be a creative child at seven. This fellow has a slightly more dignified name, I assure you.”

“‘I see.”

“You also have a fine horse.” Damen recalled the dappled white and gray horse Laurent rode at a lively pace down the pebbled paths. “A gift from your father? Or your brother?”

“A name day gift.” Laurent looked over as the black snout of Damen’s horse bumped into his shoulder in a plea for more attention.

“A gift well suited to you.” It was becoming clear that Laurent was not interested in having a conversation and Damen respected that. “I can see that you are busy at the moment and I was just passing through. I wish you a good afternoon, Laurent.”

Laurent only inclined his head by way of farewell.

The fourth time had been during the most recent dinner when Damen and Laurent had been placed next to each other in the banquet hall. Damen had helped Auguste to his seat, the two of them laughing at a shared joke, and took a seat next to his friend. To his surprise, Laurent pulled out the chair next to him, looking just as surprised as Damen felt when they locked eyes.

“You—.”

“I assure you, I was not in charge of the seating arrangement.” Damen assured.

Laurent rubbed his temples in irritation. “The gods aim to vex me this evening. Brother, wine?” Laurent poured himself a generous glass of wine and Damen looked him over as he poured a bit of his own.

Laurent looked a little whiter than usual and the set of his mouth was grim. The circles under his eyes were very dark and he was constantly massaging his temples as if in exhaustion. Damen could hardly...
focus on a lively conversation over the difference in vintages in Dorne and the Reach because he was concerned with Laurent’s peaked appearance.

“You appear tired, Laurent.” Damen remarked, offering the young man a portion of baked apples and peppers.

“What on earth gives you such a notion?” Laurent ignored the food offered.

“Your lovely mood.” Damen replied in his driest tone and Laurent glared over at him.

“I…have not been sleeping well as of late.”

“Too much excitement?” Damen asked, once again teasing as Laurent avoided most crowds as if they were afflicted.

“Too many Dornishmen.”

It was obviously a lie but such a thing would most likely be too intimate to share with someone Laurent considered an enemy. He did not press for details, though…he was curious.

Damen smiled into his wineglass. “I apologize if our good nature suits you ill. I hope you have more restful nights in the future but if not…perhaps some sweetsleep for your wine?”

“I’ll drink two drops, if you drink three.” Laurent offered with a wicked smile.

Damen smiled back and downed his remaining wine by way of response. Something sparkled in Laurent’s eyes as he watched the bob of Damen’s throat as he drank. For a moment, he wondered if Laurent had slipped the poison in his wine.

But he turned away lightly and had not spoken to Damen for the remainder of dinner. That was the extent of their conversations.

It seemed hopeless and Damen was not the type to push his suit too far.

He took a sip of the wine and gazed up at the bright, heavy moon. He would cease sending gifts and simply treat Laurent with the proper respect. He could do no more as he could not force the young man to fall in love with him.

He would have to bear the side effects with grace: the sleepless nights and Nikandros’ knowing looks of chagrin. Tonight would be no different, he felt, as he lounged on the balcony with his thoughts and his wine. Sleep would not claim him and he would be haunted by his own thoughts and that lovely face.

The first week was almost up and the Great Games would commence in the next day and a half. As a result, men and women from every noble house in Westeros had been arriving in Highgarden in droves. The large, bombastic men from Storm’s End, the cunning Lannisters with their gold hair and gaudy armor, and the sleek warriors from Riverrun were the first to arrive. Then came the haughty royals from Dragonstone, the silent and menacing Iron Islanders, and the cocky, distrustful lords from the Vale of Arryn. And then finally the people from the North: cold, pale, and somber as winter winds.

The palace was becoming full with both new and familiar faces and Damen secretly thought to himself that it was good that Highgarden was so fruitful. Lord Aleron kept a magnificent table every
evening and this most recent banquet was promising to be the most lavish affair yet.

Just as usual Damen would go with Auguste as his escort to dinner as Kastor monopolized Jokaste every evening. Damen smiled to himself over her boldness out from under the watchful eyes of Sunspear. At least Nikandros had given up his nagging as a betrothal seemed improbable at this point and Damen was determined to help any way he could.

Since he was in somewhat civilized society this evening and they would be appalled by his constant lack of shirt, Damen had opted for a fitted vest in an eye-catching red-orange to match his scarves. His arms he left bare, save for his gold bracelets; it seemed a waste to cover them.

"Are you ready to go meet your scores of guests?" Damen asked jokingly when Auguste opened the door. He looked like he would have preferred to take dinner in his chambers.

"My great delight. I would much rather watch raindrops race down a windowpane."

"Duty calls." Damen offered his arm and Auguste took it gratefully, tucking his cane under his other arm. He seemed not to mind having it on hand, regardless of any rude stares.

"Indeed it does."

On their walk over to the banquet hall, they reminisced about some friends and infamous lords and ladies from the previous Great Games. The old lord from the stormlands who went so deep in his cups that he mistook one of the hounds for his lady wife (which, in all honesty, wasn’t much of a stretch to imagine) or the daughter of one of the Iron Island lords who deflowered more maidens than twenty men put together. The scandal that had ensued—and doubtless the disappointment of the maids as they realized no man’s tongue was quite as clever—was legendary. The two of them were giggling like schoolboys by the time they heard the din coming from the dining hall.

The Highgarden banquet hall was large enough for an army and a half, the entire room carved from marble veined with gold and rose quartz. Eight large dining tables carved from honeyed oak were laid with place settings encrusted with gold and servants dipped lightly in an out of the crowds with silver flagons of wine.

It was a hall from a young girl’s fantasy and the company within was dressed to match the finery.

All eyes were on Damen and Auguste as they entered and Auguste nodded in respect to his guests. Damen couldn’t help but notice that Laurent was not in the crowds.

As soon as their feet touched the hall floor, people flocked to Auguste, their handsome host, and Damen extricated himself with a grin. Auguste winked at him, a bit of good humor before he was forced to socialize in the candlelight.

Damen much preferred intimate conversations toward the outer edges of parties and began to scan for an interesting group.

Ah, there was one, conveniently placed next to a small serving boy balancing goblets of wine.

Ser Pallas Santagar, sweet and handsome as he was, had already collected a group of smiling admirers from where he was standing near the leftmost banquet table. The group welcomed Damen warmly into the middle of their conversation when he sidled up next to his man and he was introduced to the others, mostly men from the Reach. Pallas only paused at one man.

“And, I’m sorry we haven’t yet been introduced. You are?”
The man was a scruffy wild looking specimen with his ‘best’ clothes mismatched and worn with casual confidence. His smile sparkled wickedly in his dark eyes. “Oh you wouldn’t know me, sweet thing. I’m Lazar but the smallfolk call me the Knight of the Wild Dogs.”

“I know you!” One of the lesser nobles from the Reach gasped in outraged recognition. “How on earth did you get inside the castle?”

Lazar easily ignored him, his smile wolfish as he refused to tear his eyes away from Pallas. “You’re pretty, boy. Why did no one escort you to dinner?” Pallas blushed fiercely and Lazar seemed to appreciate the sight. “Prettier than the peach, you are.”

“You, ser, are out of your mind,” Another man shot back, “Highgarden’s Peach has no equal.” Lazar gave the man a look like he might tear out a tongue for the question of his preferences and, with a name like ‘Knight of the Wild Dogs’, Damen had a feeling he might actually be crazy enough to do it.

Luckily, still-blushing Pallas attempted to diffuse the situation. “Forgive me, my lords. I have no idea of whom we are speaking.”

“Nor I.” Damen admitted.

Then the conversation dulled to a conspiratorial hush, which could only mean that the topic was very near and dear to someone at court. It was the Tyrell bannermen who explained, with wicked, lustful expressions.

“You know him.” Damen knew immediately and he had to resist very hard from joining Lazar in the tongue tearing. “Prettier than any lady here, Laurent Tyrell is. The Tightest Little Bud in Highgarden.” The other men nodded as they obviously took a moment to reflect on Laurent’s looks, though Pallas simply looked over to Damen to gauge his expression.

“You call him a peach.” Pallas ventured further. “Is it for his skin?”

Damen knew this wasn’t the case. Though peaches further north had tough, white flesh when you split them open, peaches in the Reach and Dorne bore more semblance to the skin of Aimeric Florent: all sunset undertones. It also helped that the men laughed at Pallas’ naïveté.

“Gods, boy no!”

“It’s the peach behind him what inspired the song.”

“Juiciest thing. Every time you see him walk, watch it quiver like it does…you just want to take a bite out of him.”

Ser Pallas shot a look at Damen and Damen’s expression must have been alarming, because he chewed nervously on his bottom lip and refused to join in the ribald talk. Lazar watched Ser Pallas and Damen in turns.

“Song?” Lazar asked, smiling at the tense atmosphere the Tyrell bannermen seemed not to notice. “Pray, indulge us. You’ve done so thus far without invitation and I so wish to hear you continue speaking.” He winked at Pallas as his sarcasm went unchecked and Pallas blushed again.

“We’ll have it sung in the hall later. After Auguste has gone to bed. Otherwise, he might well have us burst into flames.” No further prodding from Lazar was needed to explain what the man meant. “His Lordship would chase us out of court, out of Westeros, out of this life even if he heard someone speak in such a way over his precious brother.”
As he well should, Damen thought venomously. As I will do if you continue to talk of Laurent Tyrell like this.

“Not long after Auguste was injured by Da—the accident in Riverrun, there was talk of Laurent going to be fostered by the maesters in Kings’ Landing. Apparently Lord Aleron had a brother who was very interested to take Laurent as a protégée. I suppose it makes sense as he was always the more bookish of the two brothers but…” His voice went to hushed tones over the din of the dinner hall and his next words made Damen’s blood boil hot. “There were unsavory rumors about the man. Word from the Street of Silk was that he had a taste for boys. Young boys. Auguste heard this and of course refused to let his brother go and within the month the uncle was dead. Tried to drink wildfyre in a fit of madness.”

“You speak as though Auguste himself poured it down the man’s throat.” Lazar scoffed in a completely normal tone. The man seemed to have no fear of being overheard.

A shrug by way of response. “All we know is that any lord who comes sniffing around the Tightest Bud in Highgarden soon finds himself with a very uneven trade deal and never an invitation to return.”

“That’s why the little lord is still most likely a virgin.”

Damen was about to lay fists to the men when the knight Lazar must have noticed and turned the conversation with his barbed humor. “Virgins are boring. They lie like limp fish and cannot lick cock properly. And you,” he looked blushing Pallas up and down, “you’re sweet as syrup. Too sweet to be a virgin.”

“Must you say such things about my men in front of me?” Damen asked when Pallas seemed choked for words.

Lazar’s eyes gleamed. “I was sure you would empathize with me, Python Prince. I bet you make virgins cry.” The other men shifted with uncomfortable jealousy but Lazar continued. “What did they say in Oldtown? That thing between your thighs is thicker than a maiden’s arm. Do you prefer cherries to peaches? Lick open pretty flowers?”

“Are you trying to pick a fight, ser?” Damen asked with no real bite behind the question. He quite liked this bold Knight of the Wild Dogs.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Your Highness.” Lazar smiled wide and Damen noticed his canines were long and doggy. “Unless of course it was over little Ser Santagar here. I’d fight the giants of the North to see you bow for me and call me ‘My Lord’.” Pallas smiled as though he rather liked the sound of that himself.

“Oh look, the Tyrell Peach.” One of the men, desperate for a change of subject, pointed out Laurent entering the dining hall and Damen’s attention was immediately taken.

Laurent was once again dressed in blue—blue of the sky, of the sea, of a desert spring—and this time his hair was elaborately braided and pinned up against his head in an austere but beautiful style. Today his jacket and shirt were more of a modern, loose style but his pants and boots remained tight. With the clinging trousers, Damen could not help but notice that Laurent’s unsavory nickname was not exactly untrue. He was stunning, a vision in azure and even Lazar—for all his professions of apathy—watched Laurent with a kind of lazy hunger.

“An oasis.” Damen whispered, unable to help himself.
As if he possessed the acute ears possible to hear a murmur across a crowded room, Laurent’s head swiveled to Damen’s direction and fixed him with a cold, calculating glare. Damen refused to break eye contact, feeling himself smile, and Laurent turned away first.

“You could suck him up like sweet wine.” One of the men sighed, equally enamored, and Damen felt his irritation return.

“Pallas, I shouldn’t hope to monopolize your time tonight. Lazar. A pleasure.” Damen could honestly say the wild knight, probably an uninvited party guest, was the most welcome in the group, save Pallas. “Gentlemen. If you’ll excuse me, I should go make the rounds.”

Damen’s last glimpse of the group was of the other men grimacing in discomfort as Lazar resumed his overt flirtations the moment Damen stepped away.

He made light conversation as he circled the outskirts of the room: greeting old friends and allies, forcing himself to smile through the awkward introductions of available young women. It seemed an entirely natural circuit that he would end up at Laurent’s side.

“Good evening Laurent.”

People mostly avoided him thanks to his prickly nature and he did look up at Damen with something much like annoyance. “You and I have differing opinions on what we consider ‘good’.”

“Still not sleeping well I see?”

It was true; he still had very dark circles under his eyes and when he closed his eyes to blink he seemed to sway. Damen wanted to suggest he leave to rest.

“I’ll go to Maester Paschal if I find something lacking, thank you.”

“Surrounded by all of this,” Damen made a sweeping gesture to the elaborate feast, “what could you possibly be lacking?” He already knew the answer; he just liked to see Laurent act predictably. It seemed a rare occurrence.

“At the moment, peace and quiet.”

“I knew you would say that…” Damen smiled into his cup.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.” Searching for something to talk about, Damen settled on the most eye-catching thing in the room. “Your hair…I’ve never seen it like that. Short, I mean. It suits you.”

“Well…most activities in any case.”

Laurent shrugged. “Auguste told me he liked my hair long so I have been growing it to please him. He would have liked long hair on himself but it’s too much effort for him to maintain. So I bear the burden of having my view obstructed while reading.”

“Haaa…another fault of mine.” Regret came over him. “I only wish there was some way to make amends for all the things I have deprived him of.”

Laurent seemed quite unsure of what to say, as he was usually the one to accuse Damen of making
Auguste’s life harder. His mouth opened and closed several times and he could still not find the words.

Damen understood and he smiled softly. Time to move on before he pushed Laurent away even further. “You would think me half-drunk and sorrowful already. My apologies. I hope you have a pleasant evening Laurent.”

“…Thank you.”

Damen would take the exhausted, non-antagonistic Laurent as a victory and continued on his way, though...he took occasional glances back to make sure that no one too drunk or pushy bothered him to any extent. He was by and far the most attractive person in the room.

By his luck, Laurent was seated at the main banquet table, only two seats down from Damen, Auguste at Damen’s immediate right. The food and wine flowed as the conversation: swift, varied, and endless.

Though many of the dishes were sweeter and blander than what he was used to, Damen could make do just on the sheer variety of what was paraded before him. Whole suckling pigs with brown crisped skin, massive haunches of smoked venison and pig and a veritable phalanx of roasted duck, quail, and pigeon. Vegetables flash fried in butter or cooked into thick stew with oxtail. Every pot held a new type of soup, bread was served in steaming thick slices with butter, and the fruits. By the gods, the fruits.

The apples were crisp and sweeter than sugar water. The grapes popped with the slightest pressure and melted into sweetness on the tongue. The peaches were the so juicy that liquid poured indelicately down the arms and over the chin; one had to gasp for breath after each bite. Blackberries, strawberries, plums in sloe and gold, tart green pears, and sweet oranges with flesh like blood, so tiny that Damen could fit seven in his fist. He was liable to make himself sick from all the fruit he was eating, but he did not care in the least. A dessert course could be passed up in lieu of such fine fruits.

He could not help but notice Laurent sharing in his taste with the fruits, though the young man’s palate seemed to prefer sweets in all areas, and he smiled.

“Something amusing Damen?” Auguste asked from where he was smearing blueberry paste onto a piece of sweetbread.

“I am just wondering how the two of you would fare on Dornish food. It is spicy so we must served iced milk with meals. And we have fruit there that you might never have tasted. Dragon’s eyes, mango, and lychee. Quite different from the things serve here, but no less delicious.” Save the peaches.

“Perhaps we could share at your table someday.” Auguste offered.

“I would rather crush the spices into my eyes.” Laurent said lightly. Auguste rolled his eyes.

From this, the natural flow of conversation turned to Dornish feasts and the differences between Damen’s ‘exotic’ land and the eastern nations. For one thing, he noted, during the broiling hot summer months, women could attend bare-breasted and no one batted an eyelash at the custom. For another, dinner and dancing were not separate events as they were here in the Reach. The music playing currently was pitifully quiet for the surroundings and not suited at all to dance.

“Is there no proper bard here in Highgarden?” Damen asked. “Granted we haven’t drunk enough to properly enjoy the lyrics yet but…”
“Ah well…” Auguste looked on the verge of laughter and Laurent flushed pink. “I am no great lover of songs and Laurent…”

“Must we tell this story?” Laurent slapped his utensils down on the table.

“Now my curiosity has peaked and I greatly wish to hear this story.” Damen said.

“It is sweet.” Auguste assured. “And you were a child; I find it endearing!” He leaned closer so that only Damen could hear, his smile wide with love for his brother. “When Laurent was eleven a visiting bard came to Highgarden and sang a rendition of ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’.”

“A classic tale.” Damen interjected.

“Indeed. But I couldn’t help but notice my little brother looking more and more disgusted as the song continued. Naturally, I was concerned so I asked him what was the matter.”

“Naturally.”

“I hate the both of you.” Laurent hissed, ears pink.

Auguste ignored him, his voice already bubbling with laughter. “I asked him ‘brother, what ails you? Is the song displeasing?’ And he responds,” Auguste had to pause to compose himself, “‘Brother this song is ridiculous! Why would a filthy bear want to lick honey off a girl’s dirty head?’” Damen clapped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing too loud and he saw Laurent’s blush spread to his cheeks. “I h-had to explain t-o him that…it is not the hair on her head that is meant.” Both friends were hiccupping in an attempt to disguise their laughter.

“And you will never let me forget it, will you?” Laurent was almost strawberry red at his young foolishness and Damen found it sweet. A virginal reaction indeed.

“Never.” Auguste promised. “It was a darling mistake and you know it.”

“So now you can imagine why I dislike bards and ballads in general.” Laurent snapped. “Whenever I am present, of course ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ is the first song requested.”

“It’s alright,” Damen assured, taking a drink of wine to calm himself. “When I was young, I thought a manticore was an expensive type of jewel. Tried to a buy one from a Volantene merchant for my mother’s birthday.” Damen smiled at that and Damen was glad he was able to make Laurent feel less uncomfortable about his own mistake.

As the evening dragged on, many young children, maidens, and elderly lords began to trail off to bed, making those that remained even rowdier. Auguste looked exhausted himself and it was not long before he too stood with intent to go to bed.

Everyone cheered on seeing him rise, and Damen was about to offer to escort him out, but Laurent was too quick for him.

The Tyrell brothers were not long out of the room when the requests for lewd ballads began. Of course there were the more popular requests, to which everyone could sing along: The Bear and the Maiden Fair, The Lusty Lad, Five Maids in the Bath, and Damen called out for the Dornishman’s Wife. A few more drinks and everyone became more uninhibited. Several men, including Aimeric Florent had had too much to drink and stumbled out into the dark halls; Ser Pallas was sitting on Lazar’s lap.

Damen recognized the man who had spoke so crudely of Laurent before as he stood and nearly
sloshed wine all over his own jacket.

“Sing ‘The Tyrell Peach’!” He slurred in a drunkards’ insistence. “We heard of the pretty Dornish wife. Sing of the beauty of the Reach!” His fellow bannermen cheered in approval and the bard seemed more than pleased to indulge them. A light tingle of bells started the song and it seemed as though it was relatively popular outside of Dorne, as many began to stamp their feet and sing along.

Upon hearing the lyrics, Nikandros shot Damen a worried glance and Damen wondered if he could kill a man with a golden goblet. If he found the man who had written this…

“Little peach, pretty peach/ In the Highest Garden oh/Out of reach, out of reach/ With skin as white as the first night’s snow.

And I dream, and I dream/ The pretty peach with the skin so fine/ Would he moan, would he scream/Would his lovely juice be the finest wine?

Pretty peach, Tyrell Peach/ In the halls or on the grounds/ I will beg, I beseech/ Let me taste you lying down.

Oh so sweet, oh so clean/ When I think about that peachy pit/ How you’ll cry, how you’ll keen/ When I tongue the juice inside of it.

Tyrell Peach, golden peach/ You make me spill a thousand times/ Within Reach, but out of reach/ Only fantasies will make you mine.”

There were massive cheers that went up at the end of the song but—despite the catchy melody—Damen was in a fury. How dare these men speak in such a crude way of Laurent? If Auguste had not had the songwriter’s tongue cut out already, Damen would kill the man.

He needed air before he killed the man who requested the song.

He nodded at Nikandros as he ducked out during the next request for ‘Her Little Flower’.

Everyone was half-drunk at least, Damen included, and he stepped deftly through the halls to search for some fresh air. He forced himself not to look around too much as the dark corridors made perfect rendezvous points for uninhibited lovers. With the way he was pent-up, it wouldn’t much help him to see such a thing.

Damen walked out into the gardens, past the golden circle where the torches had been lit and into the velvet darkness of the hedge maze. He dared not wander too deep into the maze, lest he get lost, but just wanted a bit of time alone to get his wits about him and walk off the effects of the wine. It was difficult to clear his head, as each breath only smelled more and more of roses and he was becoming drunk on the scent.

Golden petals left fragrant pollen on his fingers as he rubbed a rose on the bush next to him. He wondered if the Tyrell skin felt as soft…

He wandered until the abrasive light and sound from the castle dulled into his periphery and the air did not smell aggressively of flowers. It was one of those small alcoves that lovers would enjoy in the evening: a small marble pool in the center, populated by water lilies and small white fish, private marble benches half hidden in the tangles of ivy, a wizened old willow tree with a curtain of leaves that hung thick to the ground.

Damen drank in air as a man half-drowned in liquor and perfume.
He was about to find a seat on one of the benches when a small noise, like the cry of kitten, caught his attention. There was something decidedly human about the sound that set Damen on edge and he fought the drunkenness so that he could investigate unseen.

Despite his elaborate fire-colored silks, Damen was able to slip out of his sandals and move silently through the cool grass. He heard the sound again as he came closer to an ivy-covered marble wall. There was movement there.

Damen, with all of his military experience, took in the scene with a practiced eye.

The man wore dark clothes and had dark hair so he was nearly invisible amongst the dark ivy; the only thing that gave him away were glimpses of winter white skin and the pink-red accents on his dark vest, like slashes of muscle. House Bolton, Damen would stake gold on it. Damen wondered if the man was fighting off a bout of wine sickness since the mewling noise was coming from his stout frame and he had not even noticed Damen’s presence.

Damen was about to leave him to relieve himself in peace when the man shifted and Damen saw the true source of the noise.

Drunk, confused Aimeric Florent had not stumbled off to bed as many might have assumed. Instead he was here, now, his peachy cheek pressed hard into the garden wall, entire torso exposed, and tears swimming in his unfocused eyes. He seemed to be trying to struggle but he could only shift in discomfort, his head lolling helplessly. Damen could not see the status of Aimeric’s pants, but it was clear to him that if they were not already removed, they soon would be.

Damen was so struck by the horror and anger of what he was seeing that it took him a moment to speak up. His voice came out like spouts of fire, a volley of arrows.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

The man—who was indeed a Bolton from the crest on his clothes and not even half as drunk as Aimeric—whipped his head around to face Damen. He took in Damen’s clothing, his coloring, who he was and relaxed immediately. “Ah, it’s the Dornish prince.” There was a sort of mocking deference in his tone and he did not release the boy in his arms. “Your reputation precedes you. Is there something you need from me? I’m a little busy at the moment.”

His hands, still in the front of Aimeric’s body, moved harshly and Aimeric gave a watery squeak in response. Damen longed to leap in immediately to rescue the boy but he was acutely aware that he had come to dinner unarmed and this man had his sword strapped to his hip. Damen needed an opening to break his arms or wrench his hands off of his body.

“I asked you what you think you are doing?” Damen felt his hands clench, thinking of the man’s words. His reputation preceded him?

“Oh,” he looked down at Aimeric’s crushed brown curls and flushed, panicked face, “I happened upon this little one slumped over in the halls and thought to escort him to his rooms. We only took a detour to get some air and we felt some gratitude for my kindness was in order.”

“Noooo…” Aimeric moaned in a slur. He tried to lift his arms, perhaps to push his attacker away but he was too uncoordinated.

“This boy can barely stand.” Damen felt the rush of indignation and the wind rustled the leaves of the tree behind him in a rattle of danger. “He is in no condition to be intimate with anyone. Especially not one he is actively trying to escape from.” Damen was being more than generous,
allowing the man to step back before there was a fight.

He shrugged instead. “You of all people should understand. The sweetest ones are coy and reluctant. Isn’t that right sweet boy?” Aimeric’s head shook helplessly back and forth and fat tears began to spill out. He was too drunk to even speak so his mouth just opened and closed uselessly. “You’re a sweet boy.”

Aimeric hiccupped a little scream as the laces of his trousers were finally undone and the fabric slid down loose around his ankles. To add insult to injury, his attacker licked the length of his bare neck and Damen saw red.

“You will take your hands off of him.”

A fatal mistake, the molester ignored Damen’s threat and went back to his prize. “So impatient you are, you hotheaded prince of sand. I’ve heard you’ve a cock on you like a horse and a sex drive about the same. I know you want to feed that thing but I found him first.”

“What did you say?” Damen was shocked to his very core over what he was finally realizing this man was saying, what he was insinuating.

The man’s smile was wolfish and he thrust his right hand forward in a way that made Aimeric’s sobs go high and strange. He fought with flailing arms and Damen knew he would have to act immediately, sword or no. The foul man insulting the honor of both of them did not seem to notice Damen’s growing rage as he seemed more intent on continuing his assault, fire in his eyes as he gazed down at struggling Aimeric.

“Wait your turn, Your Highness. You can have him when I’m finished.”

Aimeric finally found the clarity to scream as Damen’s fist connected to the attackers’ head with a crack like the snap of a broken tree branch. If the Bolton’s man was not dead, then he was certainly unconscious before he hit the grass and Damen had to truly hold back to keep from striking him again. How dare he? How dare he?

His anger he forced back—product of years of practice—so that he could focus on covering Aimeric’s modesty.

The boy was a mess: his dark curls were wild, his face blotchy from tears and drink, his dark green jacket was tangled around his arms and he was basically naked from neck to ankles. Damen averted his eyes to save the boy any further shame.

He stood very slowly to avoid scaring the young man and Aimeric swayed from the alcohol and fear.

“I…please forgive me, master Aimeric,” Damen bowed his head in contrition, “I should not have let him take advantage of you to this extent. I just wanted to…make sure he did not hurt you with his sword. If you will allow it…I will adjust your clothes and get you to your rooms.”

“Help me.” Aimeric sniffed and something dripped out of his nose.

His own drunkenness forgotten, Damen quickly yanked Aimeric’s pants up and tied the laces, but the shirt and jacket were out of his skill set. For the moment, he just closed them as best he could and used his silk scarf to wipe Aimeric’s face clean. These small acts of kindness only served to make Aimeric cry harder and it was not long before he was releasing the contents of his stomach onto the beautiful lawn.

Damen could only lamely pat his back. He was afraid to touch the boy too much for fear of terrifying
him any further but he did offer some words of comfort. “Release it, boy. You’re safe now. No one will harm you.”

When Aimeric had vomited to his body’s content, he slumped forward against the stone and would have fallen in his own sick had Damen not grasped him by the shoulders. He needed to get the boy to safety but…

His eyes flicked to the Bolton man still unconscious on the ground. Aimeric Florent needed a fresh change of clothes and a long rest to recover from what had been done to him. But Damen did not want this man to wake up and attempt to escape, even if he did have a broken jaw to show for it. He stood for a moment, debating with Aimeric half-fainted against him when the decision was made for him from the unlikeliest of places.

The tendrils of the willow tree rustled again and Damen heard someone step up behind him. Immediately he turned so Aimeric was shielded behind his body, only to find…

“Laurent.”

Laurent looked at him with a blank expression, arms folded leisurely across his chest. “If I had wanted to kill you, I want you to know I could have done so at least ten times in the past minute. Thankfully you strike like a viper, even if you have not the sense of one.”

“Why would I be shocked to find a flower in the gardens?”

Laurent snorted at Damen’s attempts to charm. “Perhaps I will change my mind and kill you.”

“How long have you been hiding beneath those branches?” Damen asked, drinking Laurent in. His skin glowed under the light of the moon, his hair dyed a silvery-gold that belied his Targaryen roots, and he looked at Damen with something new in his eyes.

“Long enough.”

There was a long pause between the two of them but it was Aimeric moaning that broke the spell of Laurent’s beauty. Damen turned immediately to steady the boy before he fell over. “Did you—?”

“I saw.” Laurent responded calmly. “I saw what you did for Aimeric. And I know you want to get him to safety. I…agree with you.” Damen felt his heart flip over as Laurent did not deny him for the first time. “I do not think it wise for him to spend any further time next to such…filth. I think it would be wise for you to go and fetch my captain of the guard, Ser Jord Oakheart so that he might send men out to assist us.” Damen was about to argue that he did not want to leave Laurent alone with a rapist who could awaken angry and desperate at any moment, but Laurent silenced any protests by drawing a slender sabre from his hip. Even from the distance, Damen could see that, though it was not Valyrian steel, the handle was of dragonbone and it was very finely made. Laurent held it with a practiced hand. “I promise you I can handle one man half in his cups and brain rattled from the blow you gave him. Go quickly and you need not see that my words match my blade in speed and sharpness.”

He said this all with such careless ease, as though they had been taking a leisurely stroll in the garden and Damen could not help himself but follow instructions. To make all haste, he used one arm to scoop Aimeric up against his chest where the boy dangled limp and helpless as a maiden in a storybook. Laurent simply watched him with a level blue gaze as he took up a seat on one of the marble benches.

“Be safe, Laurent Tyrell.” Damen urged. If he had been angry when seeing Aimeric pressed against
a wall…the feeling of seeing Laurent in the same position…he might very well ride North and burn the Bolton’s Dreadfort down to the snowy ground.

“Be quick, Damen Martell.”

Damen jogged as quickly as he could through the gardens without jostling Aimeric to sickness and it was not long inside the palace before he found Ser Jord Oakheart and a small group of bannermen.

Ser Jord was the bastard born but legitimized great-nephew the Lord of Old Oak, a loyal and attentive man Damen remembered from his time when he was a friend to Auguste. Jord had been more inclined to smile than Nikandros, despite some still shunning his low blood, but now the slight scowl on seeing Damen was new. Apparently, he shared Laurent’s residual anger for the accident with Auguste, but he was so proud of his position that he could not seem to find it in him to be rude to a royal guest. His mouth was half open to offer greeting to Damen when he and the men caught sight of Aimeric in Damen’s arms.

“What’s all this, Prince Martell?” The title sounded odd on Jord’s lips, as Damen had just been ‘Damen’ in the past.

“It will take a moment to explain. But I was instructed to find you and have you escort master Aimeric to his rooms.” Damen hoisted the boy up and passed him over to Jord who dropped his goblet to the floor as he cradled Aimeric. Amidst the trade, Aimeric’s unlaced jacket and shirt flapped open, revealing a very fine swath of rosy torso, finely tuned, if not from swordplay, then from archery at least.

Jord could not help himself but color deep in the cheeks and he looked as though he needed the wine he had just dropped on the floor. Perhaps reminding himself that Aimeric was heir to House Florent and was in an entirely different echelon of high society, Jord tore his eyes away and tucked Aimeric’s clothes closer around his body. The motion at his chest woke Aimeric out of his stupor.

He looked up at Jord and his expression was heartbreaking, full bottom lip quivering. “Jord…” He slurred clutching the front of Jord’s plain vest. “Help me Jord.” A young man could do no more to move the heart.

Jord’s face went white as realized why Aimeric was in such disarray and his dark, thin eyes flashed murder when he looked up at Damen. “Villain,” He hissed, shielding Aimeric with his back. “Damn you, Damen Martell, you dare put violent hands on master Aimeric?” Damen rolled his eyes behind his eyelids as he heard the sound of swords being drawn. “You take advantage of your right as a guest?”

“I did no such thing.” Damen shot back, tired of having his honor impugned this evening. “You know I would not and the true perpetrator is currently being guarded out in the gardens by Laurent Tyrell.”

Jord narrowed his eyes but he did not command his men to any further action. Aimeric was crying again, his face pressed into Jord’s chest.

“You know me Jord,” Damen insisted, feeling the tension dulling, “Even if you dislike me, you know I am no monster. I would never touch him like that.”

They had gone to Oldtown together, wooed the pretty boys and girls in Riverrun…Jord knew Damen. He knew they were both men of honor. Damen would not ever try to rape Aimeric Florent.

“Stand down.” Jord sighed. The swords were put away immediately.
“Thank you.” Damen said. “If you would be so kind to follow Laurent’s orders and take master Aimeric back to his rooms? See to it that he has every comfort provided.” Just as with Jokaste and Kastor, Damen could see the spark of passion within, so all that was needed was close proximity and a little time alone. Perhaps then something could grow… “And your men can follow me to the gardens to assist Laurent.” There was a tingle of bells, a mocking sound, from somewhere in the long corridor.

“Do as he says.” Jord said on hearing it was on Laurent’s order. “I will join you as soon as I am able.”

Damen nodded to hide his smile. He trusted Jord and knew the man’s honor would only permit him to carry Aimeric to his chambers, slide him into bed, and pour him an ewer of water—perhaps allowing himself a yearning glance—before he left to return to his duties.

“I wish you all haste,” Damen responded, in fact wishing for the opposite.

Ser Jord’s men had to jog a little to keep pace with Damen’s long legs but they reached the spot in the gardens before the Bolton man had even stirred. Laurent still took Damen’s breath away when he saw him: perched easily on the bench with robes arrayed around him, effortlessly to his best advantage, long hair unbraided and wavy to his back, and sword placed across his knee.

“Gentlemen, how kind of you to join us.” Laurent said with utter ease as he kicked at the unconscious Bolton man with his knee-high boot. “This man here was unsuccessfully pressing his suit on master Aimeric and Prince Damen was kind enough to remove some of his teeth for him. If you would show him to our dungeons, he has an appointment with the whipping block in the very near future. I’d hate for him to miss it.”

His order was followed immediately and, upon insisting that he needed no further assistance, he and Damen were left alone together. Laurent stood and sheathed his sword, watching Damen with the same look as before.

Damen felt his heart beat in his throat he was so filled with nerves and excitement.

He had not felt so nervous, even on his first visit to a brothel in Lys when he was on the cusp of manhood. Laurent Tyrell was no Lysene prostitute. He was lovelier and wittier by far than anything those houses had to offer. He had no idea how to breach the silence.

Luckily, Laurent found the words before Damen could. “Since he is otherwise indisposed at the moment, I will thank you on Aimeric’s behalf. Thank you for not allowing my allies to be raped in the garden.” He did not even look sour at having to thank Damen.

“I would never stand idly by and allow such a thing.” Damen said.

“Is that why you became angry?”

Damen felt the pinprick of anger again and he had to fight to keep hot bile from rising in his throat. “People…many people assume because of my…size and reputation that I would resort to violence in matters of courtship. Those who think I would be complicit in hurting—it is not the way things are done in my house. I do not corner people in hallways or try to steal sexual favors and it makes me ill to think people might see me in such foul a way.”

Laurent nodded thoughtfully. “I see.”

Silence and Damen searched for something witty to say.
“In Dorne, love and courting are done out of passion, out of love. An honorable thing. That man—any man who would lay lustful hands on another without permission would lose his hands, if not his life.”

“Oh, I believe it.” Laurent laughed lightly and Damen thought he had never heard anything more beautiful in his life. “In spite of all of my attempts to hate you and find you loathsome, I am…unable to find you anything other than honorable and…good.”

Damen’s heart skipped a beat.

Laurent had averted his eyes and the flash of blue caught in the light of the moon. A beautiful profile, hair he longed to stroke and now…a flash of hope. He hoped he was not taking liberties but…

Gently, and allowing Laurent every opportunity to move away, Damen cupped Laurent’s chin with his hand and tilted that lovely head up toward his. He was struck once again, just like his first moments inside the palace gates, how no one could compare to this young man. Laurent did not step away or balk in disgust at the touch. He only gazed at Damen’s face, studying him.

Damen’s throat felt hot and dry. “Forgive me if I offend. It is not my intent. But…I am undone. I have every intent to court you with all respect but if you have no inclination, one word from you will silence my attempts. I will not pursue you if you have no interest and I will not…do as was done to Aimeric tonight. I will regard you with warm respect and leave things as they are.” Laurent had such wide eyes and Damen could not tear his eyes away. “I trust you…not to shield me from your true feelings.”

There was a long moment where Damen could feel Laurent’s pulse through the lily-fine skin of his jaw.

“Curse you.” He whispered, barely louder than the rustle of leaves, but his tone had no bite. “I have…misjudged you.”

Another beat of silence and Damen felt the world shift around him. He watched every movement around him.

The flutter of Laurent’s long hair brushed against his high cheek and Damen saw what was almost rendered invisible by the cool light of the moon. Laurent’s fine white cheeks were flushed at the tops. Blushing. Laurent Tyrell was blushing. The hope blazed unrestrained.

Laurent continued to voice his thoughts when Damen seemed too flustered to speak. “I had thought…you to be nothing more than the sum of rumors. Python Prince. Crippler of my brother. And more. But you have treated me and my brother with nothing less than patience and honor. I find myself unable to hate you at the very least. And the dreams…”

He trailed off then, cheeks flushing darker, and Damen boldly dropped Laurent’s chin in favor of taking his left hand. He could not help himself and this was a garden constantly filled with loving secrets and passionate whispers. And this drop of information was enough to give him even more than hope.

“You dream of me?” His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears and Laurent glanced away to hide what truth might have shown in his eyes. He did not deny the question so Damen could only assume that he was correct and Laurent had said too much in the heat of the moment. Impassioned by the idea that he visited Laurent Tyrell in dreams, the words flowed hot and eloquent. “I am held captive by my own. You haunt me in sleep, even though you only say my name and smile. Nothing more, I swear it, as I would not take advantage of your hospitality, even in sleep. But I dream of you
The fire in his chest increased, threatening to burn them both in the cool secrecy of this alcove and Damen raised Laurent’s fine, slim wrist to his lips. Laurent’s skin was cool and so thin that Damen could feel the red-hot pump of blood through it. Laurent could no longer avert his eyes and looked up at Damen with something like innocent surprise.

“Do you dream of me?” He pressed, more desperate for this answer than anything he had asked from Laurent in the past.

Barely louder than a sigh, Laurent stepped forward, transfixed. He bit his bottom lip as if trying to physically keep the thoughts inside of him, but he spoke a moment later with lips shining. “Every night since you rode through those golden gates.”

Damen could think of nothing clever to say.

His heart beat wildly in his chest and the happiness threatened to consume him whole. Laurent was better than his dreams: blushing softly, eyes downcast, and a sweet smile playing at the corners of his lips. With his free hand, Damen curled Laurent’s long hair behind his ear and those large blue eyes caught him again. Without breaking eye contact, Damen raised Laurent’s hand to his lips again. The blue fabric of his sleeves slid up his creamy forearm in the slightest immodesty and Damen kissed each of the fading bruises there. Each kiss lingered long and slow, a promise of what he hoped would come during his time in the Reach. He was gentle, so gentle; this virginal fine skin felt as though even a kiss would be pressure enough to leave bruises. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss Laurent’s lips…

“Laurent?”

Damen dropped Laurent’s hand immediately and Laurent took two steps back to create a proper distance between the two of them. Laurent’s face smoothed to a normal mask of indifference just as Ser Jord jogged around the corner. Damen could not focus on Jord at the moment. He wondered if he had dreamed the encounter.

Laurent was once again icy as the Wall, looking in no mood to be kissed. But his hair was still curled behind his ear and the tops of his cheeks were still a little rosy. Not a dream after all, but a secret, something to be preciously guarded.

“Laurent, my lord, as per your instructions I have seen master Aimeric to his rooms and given him all the comfort I could provide. I will instruct Maester Paschal to attend to his body in the morning. Is there anything else you would require of me?”

“Yes, thank you.” Laurent’s tone was firm but thankful. “The man responsible is being held in our cells and with both myself and Prince Damen as sober witnesses I presume he will be convicted with no fanfare. Please alert the Boltons and the whip-master when they wake tomorrow morning. I will inform Auguste.”

Murderous vindication flashed in Ser Jord’s eyes. “It would be my pleasure.”

Laurent sighed and then turned his back on Jord to face Damen, his face still impassive and remarkable cool. He refused to meet Damen’s gaze. “Once again I thank you for your defense of Aimeric Florent. I am touched by your chivalry.” Damen thought his heart would freeze over Laurent’s frosty tone. But then Laurent looked up. “Good night, Prince Damen.”

He was smiling as he spoke; not like before where his lips were only threatening to turn up, but a
full, delighted and beautiful smile. It was better than any figment of Damen’s dreams.

“G-good night Laurent Tyrell.” Damen managed to choke out.

A swirl of blue and gold and Laurent was following Jord out of the gardens, leaving Damen alone, burning under the skin. Hope, desire, excitement all roiled hot and golden in his body. He had no idea how it was done but he managed to walk back to his chambers, despite his haze.

The door closed behind him and Damen nearly upended a small table in his desperation to reach the pitcher of chilled wine. He downed the wine in one deep drink and simply let the cup slip through his fingers. It clattered on the ground in a hollow sound that rattled his brain.

The wine did nothing to douse the blaze.

Damen had felt this heat before but never had he been in such dire straits. In the past when he had been aroused—though he could only remember one other time when it had been so painful—it was easy to find a lovely partner in the city to help slake his lust. But he could not even fathom a single person who he would take in this moment; all of his previous lovers, infamous beauties in their own right, paled in comparison to the Tyrell Peach.

The candles were extinguished with heated breath and Damen fell back onto his feather bed. Even the cool silk sheets burned his skin like heated stones.

He unwound the scarves from his head and neck, practically ripped the buttons removing his vest, and tossed his gold jewelry to the side, uncaring of where they landed. The only thing he took care with were his loose trousers as…they were becoming cramped in the hips. A few slow moments later and he was utterly naked, save for his sunstone nipple studs and the matching navel ring, his cock standing stiff and frozen with desire. He could clearly feel that it would not be going down at any point in the near future and it would have to be dealt with.

It struck Damen that he had not done this for himself since the first blossom of manhood.

Usually he could focus on pleasing his lover but at the moment he was alone with only his thoughts and his unflagging arousal. With a deep breath, Damen inched his hand down and gripped himself.

He was so desperate for it that his eyes fluttered shut at the touch.

He stroked himself gently at first, just relishing in the feeling of pleasing himself. But as the lust rose and his hips quivered in desperation, he realized most people usually fantasized as they did this. It had been so long…

Never would he dare to even fantasize about making love to Laurent without permission, but just the thought of Laurent nearly unraveled him. His feverish mind jumped immediately to the last interaction he had had with Laurent and Laurent’s smile jumped to mind.

The smile…the way his blue eyes sparkled with hope and sweetness…his hair was so soft and silken running between Damen’s fingers…his lips. His lips.

Damen remembered the fullness of them as Laurent tried not to smile, the color of them after he bit his bottom lip, pink-red as ripe fruit. The way they looked wet…the sweet poison words that spilled out…the smile. Laurent Tyrell had smiled at him. Laurent Tyrell dreamed of him.

This thought alone had Damen’s heels digging into the bed and his hips arching up into the swift, tight grip of his right hand. His free hand clenched the silk bed sheets and he came with the sort of
desperate need given a man who had an untouchable lover. His body shuddered in between spurts; one would have thought that he had not felt sweet release in years. Breath came in deep gulps, no more effective than the wine. The heat seemed as though it were here to stay, burning like a dragon’s coal in the pit of his stomach, waiting until the next intimacy with Laurent to burst into flame.

The image of Laurent’s lovely smile was seared onto the back of his eyelids. It was inescapable and he doubted he would find sleeps’ embrace this evening.

He wondered if Laurent would dream of him again tonight…
4. Jord

Chapter Notes

Jesus. JESUS. It feels like FOREVER since I've updated this story and I swear, it's not because I've dropped the story; I've been very busy writing and updating my Captive Prince Big Bang fic. In fact, now that Snakeskin is done, I can focus all of my attention on this story! Chapter 5 should be coming out sooner than this one did.

Now...oh Jord.

If you think Damen has it bad, Jord has got it even worse. Sorry to any Jord/Nikandros shippers, but I am 100% in the Jord/Aimeric corner. I wasn't quite sure what Jord's POV would be like but...as I wrote he became very clear that he is over-polite (see how he always refers to people respectfully), he has a bit of a chip on his shoulder because he was born a bastard and was legitimized, and the ONLY things he describes in detail are things pertaining to Aimeric. He has it bad. There is some glimpses at the illicit affair from the last chapter but Jord is too fucking dense! Haha sorry about that ;) And I love Jokaste in this chapter. A pushy matchmaker!

I hope you all enjoy! I'm so excited to share it with you!

4. Jord

Ser Jord Oakheart was a man of modest means and unflagging loyalty. Only a few years older than his sworn lord, he worked his hardest to maintain his own honor and chivalry as well as defend the honor of House Tyrell and his friend, Auguste Tyrell. His friendship was reliable and precious as Valyrian steel and his trust once betrayed was gone forever. Which was why he struggled so hard when it came to the Dornish, their Prince in particular.

On one hand, he wanted to join the young lord Laurent in his blatant, poisonous dislike for what he saw as an unforgivable mistake in the previous Great Games; a youth's error, but it did not seem fair or right, that his own golden lord was crippled for all his days while Prince Damen Martell was able to move through life without a cane and a limp.

On the other hand...Jord knew Prince Damen Martell.

They had been some of the closest of friends: he, Prince Damen, Auguste, and Damen’s own sworn man, Ser Nikandros Gargalen, a man of honor if ever there was one. They had done countless honorable and illicit things together and Ser Jord could recall more good times than bad. And with recent events...with the gentle way Prince Damen treated Auguste, with the absolute kindness he showed in the face of Laurent’s venom, and in the way he had saved young master Aimeric Florent, Jord could not maintain his own hatred. The Dornishman and his equally friendly followers had won him over completely and he decided to make more of an effort to salvage friendly relationships with the lot of them.

Jord rose early every morning, and the day after the incident with the Bolton man was no different, as Jord had various tasks he wanted done before breakfast. The sun was just now staining the sky dark lavender to match the flowers in the night garden and the castle was nearly silent.

His own modest quarters were on the Northern side of the castle and, while they did not afford a
pleasing view of the gardens, he could see the expanse of lovely forest that grew there. It did mean it
took a bit of time to reach Auguste’s quarters on the first floor on the prime south side.

As eerie as it was, like walking through an abandoned palace of old, the ruins of Valyria, Jord quite
liked it this empty and silent.

It also made it easy to hear if anyone was approaching him.

He rounded the corner and was surprised to find Laurent coming out of his own rooms.

“My Lord, Laurent.”

His hair was tied high up out of his face in a perfect golden ponytail and he was dressed in his tight
riding leathers. At first when he heard someone hailing him, Laurent turned and his large blue eyes
were sparkling with anticipation. Jord knew the look; it was rare, but occurred whenever Auguste
returned from a long journey, whenever Laurent found and bought a new tome that he had been
searching for, or whenever he was in the presence of horses. Ever mindful of decorum, Laurent
smoothed his expression immediately and stood up straight.

“Ah, Ser Jord. Good morning. Are you off to visit my brother?”

“Yes, and yourself?” It was all pleasantries; Jord could clearly see the fine riding gloves crushed in
one lily fist. Laurent curled invisible hairs behind his ears and smiled quickly.

“I thought to go for a ride before the parks are overrun with our guests,” Laurent replied, motioning
to the window as if to explain his explanation for being up so early. “On the morrow the games will
begin and I doubt I will have a spare moment to breathe, much less ride.” They began to walk
together down the labyrinthine halls and staircases, soon to part. Laurent practically hummed with
energy for the ride and it seemed as though he were bouncing in place by the time they had to part
ways. “If anyone looks for me, please let them know I will return by the afternoon meal.”

“You’ll be skipping breakfast then?”

Jord knew that Laurent, not fond of socializing on the best of days, would now find any excuse to
avoid attending meals. He had not even brought any provisions with him, save what looked to be a
flask of water.

Laurent smiled again. “I’m sure I can find something. Thank you for your concern, Ser Jord.” And
then he was gone in a swirl of gold. Nothing other than his brother and his books could delight
Laurent so.

Jord put Laurent out of mind so that he could focus on his other tasks for the morning.

By the time breakfast had finished, Jord had done more than most of the men inside the palace walls.
He had already visited Auguste’s chambers to get his instructions for the early day and then visited
the contingent of Bolton men with the charges written in Auguste’s beautiful script. The Boltons
were a cold, unreadable lot and only their stone-faced silence kept Jord from lapsing into
unprofessional fury as he read the charges and the corresponding punishment, to be carried out
shortly before the midday meal. Their leader did not attempt to argue against the charges or beg for a
more lenient sentence; he simply nodded as though such a thing were to be expected and Ser Jord
was shown the door. All in all, a painless but unsatisfying confrontation.

The whipping itself was far more satisfying. Twenty-five lashes and a ban on him ever returning to
the castle once he had sufficiently recovered enough to ride back to Dreadfort.
And after the midday meal there was an every lovelier reward for all of his tireless effort that morning.

It started with Prince Damen Martell nearly colliding with him as he rounded a corner. The man was like a tornado of flames: always running swift so his hair was windswept and wild, dark body burning with energy, and dressed in a foreign spectrum of yellows, golds, oranges, and reds. He smiled wide when he saw Jord and stuffed a dark piece of leather into the pocket of his loose Dornish-style riding pants.

“Ser Jord Oakheart! Well met!” He even seemed to radiate heat, as if he had spent hours in the sun. “I only hope your duties haven’t run you ragged before midday.”

“Not at all. And yourself? I assume you and your men made quick work of your meals,” Jord remembered all too well how the Dornish could tear through food like locusts and still find the energy to complain that it wasn’t flavorful enough for their discerning tastes, “Off to the practice greens then?”

Most athletes burnt off energy there…or in the bedchamber, as they sized up the opposition for the next day’s events and stretched their muscles out of atrophy. Jord knew Prince Damen liked sports and was attempting to resume acquaintance with the man. Prince Damen grinned bashfully, perhaps at how transparent he was.

“Ah! I—yes. Yes, I am.” He scratched at his wild, wavy hair.

There was a moment of awkward silence where time and cooled friendship rendered them incapable of finding another topic of conversation. He did not relish this, but Jord was not so prideful that he would not admit his prejudices; his mother was a baseborn woman and he had originally been ‘Jord Flowers’ and some would not let him forget it.

“I…wanted to thank you again for what you did last night. Despite all that my countrymen disdain you and my reception to you has been cold these past years and for all my young lord Laurent blatantly wishes you ill,” Prince Damen flushed at that, perhaps remembering some of his exchanges at the expense of Laurent’s sharp tongue, “you have shown nothing but grace and honor. I hope you can forgive me for any slight I may have given in the past ten years—.”

“And risk you waxing poetic for another half hour? You’ll be as stony as Ser Nikandros before long.” Prince Damen joked kindly, clearly uncomfortable with any mention of the tumultuous past relationship between Dorne and the Reach. “There is nothing to forgive, save the foolhardiness of youth.”

Jord ignored his quip about Nikandros. “I’m sure if young master Aimeric Florent were here, he would thank you himself, so I will do it on his behalf.”

The prince, tall as he was looked up over Jord’s head and grinned wide. He had a smile women would swoon for and it always hinted at the lascivious. “He certainly seems reluctant now.”

Jord had to exercise every ounce of his self-control not to whip his head around in a most unseemly manner. He turned slowly, if only to deny the Dornish prince what he did not suspect. The desire was too strong.

There was master Aimeric Florent, peeking out shyly from behind a corner.

His brown curls were polished now and arranged to cover his ears, which endearingly stuck out like the handles of a china teapot. The white, azure, and vermilion colors of his house suited his pallor ill,
but forest tones, like the deep emerald green he wore today, brought out the lovely blush in his
to his cheeks; Jord did not like to flatter himself in any way, but he liked to think that master Aimeric was
not looking at the fine, fiery form of Damen Martell but at him. The prince would engulf a sprout like
him and burn him away to ash; an oak would shield him, cultivate him…at least that was how Jord
rationalized it to himself.

The nervous heartbeat in his ears almost made Prince Damen’s words unintelligible, “I’ll be off to the
practice greens then, Ser Jord. Perhaps I will see you there soon and we can continue our
conversation.”

“Of course.”

Then master Aimeric slipped out from behind his corner, his head ducked low as he approached
Jord. Jord composed his expression so the young man would not sense any untoward thoughts.

“Master Aimeric,” Jord nodded respectfully, aware of their class difference, even though he had been
knighted. His mother was a carpenters’ daughter, while Aimeric’s could likely trace her noble blood
back to the First Men. “I am…so pleased to see you are healthy and on your feet today. I hope you
rested well?”

“I did, thanks to you.” He looked up at Jord with a small smile and scuffed his dark boots on the
floors, “I…wanted to thank you for…taking me to my rooms, Ser Jord, and…for not taking liberties
with me in my…shameful state.” Jord could not help but remember and his face became hot. Master
Aimeric certainly had a very fine form thanks to his love of swordplay and archery and that was all
Jord would allow himself to dwell on.

“You need not thank me. It is my duty to shield Lord Auguste, House Tyrell and all of its’ loyal
men. I only wish…I could have been the one to prevent such a crime. For that, you need only thank
Prince Damen Martell.”

“Oh, I did, when he returned to the stables this afternoon. But…it was you who I remember carrying
me to my chambers.”

“It was nothing.” Jord’s mouth went dry as Aimeric inched closer. He had a smatter of brown
freckles across the tip of fine nose and a beauty spot on his right cheek. The irrational part of Jord’s
mind wanted to kiss the spot.

“It was noble.” Master Aimeric insisted, “And I am indebted to you.” Jord found himself at a loss for
words and master Aimeric pushed on as boldly as any young lord. “It will not do for me to…wallow
in my rooms. Prince Damen had mentioned the practice greens and…I was wondering if you could
find the time to walk down with me?”

“O-Of course.”

Jord could barely keep his eyes facing forward as he and master Aimeric walked down to the
practice greens but luckily he did not embarrass himself with his poor conversation, as master
Aimeric seemed perfectly content to lead. They talked at length about the Great Games beginning the
next day and the topic was especially exciting for master Aimeric. Archery was first and he was fully
planning to compete in that event as well as the tenn tournament, so suited for his slim, lean form.

“I would have liked to compete in swordplay but…my father advised me against it. He said…I
should allow my brothers the opportunity for glory since…they are more skillful than I am…”

Jord thought of master Aimeric’s three older brothers and remembered them to be cordial, if
unremarkable.

“Nonsense. You have a fine form...while fighting. A practiced stance and strong legs and posterior. I believe you need only a skilled partner to practice with and you would be more than a match for your brothers.”

“You watch me while I fight?” Master Aimeric’s eyes sparkled from the praise.

Jord rushed to make it sound less incriminating. “I...am the captain of the guard. It is my duty to watch and see who shows promise.” He tried not to let it bother him that master Aimeric looked a little crestfallen. “But yes, I have watched you and found you a fine swordsman.” Master Aimeric smiled, apparently starved for compliments.

“If you consider me lacking in any aspect, Ser Jord, I can only hope you recommend me a teacher or...show me yourself.”

“I-I would be honored to.” Jord responded, hoping his response was not tinged with undue excitement.

As if to rescue him from any incriminating displays of affection, the two of them reached the practice grounds just in time to see a sizeable crowd forming around two figures in the swordplay arena. There was no mistaking the enormous muscular frame of Prince Damen but more surprising was that Laurent was standing across from him as his opponent, his flaxen hair now braided and pinned against his head. Apparently Prince Damen had finally worn Laurent down and the young lord had accepted an invitation to spar, as he usually denied all requests.

They began before Jord and master Aimeric could join the crowd and the two arrived on the beautiful lawn to the sound of cheers and steel hitting steel. Jord could not help but be impressed when he got a good view.

It was like watching an elaborate dance: beautiful, graceful, and deadly.

Prince Damen was lunging at Laurent, playful and smiling as he felt out his opponent, while Laurent parried with a completely apathetic expression, though it couldn’t have been easy. Jord, despite his professional eye, had no idea who would emerge victorious.

A sparkle in his dark golden eyes and Prince Damen renewed his efforts, hitting Laurent’s steel so hard that Laurent’s shoulder twitched from the force. Laurent was forced to go on offense and returned with a flurry of attacks so skillful that Prince Damen was forced to take a few steps back. A give and take so savage that Jord felt master Aimeric grip his sleeve and exhale from excitement.

Laurent’s footwork was graceful, but he was slender and weaker than Prince Damen. When he attempted to slam his body into Prince Damen’s, it was clear all he attained was a bruised shoulder from his efforts, so he attempted to do some fancy footwork to find his opponent at a disadvantage. Back and forth, never tiring and never showing any sign of who would emerge the victor.

It all happened so quickly.

In a bold move, Prince Damen stepped in close to Laurent, very close. If Prince Damen hadn’t caught Laurent by the wrist, Laurent might have actually fallen backward and he curved his torso back in a graceful arc. Prince Damen’s sword was abandoned in the grass in lieu of holding Laurent’s sword arm in place, his dark muscles bulging from the effort. Laurent narrowed his eyes but Prince Damen spoke in a low tone, smiling so wide that he dimpled—Laurent would hate that—but Laurent dropped the sword. A cheer went up at the display, from Jord and master Aimeric as
well, but Jord felt as though it was tempered by the ones who were set to compete against the two of them in the swordplay competition. Now they knew who they were up against.

Prince Damen held Laurent’s wrist a moment longer than Jord thought was necessary and when Laurent went to step away, Prince Damen boldly cupped Laurent’s back so he would not fall over backwards; Jord thought it was a good way to lose a hand.

Prince Damen must have remembered that as well because he released Laurent a half a moment later and the two moved a respectful distance apart. Laurent looked wholly impassive but Jord knew the moment he caught Prince Damen alone, the man would wish he had never laid hands on a Tyrell.

Still it had been a spectacular fight and Laurent should be proud of his skill.

When the cheers and congratulations had died down and a new set of competitors begged chance to take to the ring, Laurent skillfully extricated himself from the crowd and disappeared into the closest entrance of the rose maze. Prince Damen’s smiling eyes never left Highgarden’s golden lord and the moment he saw opportunity, he too slipped away in hopes to make amends. Jord admired his persistence, though futile; Laurent Tyrell never hated anyone more and—after several more fights concluded—he began to worry about the man’s life.

It was with a great deal of regret that Jord stepped away from master Aimeric’s hand, still resting lightly on his arm.

“Where are you going?” Jord hoped it was disappointment that tinged master Aimeric’s voice.

Jord smiled down at him. “I must go try to prevent a national incident that my lord would not relish having to deal with. Besides, master Aimeric, the archery butts are just a short walk from here and…I am no archer. Regrettably, it is here that we must part.” Normally he would simply bow by way of courtesy, but master Aimeric offered his hand, like a lady would and Jord took it completely out of habit. Before he could catch himself, Jord pressed his lips hard against master Aimeric’s knuckles. He pulled away too quickly to play off the situation but master Aimeric didn’t appear upset at this breach of decorum…

On the contrary, he smiled wide and wicked at his own cunning. “I will see you at dinner, Ser.”

“O-Of course.”

The scent of roses, the scent of lovers, mocked him as he wandered through the rose maze in search of Laurent and Prince Damen. He could not think of Aimeric. It could not happen.

Normally people would get lost in the endless thorny walls of the maze, but Jord had memorized every maze in Highgarden and could find his way around with no issue. Perhaps this had been Laurent’s design: to have Prince Damen enter the maze and leave him to be hopelessly lost for hours. Or…

Jord heard a laugh from near one of the open areas that featured a natural swimming pond. The laugh was familiar but Jord sincerely doubted that Prince Damen could laugh so gently in the presence of Laurent. Jord wondered if he had happened upon one of his bannermen in the maze.

“Prince Damen?”

There he was. Jord rounded the corner and saw Prince Damen’s impressive form blocking the thorny allée to provide extra privacy for himself and his companion. He had just finished intimately tucking a golden rose the size of a saucer into his companion’s hair and jolted when Jord called out to him. From his companion…Jord only saw a flash of long, wavy golden hair.
Ah. It couldn’t have been Laurent then. Laurent would have sliced his hand off for someone taking such liberties, prince or no.

He thought as to who else had such hair and of course, the most logical answer was the Lady Jokaste Dayne, a highborn woman unparalleled in looks and of course a natural choice of partner for any lord or prince.

“Ser Jord,” Prince Damen stepped in front of his lady to shield any ribald talk but it was of no concern for Jord. Who was he to judge if the nobles courted one another in the privacy of the gardens?

He averted his eyes. “Forgive me. I only…wanted to make sure you had not gotten lost.”

“Thank you,” Prince Damen smiled kindly but he made no indication that he wanted more company, “I think we will be able to find our way out.”

“Of course.” Jord bowed, turned, and left the maze.

He apologized to the Lady Jokaste later that evening when she somehow managed to have Laurent escort her to dinner. Usually so repulsed by the idea of accompanying someone to dinner, Laurent was actually laughing at some remark of the lady’s and they were well matched with each other. Save for her lightly tanned skin and the grey tone of her eyes, they might have been siblings. Apparently there was one person from Dorne who Laurent could stand and he talked with her at length over a goblet of wine.

“Laurent,” they had known each other so long, Laurent insisted they did away with titles, “Lady Jokaste. Good evening to you both.”

“Good evening Jord.” Laurent smiled at him, a rare sight these days, “I don’t believe the two of you have been introduced. Lady Jokaste, this is Ser Jord Oakheart, the captain of the guard here in Highgarden and my brother’s sworn man. Jord, this is the Lady Jokaste Dayne of Starfall in the only sensible dress she owns.” Lady Jokaste shot Laurent a look of faux chagrin before offering her hand.

“Ser,” Her voice was low and honeyed and Jord could see her appeal. She was exquisite.

“My lady,” He kissed her smooth knuckles, “I am at your disposal. And I do apologize for earlier. I had not meant to interrupt your conversation with Prince Damen in the gardens.” He left the details vague so any eavesdropper would assume she was simply talking with her prince.

Lady Jokaste looked surprised and then glanced at Laurent, perhaps hoping he would not be the type to spread baseless rumors. For his part, Laurent was a little flushed at the mention of his sworn enemy, to which Lady Jokaste smiled wickedly.

“Ah, yes. Of course. Ser, you need not apologize for an honest mistake.”

He felt she was being very gracious, as he would be mortified if someone were to come across himself and master Aimeric speaking intimately in the gardens. But that could never happen.

Lady Jokaste smiled again and roped one slim arm through Laurent’s. “Ser Jord, it was a pleasure meeting you this evening and I relish the chance to speak with you again. I beg a moment to speak with Laurent Tyrell alone? He and I have much to discuss.” She was so beautiful and sweet, Jord felt himself being moved even though women usually held no sway over him. He could not help but be charmed and felt no sting over the brevity of their conversation.

“Of course, my lady. Laurent.”
The meal was acceptable, though noticeably less raucous than usual, as the competitors did not want to overindulge in food or drink lest they fall ill the next day. Prince Damen and various others disappeared earlier than usual and Jord took the opportunity to escort Auguste back to his chambers, Laurent having gone for an evening stroll in the gardens.

When he turned to walk to his own chambers, he heard bells and jumped when someone laid a hand on his arm. Aimeric yelped and reared back as Jord whirled on him; *ah, he must have been mistaken then…*

“F-Forgive me, Ser Jord. I…didn’t mean to startle you.” He was blushing furiously.

Jord rushed to make amends. “No, no, the fault is mine. I had thought someone was spying on me but…please don’t concern yourself, master Aimeric. Is everything all right? Are you in need of my help?” The feelings that had been dormant for so long bubbled up at the thought of Aimeric in peril.

“N-No, I…” He looked sweet in the torchlight and the irrational part of Jord wanted to tuck the wild chestnut curls behind master Aimeric’s ear and—if he were to be so bold—kiss the freckle on master Aimeric’s peachy earlobe. Master Aimeric took a deep breath to steel his resolve, “I am set to compete in the archery competition this week and…I wondered if…I might…”he flushed even deeper, “if I might…have a token of yours…for luck on the pitch?”

Jord was so shocked by the request that his mind could not keep up with his body. His mind was still basking in the idea that a token for such a competition was a very express overture of…*feelings*, while his body was busy searching for some token to give master Aimeric.

Despite all of his misgivings, he was nowhere cruel enough to turn down such an honest request from someone so sweet. *Perhaps he asks out of admiration for me*, Jord lied to himself as his searching fingers grasped a prize.

Before he could consider the ramifications of his actions, he latched onto his house signet ring.

The only piece of jewelry he wore, it was heavy and golden, the face inlaid with a chunk of dark green jasper that had been carved in the shape of an oak leaf. It was something he held precious; it had been given to him the day he was simultaneously knighted and legitimized, the day he was given the illustrious name of ‘Oakheart’. This ring represented his legacy and was priceless to him…

Yet there it sat, heavy and warm in master Aimeric’s open palm. Jord wondered what it would look like on master Aimeric’s slender finger.

His wide brown eyes and delighted smile more than made up for the removal of Jord’s ring. Reverently—and apparently uncaring that Jord had been largely silent—master Aimeric closed his fingers over the bulky ring and kissed his closed fist. It was shameful, but Ser Jord felt a cockstand coming on at the sight of it.

“I will cherish it,” master Aimeric whispered, “Thank you…Ser Jord.”

Jord was vaguely aware that he was playing a dangerous game with this. It was more than his heart on the line, but his reputation and master Aimeric’s. But…perhaps just for the moment he could dream.

The Great Games had been established long before anyone’s living memory and lasted for a full three weeks; three weeks of tournaments, feasting, and flirtation that so exhausted the nobles it took them five years to plan another. The first week consisted of what were called the ‘Sweet Man’s
Sports’, so named because any small, pretty lad or lady could have the skill to compete, musculature being of no concern. Such sports were falconry, bowls, archery on the butts, and even games of cyyvasse, with the beautiful, expensive boards set up en masse on the dining halls’ tables.

Then came the second week with the Midlin tournaments, which did require a good deal of strength, speed, and skill, such as the tenn tournaments, played in teams or singles on the grassy knoll, archery contests on horseback, spearing, or the rowing competition on the Mander—a completely useless sport in Jord’s opinion as it was always someone from Riverrun or the Iron Islands who won. Midlin was often when new games were introduced to the nobles as well, though the finger dance had not exactly caught on with anyone wanting a complete set of fingers.

Finally came Jord’s favorites and the ones he most liked to participate in. These were called the High Tourneys and required the most extensive training and athleticism. First, was wrestling in the hard packed dirt of the arena and it was no small wonder who was the favorite to win that particular competition. Then came the wildly popular sword-fighting tournaments, which took up two entire days due to the sheer volume of participants, and after that were the horse races. The final sports were the most widely anticipated: the joust and the okton.

Auguste had spent several nights compiling the lists of competitors and coming up with the fairest brackets so that a green sixteen year-old lad was not pitted against a seasoned warrior.

Jord himself was set to compete in only the High Tourneys, specifically the sword fighting and the jousting, so for the first two weeks he would be able to watch at his leisure and make sure that there was no foul play suspected. Auguste’s little spy would inform him of any misdeeds and Auguste would alert Jord.

The first day, Jord reacquainted himself with Ser Nikandros, or ‘Ser Stone Eyes’ as people called him, and was delighted to find the two of them had more in common than he remembered. He too ran himself ragged regularly for the sake of peace in Dorne and they chatted at length about their grievances during the falconry spectacle. Conversation flowed so smoothly and with such variety that Jord even spent dinner that night talking with Ser Nikandros and his fellow Dornishmen, Prince Damen included.

“Did you enjoy the falconry events?” Prince Damen asked. He had been absent from the display and Ser Nikandros had only looked pained when Jord had inquired to his whereabouts. He assumed the Lady Jokaste was to blame, which would explain her absence as well.

“Well enough,” Jord admitted, failing to mention that all he could think of was master Aimeric bearing his token during the next day’s archery competition, “Although I was unsurprised with Lady Celtigar’s win. I am sure her family can afford fine hawks in spades.”

“And you need not pamper a bird when you could simply shoot your target out of the sky.” Aktis Vidre responded dismissively; he was set to compete the next day in the archery competition and clearly was unimpressed by hawking as a whole. “Bows eat less.”

“Confident talk for a man who did not even compete.” Jord teased him, “And I have a gold crown on the Reach to win the archery competition tomorrow.” He was not normally a betting man, but there were some fine men enrolled.

The Dornishmen’s eyes caught fire.

“I will take you on that, Ser.” Kastor Sand, Prince Damen’s bastard brother, joined them, smiling as he defended Aktis’ honor. Lady Jokaste was lightly gripping his arm and smiled at Jord. Jord was confused by their relationship, as it seemed the lady was just as fond of the bastard brother…but he
did not allow himself any moment to make an assumption or judge.

Unfortunately, Jord was out a golden crown the very next day as the Dornishmen apparently failed to mention that Aktis Vidre could shoot a bird from the sky and then fire arrows perfectly through the bloody feathers that floated down afterwards. Never had the targets seen such accuracy and master Aimeric failed to even break the top three. He was flushed with defeat, despite a valiant effort and sadly returned Jord’s signet ring from out of his breast pocket.

“Forgive me, Ser Jord.” Master Aimeric kept his eyes downcast and shoulders slumped, “You…had such faith in me and I was unable to…”

Jord longed to tilt up his chin and kiss the tears he knew were forming on those long eyelashes, but all his decorum could manage was a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Enough foolishness. You did admirably for a first time competitor. Only eighteen and placing fourth amidst so many fine noblemen and women? When you are Aktis Vidre’s age, you will be able to shoot the stubble off my face at two hundred paces.” A watery laugh in response and Jord felt emboldened, despite being surrounded by people. “Aimeric…”

Aimeric looked up, his chestnut curls bouncing. He caught Jord’s eye and for a moment looked touched by Jord’s attempt to console him. But then a tear rolled out of his eye and his expression crumpled into bitter disappointment.

“Forgive me.”

Before Jord could try to console him further, master Aimeric was gone, pushing through the crowd and rubbing vigorously at his eyes. Jord wanted to slap himself; he longed to run after master Aimeric and embrace him until the tears stopped but…there were so many people watching. He was a coward.

“Ser Jord!”

He looked up to see Kastor Sand, Lady Jokaste Dayne, Ser Nikandros, and Aktis Vidre coming towards him through the crowd and he tried not to let his annoyance show as he withdrew a golden crown from his jacket pocket.

“Vidre, a fine win.” Jord offered diplomatically and Aktis inclined his dark head by way of thanks. “And, as per our agreement, Kastor.”

Kastor waved it away, hissing in the way many Dornishmen did when they found the idea of something distasteful or preposterous. “Put that away, Ser. I see now why you were willing to wager. Buy us some proper bottles of Dornish wine to drink, join us in finishing them and consider our bet settled.”

“Invite that Florent lord as well.” Lady Jokaste added, her large eyes flashing with the delight of discovering someone’s secret.

“Pallas will want to bring that hedgeknight he is so fond of,” Aktis added, “and Orlant Hunt, Ser Guymar Fossoway, Lady Vannes Redwyne, and Kashel Pyke invited themselves to play at cards in our quarters.” He shook his head in disbelief, “Who would have thought that we would host a private party of Tyrell bannermen.” Ser Nikandros shrugged.

As they discussed the finer aspects of what was rapidly developing into Aktis’ winning celebration, Lady Jokaste slipped from Kastor’s side and sidled up next to Jord. Her grip was surprisingly strong on his arm and she managed to keep the most angelic smile as she offered him unsolicited advice
under her breath.

“You, Ser, must be a very fine soldier, honorable and brave, if you were able to obtain captaincy at such an age. I can only think to compare you to Ser Stone Eyes here. And you are a fool to continue standing here speaking of cards and parties while that lovely little Florent boy sobs his heart out in the gardens and no one comes to comfort him. Forgive me if I’ve the wrong impression of your relationship, but if I were you and wanted to curry favor, I would leave these archery butts immediately and go let him sob on your shoulder. Maybe then it will release some of the tension that hangs over the two of you every time you are within an arm’s reach of one another.”

Jord was flabbergasted by her brutal honesty, but only one concern could come to mind. “Am… I that obvious, my lady?”

She smiled genuinely this time and Jord could see why so many were tripping over themselves to get her attention. “I am expected to marry higher than my station. It is my duty to notice these things.”

“I believe Auguste Tyrell could offer you employment, provided you are fond of bells.”

She released his arm and giggled coyly. “How scandalous! Though I am coming to adore your people’s quaint chivalry. But enough about me; are you going after your little love or will I be forced to find someone who will?”

Jord kissed Lady Jokaste’s knuckles, a little thankful for the push. “My lady, forgive the sudden departure, but I have something very important that needs to be done.” She waved him away with a bright smile and took her place back with her countrymen as Jord jogged across the lawn.

He wasn’t sure if master Aimeric had gone to the gardens to compose himself but he walked quickly through the thorny mazes just to make sure. With so many people watching the archery competition, the mazes were largely empty, although he did catch a glimpse of Prince Damen kneeling on the ground of a secluded alcove with his head on someone’s knees, a hand stroking his fine, dark hair.

Jord searched for the better part of an hour, feeling a twist in his gut over his own indecision. Master Aimeric was not in the gardens and he had lost his chance…

The next morning, Jord fought back his hangover from the sharp Dornish wine he had drunk the previous night and made his way to the head jeweler of Highgarden. In the tiny workshop he found the little old man stooped over his most recent masterpiece: a necklace of lapis lazuli, polished to a mirror hue and set in gold. It was simple, lovely, and would look effortlessly elegant on any lady’s neck. The color drew him in; it was just what he wanted.

“Arnoul,” he hailed the jeweler and the old man looked up, owlish in his oversized magnifying spectacles, “I hope the day finds you well.”

“Ser Jord,” a wizened but skilled hand waved him forward, “sit, sit. Let me finish putting this chain in place and then…” His voice trailed off as he concentrated and Jord could not help but notice the delicacy of the man’s work. Old Arnoul was older than dust but his work was unparalleled. “Dornish lapis,” he explained as he felt Jord’s inquisitive gaze, “very fine. Very fine indeed…and worth a small fortune.”

“A lucky woman indeed, who would wear such around her neck.”

Arnoul smiled as he fastened the gold chain into place and put down his spectacles so that he could face Jord, a first time customer.
“Have you any more of that stone? Even a chip about this size would do.” Jord asked, arranging his thumb and index finger in a circle about the size of a tiny forget-me-not bloom. Arnoul immediately shook his head.

“Forgive me Ser but it is not mine to sell and even that small of a bead would cost you a month’s wages.” His clever eyes sparkled as he regarded Jord’s obvious inexperience with fine jewelry, “Forgive me, if I speak out of order, but you do not strike me as the type to commission or wear jewelry.”

Jord was suddenly struck with the fear that only he knew; the illicit act of courting master Aimeric only he was privy to. Arnoul, who had seen countless men commission jewelry for paramours and betrothed lovers, could probably see right through his façade.

“One of my protégées has failed to place first in his chosen competition,” Jord explained in his most monotone voice, “and I sought to make him a ring to lighten the disappointment.”

“I see.” Arnoul tapped his chin and motioned for more information.

“I want it similar to this ring.” Jord said sliding his own signet ring close and then quickly amended so that Arnoul did not think it to be a matching pair, “Simple, I mean. Perhaps a small design around the band and a sigil on the face of the ring.”

Arnoul studied the ring with a practiced eye. “Made of gold?”

Jord’s coffers would suffer and he knew a gift of gold was indicative of very serious intentions but… master Aimeric was worth such a gift. “Perhaps silver would suit my friend’s coloring and sigil more…and then a blue forget-me-not for the sigil and red stones on the outer edge.” He thought of the symbol of House Florent, the clever fox surrounded by azure flowers, and thought that the red would compliment whichever blue stone he could afford.

“Sodalite for the flower,” Arnoul agreed, “The blue is close the color of lapis and it shines like star sapphires. And perhaps red jasper for the edges, so that it may have something in common with your own ring. Do you know your…protégées’ size?”

Jord showed him an approximation and Arnoul began to sketch on an errant scrap of paper.

“When can I expect to pick up the ring?” Jord asked, already trembling at the thought of presenting it to master Aimeric. Surely then the smile would return to his lovely face.

Arnoul waved him away, already deeply involved with the design as his pencil scribbled hastily across the page with measurements and styles. “I will have it to you by the High Tourneys. You can inspect it and then we can discuss your payment. I know you are good for it, Ser.”

“Thank you.” Jord left him to his craft.

He did not see master Aimeric on his way back to the dining hall and fought down his disappointment as he surveyed the massive cyvasse tournament that was currently underway. Though Jord was no good whilst playing, he could enjoy watching others work out the complexities of the game.

Auguste was fond of the game and was currently chatting animatedly with his Lannister competitor while the hedgeknight, Lazar Knight of the Wild Dogs, played with wooden figures that looked hand-carved, as all the pieces featuring men or animals were endowed with monstrous, erect cocks. He looked the type to cheat outright and Jord decided to keep an eye on him in case someone took offense and started a fight.
There was a small table set off from the others that Jord noticed as he made his rounds and he immediately felt pity for Laurent Tyrell. His brother sought to torture him by pitting him against Prince Damen Martell.

Prince Damen was grinning wide as Laurent considered his next move and Jord sidled closer to hear what was sure to be a biting conversation. Laurent had tied up his long hair, a true sign that he was incredibly focused.

“If I may recommend a move—.” Damen began.

“Why, in the name of the gods, would I take your advice?” Laurent shot back, regarding his lavender jade pieces, “You are my opponent and I trust my own mind more than your foolish tongue.”

Prince Damen was not deterred. “You ought to. This game first came to Westeros through Dorne; though you may be quick, I’ve been playing this game much longer than you.” Laurent ignored him and seemed to focus twice as hard, “We can do a simple exchange: I’ll tell you my next move and you give me a ki—.”

Laurent moved his trebuchet in such a cunning move that it gave Prince Damen’s endless ego pause. He stopped speaking mid-sentence and considered his own ivory pieces with a new determination. Laurent smiled, smelling victory.

He did not have much time to gloat though, as Prince Damen sneaked his rabble into position, preventing his dragon from being lost. Laurent’s eyes flashed; he was unaccustomed to losing at these types of games and focused hard, despite the fact that Prince Damen had begun baiting him again. Surely, theirs was going to be a game that could last for hours and would be vicious in cunning.

“For all that you insult my intelligence, Laurent Tyrell, it would be a sweet sort of irony if I were to best you at this.”

“The game is far from over,” Laurent insisted.

Indeed the tournament was far from over and lasted long into the evening. Prince Damen and Laurent’s game lasted the longest by far, and Laurent only managed to win on a technicality. Prince Damen did not seem at all put out by his loss and bothered Laurent for the rest of the tournament, whispering possible moves in Laurent’s ear as he went up against his following opponents. Laurent handled it beautifully, mostly ignoring the Dornish prince, and occasionally even giving a diplomatic smile as he moved the pieces in the exact opposite way Prince Damen recommended. Oddly, he managed to keep winning.

Jord could not help but be amazed as Laurent managed to get the sweep and win the entire cyvasse tournament. Presented with a board and pieces made of nothing but the finest stones—tiles made of emeralds, rubies, sapphires and seraphinite and pieces carved of silver and gold—he looked astonished at suddenly being the center of attention and smiled at his applauding brother.

In between the congratulations of the other, less-skilled competitors, Prince Damen leaned a little too close to offer his own praise. His wide smile only hinted at the wicked words spilling out of his mouth as Laurent looked at him in blatant astonishment.

Jord overheard some of their conversation as he went up to congratulate Laurent himself.

“Very well,” Laurent hissed under his breath, “I’ll play you again but if you lose you give me that fine horse of yours.” And Prince Damen’s victorious smile only drove home the point for Jord, that
he was possibly the most hopeless fool in all of Westeros.

By the time of the High Tourneys, Jord was spending every other evening in the company of the Dornishmen and a few of their chosen friends from the Reach and some of the other noble houses of Westeros. The numbers had been increasing steadily with each ‘party’, starting with Ser Rochert Serry and Ser Huet Serry, the second and third sons of Lord Serry of Southshield, Lazar, Knight of the Wild Dogs, had joined them mostly to flirt relentlessly with Ser Pallas and ignore anyone who questioned his lineage, and several more lady pirates from the Iron Islands. Jord invited master Aimeric and he joined them regularly, although his shame did not allow him to speak to Aktis Vidre. Once or twice even Prince Damen and Auguste came to drink and play with the rest and the most recent time Laurent had come with Auguste, mostly remaining silent as he listened to the unlikely group chat amongst themselves.

Of course, no other topic of discussion could interest them but the most recent winners and who was most likely to win the next competitions.

The winners of the Sweet Man’s Sports and the Midlin tournaments had already been crowned. Lady Celtigar had won the falconry, Aktis Vidre archery on the butts, Lady Hunter won at bowls, and Laurent was victorious in cyvasse. Damen raised his wineglass whenever that fact was mentioned and Laurent blushed, though he made no mention of whether or not he had won Damen’s horse in the rematch.

For the Midlin Tournaments, things had been a little more exciting for both the Reach and Dorne. Though he had lost in the singles tennis tournament to Lord Torveld Caron of Nightsong, Aimeric had won the doubles tennis tournament alongside his partner, master Ancel Collier. He smiled more often after that and Jord wished the ring he had commissioned would have been finished in time for the doubles.

The horseback archery took everyone by surprise as Lazar, that wild knight, took everyone by surprise and won as easily as breathing. Further outrage came about when he refused the traditional prize in lieu of asking Ser Pallas Santagar to do unrepeatable things with him; that public request paired with his questionable lineage allowed the judges to award the prized bow to the second place winner, the middle son of Lord Locke of Oldcastle in the North. Lazar did not seem at all upset by the stripping of his title, and the next morning both he and Santagar walked with some difficulty, which made Jord think—official winner or no—the man had gotten the prize requested.

The pirate ladies of the Iron Islands, led by Lady Halvik Greyjoy and her bastard daughter Kashel Pyke, easily won the rowing contest on the Mander and the spear throwing came as a tie between Ser Pallas and the first son of Lord Marbrand of Ashemark.

The dual victories of their Iron Island ladies and sweet Ser Pallas set the tone for their private evening festivities. Even better, Jord had gotten message that morning that his ring was completed and he had spent hours thinking of the right moment to give it as a victory gift to master Aimeric.

“You have yet to compete, your highness,” Orlant Hunt said to Prince Damen as he pour more wine. “In fact, I have yet to see you in the stands of any event, save the cyvasse tournament.” Jord thought back and found it true; Auguste attended every event, showing no disappointment despite his inability to compete and Laurent hated crowds, but Prince Damen evidently had better things to do.

“I get lost in your gardens, ser,” Damen replied, “and eat myself sick on peaches. But rest assured, I fully intend to compete in the coming days. Wrestling is my favorite, though I do wish you easterners would do away with the impediment of clothing.” The Dornish laughed at the expressions of
“You’ll be sword fighting as well,” Ser Pallas added from where he was perched on Lazar’s lap.

“Every person here will be swordfighting,” Lady Halvik amended.

“Save for me.” Auguste responded with a good-natured laugh, “I have a very effective method of feinting where I simply topple over on my poor leg.” Kashel Pyke nearly spat out her wine at the jest and Auguste laughed even harder as she wiped wine off of her dark chin.

No one was set to compete in the horse races, though Laurent looked as though he regretted no throwing in his lot. He was most skilled rider Jord had ever seen and spent most early mornings off on a ride.

It soon came out after a bit more conversation that Prince Damen did not intend to compete in the okton, even though he had never once lost when he competed. In the face of their collective outrage Prince Damen smiled sadly into his half-empty wine glass.

“I…refuse to compete in the okton since my accident with…” He shook his head as clearly the thought tortured him, “I just don’t want to hurt anyone else.”

That certainly sobered the mood, especially with Laurent, as they all realized how seriously Damen took his prior actions. It obviously wounded him deeply that he had so grievously injured his friend and no one in the Reach had allowed him to forget so he did penance in his own way.

Immediately Damen tried to amend for the awkward atmosphere he had created and broke into his sunny smile. “But it’s no matter, as I fully intend to win the joust. I have to settle a score.”

Though everyone smiled at his limitless confidence, the mood did not really go back to normal until Prince Damen left to walk with Auguste back to his rooms. Ser Nikandros simply said, “It haunts him daily.” Laurent stood at this pronouncement, inclined his head silently to the group and turned on his heel to leave. More wine was poured and the relaxed atmosphere returned.

At some point during the evening when Lazar decided to teach a card game he had supposedly learned in the ports of Essos, master Aimeric moved so that he could ‘better see the card tables’ and somehow managed to seat himself directly next to Jord, leaning so that he was even closer. Jord could feel the heat coming from his torso and Lady Jokaste raised an eyebrow and hid her smile behind her wine glass.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand the rules of this game,” Aimeric whispered with wine sweet breath, “Would you explain it to me?”

“I’m unsure of the rules myself,” Jord admitted, inclining his head closer so that their heads were almost touching, “Perhaps…we can simply watch.” His body thrummed with anticipation over the very thought of touching master Aimeric somehow.

Ser Guymar Fossoway shuffled the cards and master Aimeric refilled Jord’s wine glass. The ring in his breast pocket seemed to burn but now was not the right time. Aimeric’s breath felt as though it was inches from Jord’s ear. He was drinking too much, but the wine felt so good and it gave him confidence. He wanted to give the ring to Aimeric tonight. Shouts went up as Kastor Sand won the first round; money was placed on the table and Lady Vannes won next. On the third round, Aimeric stood to bid everyone good night and Lady Jokaste took up his seat the moment he exited the room.

“Here to push me again, my lady?” Jord slurred. He was frozen in place and wanted to run after Aimeric at the same time.
“You, ser, are drunk,” She remarked sweetly, sipping on her own wine. Dornish red, so sour and strong. “And yet…usually wine gives men foolhardy courage but you are too strong to relent. Why do you not go after him? Anyone can see he looks at you with love and yet…you hold back.”

“I should not burden you with this, my lady.”

“You burden me with your helpless pining.” She said, flipping her honey-colored hair. “Is that the way courtship is done in the Reach? Endless heartbreak until someone breaks down or the both of you die from sexual frustration?”

Jord could not think of sex. Not now. “How is it done in Dorne?”

“We see what we want and do not stop until death or victory stop us.” Lady Jokaste responded and her gaze bored into him like fiery blue coals. “Why do you hesitate, Ser Jord?”

It sounded so very simple.

He sighed and felt the alcohol loosening his tongue. She would be back to Starfall within weeks; what difference would it make for her to know his secrets?

“I am unworthy of him.” Jord admitted in an impassioned whisper. “I am older by eleven years while he is young and green. And…my blood is…” It almost hurt him to admit that, despite his legitimization and status, he could not shake off the feeling of being a bastard. “He is the precious youngest son of Lord Guion Florent and I am still ‘Jord Flowers’ in the eyes of so many here. I would—my affections would shame him.”

So now Lady Jokaste Dayne would know his shame. He dropped his head low in embarrassment.

A moment’s pause and—over the din of Ser Pallas making an excellent play—Lady Jokaste took his hand in her own. When he looked up, she was smiling at him, in no way mocking him.

“I understand you, ser, truly I do. I know what it feels like to fall in love with someone of an uneven station.” Her other hand she placed over her heart. “I must admit, in the beginning I felt a bit as you did. But now I have fallen in love and I will make myself sick if I do not give in to my heart. I can see the sickness in you now. But I am not afraid; I have friends in powerful places…as do you.” She took her hand from her heart to lift his chin. “Raise your head, ser; you have no need for shame. Your love is not shameful.”

“I-I don’t…” Jord felt lighter upon hearing her reassurances but his drunken mind was still struggling to comprehend all that she had told him, “House Dayne is very distinguished. I am sure the Martells will have no objections to you wedding their prince.”

Lady Jokaste smiled sadly as she looked at their group. “Ah, but therein lies my problem. I have no intention of marrying Damen Martell. I was sent to seduce him but my gaze fell…elsewhere.”

Jord frantically thought back and it struck him immediately. Kastor Sand. She was in love with the prince’s bastard brother.

She must have seen the recognition. “His highness feigns interest in me so the two of us won’t soon be separated. At least…until we decide how to explain to my family.” Powerful friends indeed. “You see? We are more alike than you thought. Perhaps we are all fools. But…then maybe it is better to love until you burn all to ash than to let that green vine slowly wither and die. I know my choice,” she squeezed his hand, “what will you decide?”

“I have no friends as powerful as a prince.” Jord knew it was a weak excuse.
“You have Auguste Tyrell. And everyone in this room. And me. We would welcome your passion in Dorne.”

“My duty…”

“Duty!” She scoffed, “Men and duty. What greater duty of being young and alive than to love? At least, it will give you something to fight for, other than the houses that spurn you for having a mother born on straw rather than silks. Drink this.”

She offered him a sip of her Dornish wine and Jord took it. It tasted as though it were laced with fire and it made his heart pound.

“You are…extraordinary, my lady.” He admitted, handing her back her glass.

“I relish the compliment.” She replied. “Off to bed then? Good night, Ser Jord.” He had made no mention of going off to bed but he was thankful for the push. All he could do in response was kiss her hand and wish the others a pleasant night; Lady Jokaste’s ring on her left hand was gold and polished sandstone. Married to a Sand and the ring proclaimed it.

The Dornish red hit him hard as he stood, and he stumbled down the halls with only muscle memory pushing him forward.

“It’s ok, my love, sweetheart, my oasis.”

Prince Damen’s voice. Jord could just barely make out his muscular form in the torchlight. He blended into the flaming shadows with his red-brown skin and fire-colored silks. He was comforting someone in the darkest corner but Jord could barely make him out in his drunken haze.

His partner mumbled something into his chest and Prince Damen kissed the top of their head. Jealousy flamed in Jord’s gut. “Nothing you say could hurt me, I swear it. Nothing save if you wished me away from your side. Don’t wish me away; the thought of living without you is worse to me than any other sins I’ve committed. Come here. Please.” The sound of gentle kisses and Jord’s own lips burned.

Jord stumbled away, leaving that silver-tongued prince to his seductions. What did he care if the Dornish prince seduced a lady during the Games? Certainly it was not unheard of.

It was a sheer miracle that Jord managed to find master Aimeric’s rooms without once tripping and falling to the marble floors.

Master Aimeric, by virtue of his father’s illustrious name, had quarters of his own though they were small and were supposed to be the adjoining studies from his brother’s rooms. Jord remembered them in the warm, rosy haze of near-drunkenness.

He remembered the greens and golds dyed black in the darkness of the night; the strip of pink-gold flesh that bloomed between the dark green leaves of Aimeric’s open jacket. Those tangled dark curls fell across his pretty face like chestnut ivy. And Jord drank him in, wished for a lover so sweet before he turned and left.

Trying to avoid waking up his family, Jord knocked gently on the door and hoped Aimeric was not already asleep. Worried he would lose his nerve, he waited a full five seconds before knocking again.

The door whipped open and Jord nearly pitched forward.
Aimeric stood in the door and had apparently just been about to go to bed for the night because all he wore was a white sleeping shirt, long to his knees. His hair was in a wild tangle around his heart-shaped face and Jord felt his tongue turn to lead.

“S-Ser Jord!” Aimeric gasped as though he did not believe it himself. “What are you doing here?”

Jord fumbled with his vest pocket and felt his clumsy fingers close around the cool band of silver. “I-I wanted to…” Words failed him and he simply presented Aimeric the ring with shaking fingers, “For your win. I congratulate you.”

Aimeric exhaled softly when he saw the lovely ring in between Jord’s fingers. A band of silver with a line of bright red jasper cut into the center of the band. On the face was a cabochon of polished, milky ivory, a spot having been carved out of it for a luminous sodalite forget-me-not, the azure petals streaked with feathery, pearlescent stripes.

For a moment Jord was embarrassed looking at it.

It was beautiful, but a ring more fit for a lady’s finger than a young man’s. What if Aimeric gave a polite, but awkward thank you, faced with a gift unasked for? What if he never wore it and it sat forever collecting dust as the token of an unwanted admirer?

A cold trickle of sweat ran down his spine and Jord wanted to shove the ring back in his pocket and run. Aimeric looked at him, looked at the ring and plucked it out of Jord’s hand with cool fingers. It rested on Aimeric’s palm for a brief moment before he slid it onto his left ring finger and looked at it intently. It looked a little big on him.

Jord began to babble because he could no longer stand the silence. “Forgive me if the design is a little feminine; I h-had thought to make it in your house colors, but if you find it distasteful, I can… I don’t mean to impose this on you and you n-need not wear it if you dislike it. B-but I thought…as a congratulatory gift—f-forgive me if I am out of line and if the ring is too large, of course I can have it resized but I—.” He bit his tongue to cut off the ramblings and found that Aimeric was staring at him with a wide brown gaze.

His voice came out in a whisper, a hopeful, lovely whisper. “I think about you.” One step forward and Jord could smell the clean scent of his skin. “Do you think of me even a little?”

His mouth was dry and devoid of words. He could only nod.

With the speed that had helped him win the tenn tournament, Aimeric reached forward and snatched two fistfuls of Jord’s jacket collar and yanked him down and forward. Aimeric’s lips pressed against his, his thin fingers working furiously at the laces on Jord’s jacket as he dragged Jord inside his room. Jord had the sense of mind to close the door behind him before Aimeric stripped off his jacket.

He cupped Aimeric’s head, fingers running through those soft curls, as Aimeric dragged him back toward the bed. His other hand slid up Aimeric’s thigh, pushing up his nightshirt little by little; Aimeric’s hands were busy pushing up the front of Jord’s undershirt, tracing the hard abdomen beneath.

Aimeric yanked hard and Jord fell on top of him, the both of them landing splayed on the bed. Jord ripped off both his jacket and shirt so that Aimeric could touch him as he liked and begin yanking on the laces of his trousers.

“Y-You want this?” Jord gasped in between feverish kisses. “You want me?” He could scarcely believe it himself.
Aimeric yanked him back down to the bed again and licked the curve of Jord’s ear. “I want you, ser. I want this so much.” A young man could do no more and Jord made his choice: to burn to ash in this embrace.
5. Lazar

Chapter Notes

I AM SO EXCITED! Ok, so I wasn't planning to update for another couple of days so I'd be further along with the next chapters but you can thank Rehsa for an earlier update :) Now onto the chapter...
Aside from Damen and Laurent, I love Pallas and Lazar and I was so excited to do Lazar's POV. He's a complete and utter scoundrel but to be honest, he's the kind of person I aspire to be. I imagined him as a sort of wandering rogue who has seen everything, done everything, and just kind of coasts his way through life. All he wants is a roof over his head, food in his stomach, and a cutie in bed.
Also this is probably the chapter where it's hardest to spot Laurent and Damen being cute. There are hints but you have to look for them ;) I'll be interested to see if you guys notice some of the stuff I've slipped in there from previous chapters!
And next chapter the drama is going to kick off with a hell of a bang! Enjoy!

5. Lazar

Lazar had no last name unless it suited him.

He had chosen the guise of a hedgeknight this time, his title taken from a nickname given to him by a Khal who was impressed by his bark. It sounded like the name of a character from a story and that suited him just fine.

Lazar had forgotten most of his early years, not even knowing whether he had been born in Westeros or Essos or even at sea.

Perhaps he had been born a bastard in the stormlands or the westerlands, maybe the son of a forest thief or a traveling bard; his mother was a Lyseni prostitute, a priestess bathed in flame or a Myrish pirate, his father was a disgraced prince, a seed, a Widling from beyond the wall, a feral dog that could turn human when the moon was full. He had told so many stories, assumed so many identities, and been to so many places that he could discard one Lazar and assemble a new one without regret.

As a child he had held an ancient dragon’s egg in the port of Pentos, rowed upriver from Volantis to Norvos, been taught to fight by the Faceless Men, and watched profane sacrifices made by the Red Priestesses; he sailed on the Smoking Sea, traveled the length of Westeros, and had seen the icy Wall before he grew pubic hair. He had raced Dothraki on horseback across the grass, fought for his life in the pits, and turned to piracy, mercenary work, gambling, religion and even prostitution to assemble funds. Countless times he had sneaked into a wealthy merchant’s banquet, talked himself out slavery or losing a hand, he had stolen or won fortunes, spent the night with famous courtesans without paying, killed countless men, and saved twice as many. He had lived an interesting life, by his own admission.

All Lazar asked in life was a beauty in bed and a genuinely captive listener for his many stories. Who would have thought such perfection would have come with skin that tasted of sea salt and thighs that could crack coconuts?

Lazar luxuriantly let smoke billow out of his nose as he breathed deep on the Volantene herbs
packed into his whalebone pipe and ran his hands through Ser Pallas Santagar’s chest-length black hair.

It was before dawn and they were currently in the chambers Lazar had commandeered for himself simply by virtue of persistence and making friends with the right people. Though a little on the small side, his smoking habit and curios assembled from his travels had given it the distinct air of an exotic boudoir. He and Pallas returned here to make love whenever there was sufficient time. Pallas, at the moment, looked like a very expensive whore in Lazar’s eyes. Sweetly naked and asleep, his red-brown skin was slick from sweat and oil, so exhausted that he did not wake as Lazar stroked his hair and back.

Lazar was exceedingly fond of little Ser Santagar, though…there was nothing ‘little’ about him. He and Lazar were the same height but Pallas was twice as bulky, with a thick, hard waist, large biceps, and an ass like two firm melons. He did things with that pretty body that would cause even the boldest Yunkish slave to blush.

Moreover, he listened to Lazar’s many stories with the rapt delight and sparkling eyes of an innocent child. He never tired of Lazar’s adventures and jealousy never sparked when he heard tales of previous lovers; he was a sweetheart through and through.

A sweetheart wearing a cock ring that could buy a small ship.

Lazar took another drag on his pipe before putting it aside in favor of kissing the dimples above Pallas’ ass. The sensitive flesh twitched under his lips and Lazar knew the young man was coming awake under his touch.

“Mmm…you kiss me as though you worship me.” There was a smile in his lethargic voice.

Lazar saw the first glint of gold as Pallas turned and he placed another kiss on the dark hip by his cheek. “In the Summer Isles, they worship a love goddess whose ass is not even half so fine as yours.” Ah, there was the pretty ring. He had stolen it from a lord in Lys and it had carved dragons made of dragonbone ivory embedded in the soft gold, their flames made of deep orange amber.

“You’ve been to the Summer Isles?”

He was hungry for a story and Lazar kissed him again; a perfect listener, made just for him. “Of course I have. Did you not notice my golden wood bow during the archery? Did you not notice the skill with which I use my cock? I cut my teeth in the Summer Isles; my first fuck was at one of their funerals.”

“One way to celebrate I suppose.” Pallas smiled down at him.

Ah. They had been celebrating; Lazar had completely forgotten.

It was the last few days of the Great Games and Lazar had been enjoying the High Tourneys more than any other event simply because he got to see the raw power of Dorne.

It was frankly a miracle that Prince Damen Martell had not registered to compete in every event of the High Games, because it was Lazar’s professional opinion that he would have won every single event that required any athleticism. Wrestling had been first and Damen Martell hadn’t appeared to have even broken a sweat as he pinned every man to the dirt with ease; even pretty, witty Laurent Tyrell couldn’t help himself but be impressed and applaud. Only Pallas had come anywhere close to winning and Lazar had been sore when the two of them had a proper ‘wrestling’ class later in Lazar’s rooms.
The sword fighting Prince Damen had also won.

Lazar’s skill was such that he had risen through the ranks easily and actually had to face the man in the arena. Had they been in the fighting pits of Essos, Lazar would have finally met his makers.

Lazar had speed and skill and stamina honed from years of necessity, but Damen Martell’s strength alone would have defeated him. He fought with the force of three men, easily, and his skill had the finesse befitting a prince. Lazar recognized moves taught in Essos; parries and thrusts that were learned the hard way, slippery defenses no one here would call honorable or fair but it would keep you alive for long enough to get away.

Damen had grinned as he saw through Lazar’s lifetime of little tricks and spun them back on him, only with three times the force. Lazar’s back hit the dirt five minutes in—four minutes longer than anyone else had lasted—and what could he do but laugh? At least he was still alive.

A firm hand yanked him up by the collar and he met Damen’s sheepish grin; damn him, he had not even broken a sweat. “Remind me, your highness, to never side against you in battle.”

Damen had laughed and clapped him on the shoulder; Pallas had been waiting with water and wine and a kiss on the sidelines so there was no sting of defeat.

“He is a monster in the arena.” Lazar remarked when he returned to the circle of Martell and Tyrell bannermen.

Ser Stone Eyes had shrugged and Lydos Greenhill simply said, “He is our prince.”

The audience was treated to another match between Damen Martell and Laurent Tyrell, the visceral back and forth between them hinting at some broiling hot emotion. For Damen, it was probably lust, as he had that reputation and appetite for beauty. For Laurent it was no secret the extent of his hatred, and so their blades glanced each other with such ferocity it brought gasps from spectators.

Damen had been victorious again, though Laurent lasted longer than anyone else, and the taste in his mouth must have been bitter indeed as he bowed for his hated enemy.

The horse races Lazar had skipped.

They did them all wrong in Westeros, what with the fancy saddles and bridle and the lords riding them as though they chased a stag through the woods.

Lazar had seen true horse races before: where the horse was not strapped in leather to its’ eyeballs and the riders were the smallest of children so that the horse could sprint at breakneck pace. Once you had seen the Dothraki race, well…there was really no comparison and all other races seemed lethargic in comparison.

Then came the okton in that spinning circle of death, horses moving in a graceful figure eight as spears flew overhead. Lazar had seen the sport in the Free Cities where only one person left the pitch alive.

Pallas’ victory was the reason for celebration.

Lazar’s cock tingled, always hungry, like he was. He slid up the length of Pallas’ warm body, his stubbled chin resting in the hollow at the base of Pallas’ throat and felt gentle hands carding through his wild hair. He wished he had some of his jewelry, his pirate’s trove in his manse in Pentos here. He would love to see Pallas collared in his wealth.
“I want you so badly,” Lazar admitted without shame, “But we need to be able to stand and walk and sit on a bouncing horse, no?” Chaste kisses peppered the top of his forehead and Lazar wanted to spank the Dornishman till he cried for being so unbearably tender.

“The joust is the most important!” Pallas argued, half sitting up so that he could smooth Lazar’s hair out of his face. “It is the last competition and someone will be crowned champion, another crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty.” He was a bit innocent in this aspect too; displays of wealth, splendor, and heraldry made him go weak-kneed. There would be no more wild fucking until the evening.

Lazar pouted on purpose. He never pouted. “What will you give me if I win?”

Pallas laughed and it only made him more beautiful. It broke Lazar’s heart he was so lovely. “A bold dog you are! You think you can win against me? Against my prince?” Lazar was unwavering and Pallas blushed alongside his smile. “What is it that you want?”

Lazar shuddered with need. “I want to strike you with a leather strap here.” He grabbed a firm handful of Ser Santagar’s plentiful backside, “Gently of course.”

“And what do I get if I win?”

“Whatever you want.” Lazar mumbled, burying his head into that firm chest and refusing to let go of his prize. “I’ll give you anything you want.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Lazar would be perfectly content to live the rest of his days like this: a whirlwind of activity during the day, drinking and eating with friends, and then an endless string of hours in hazy, hot lovemaking before sleep finally engulfed him. This heat, this smell, he loved it…

They napped a little longer, coiled together like snakes, and only arose when dawn streamed through the windows.

Lazar was awake first, as he never needed much sleep to begin with, but Pallas rose soon after. He was practically giddy with excitement as he pulled on the silk dressing robe that was too small for him across the chest and shoulders and Lazar was already planning in his mind the dirty things they would do later that evening. Pallas kissed him swiftly on the corner of the mouth before running back to his own quarters to dress and prepare for the last tournament.

Lazar felt a lack of…something at his departure and the feeling shocked him.

He never tried to grow attached to things or people. Things could be won and lost in the span of moments, people as well, though he always hung onto a memory or two of the vast multitudes of people he had met. But never did he grow so attached.

Still, the feeling of Pallas Santagar leaving him left a sour taste on his tongue.

He shook off the feeling and went to attend to his own appearance.

A little less than half an hour had passed and he was ready in his finest garments. Though simple in design and colored in dun and white, his cotton undershirt and leather outer garments were the finest money could buy. Normally competitors wore their house sigils on a pin or a ring or even emblazoned across their clothing—hell, even Aimeric Florent had gotten himself a house ring during his time in Highgarden—but Lazar had no such familial connections.
He thought about hanging the cock ring from his clothes but decided to save that for the secrecy of his bedchamber. Instead, he simply took a dog’s tooth tied with twine and pinned that to his breast. A wild dog indeed.

There was already the familiar sound of a crowd growing outside and Lazar stepped out of his door to a nearly empty hallway. Everyone wanted to be out early to get a plum seat for the joust, especially since the smallfolk would be allowed to attend this tourney.

The only person he encountered on his way was Laurent Tyrell.

“Ah, Tyrell.” Lazar inclined his head by way of greeting, “You are going to the field as well?” It was a stupid question; Laurent had his long hair loose and had taken great care with his appearance. He had to be going to watch the joust but even Lazar lost his silver tongue in the face of this cast iron bitch.

“Lazar. Good morning. Ah, yes. Yes I am.”

Normally Laurent was the picture of eloquence, able to cut off a man’s ability to speak without even drawing a blade. He seemed apprehensive today. “Do you…mind if I walk down with you to the stands.”

“No, by all means.” Laurent said in assent.

They walked in silence and Lazar was forced to entertain himself.

His eyes flicked over Laurent in a quick appraisal, a habit leftover from when he was a sellsword and a smuggler in Braavos. He took stock of the value of everything, even people, and Laurent Tyrell was no chore to look at.

Today the boy wore a new silk jacket in the same ostentatious kingfisher blue as his eyes, the pale gold embroidery the same color as his long hair. Lazar liked this look on him; normally laced tight within an inch of his life, this jacket was long to mid-thigh in the latest fashion and hung off of his shoulders showcasing the fine white skin underneath. Tight cream colored pants and matching boots, a simple necklace of costly lapis around his white throat, and a slightly wilting golden rose the size of a saucer pinned to his chest, but the most valuable asset by far was little lord Tyrell’s pretty face.

On the auction block in any of the Free Cities, especially Lys, this young man would raise a fucking fortune just by virtue of his beauty.

Lazar wouldn’t mind getting a leg over Laurent Tyrell and Pallas had not been adverse to having a third join their bed, but it would be unseemly to ask their host’s youngest son. Besides, the saucy little redhead who had partnered with Aimeric Florent for the tenn doubles had been making eyes at anyone who looked at him. Maybe he would do…

Lazar realized he was being rude by ignoring his companion. “Forgive me, Tyrell, I was lost in thought. What did you say?”

“I said nothing,” Laurent replied with an emotion much like irritability roiling under his tone, “I was lost in thought. Like you.”

“You are not set to compete?”

“I do not want to risk the life of my horse. And my father forbids me from it or the okton after—.”

The painful silence let Lazar know Lord Aleron Tyrell did not want to risk two crippled sons.
“You will escort your brother down?” Lazar liked Auguste Tyrell as the man seemed calm and sweet but had a streak of wickedness down the middle, like an ornery cat. It was a huge topic of debate if the younger brother was opposite in his personality.

“No. He requested Damen Martell to escort him down.”

*Oh, Laurent would have hated that,* Lazar thought. He decided silence was the safer option. They walked side by side to the stands, the most unlikely pair in the Tyrell Peach and the Knight of the Wild Dogs.

The jousting field had been constructed a little outside the walls of the castle and was a massive wooden structure draped in white, green, and crimson silks that had been embroidered with the Tyrell golden roses, perhaps to compensate for the lack of Tyrell competitors. Amidst those colors, Laurent stuck out like a blue beacon.

The larger stands for the smallfolk were already packed with people holding colored silks and waving paper pennants with their favored rider’s colors. Across the pitch in the noble’s boxes, people were still trickling in and several noble women were grasping a token of affection in hopes that their knight would emerge victorious and crown them queen.

Small chance of that.

“Thank you for walking with me, Lazar.” Laurent said when he spotted his brother standing by Damen Martell, Jord Oakheart, and Ser Stone Eyes.

“Not at all.” He replied, taking in one last look at Laurent. He went down like icy water.

Lazar went to see the tourney sheets over by the stables to see when he would ride and who his first competitor would be. He would also have to borrow armor, since he did not possess a set of his own. And if the mood was excitement in the stands, then in the stables it was positively explosive.

Squires ran to and fro with pauldrons and weapons and bits and bridles, while lordlings and battle-hardened professionals prepared themselves and attempted to soothe their horses.

Lazar’s own horse was placid and plain, standing in its’ stall munching hay and it whickered like laughter at the sight of him in armor. They were set up against some young minor lord from the westerlands as no one knew the extent of his skill. To be honest, he would probably be more adept at stealing some of the fine armor than winning the joust.

He did have to admit however, that the adrenaline rush when he rode out onto the packed earth of the pitch was almost unparalleled to anything else he had ever felt. The cheers went up even for an unknown wild knight like him and he waved to the adoring masses. Pallas he saw standing with other competitors in armor with azure detailing on the shoulders and helmet made to look like a leopard’s spots.

Lazar blew him a kiss and he saw Auguste Tyrell try to hold back a laugh.

Though the jousting lance was unwieldy, Lazar trusted his horse and his arm so it was no surprise to him when he was able to unseat his young opponent. He offered the young man a hand up and clapped him on the back.

This was obviously his first Games, and surely the boy would get better with practice. And Lazar did not intend to last long either.

His competitor in the next round was his lover Pallas, and never had he been happier to be knocked
on his back into the dirt. He did away with the stuffy armor, found a pitcher of wine and took up a place in the stands with the Iron Islands pirate ladies. In the stands it was a little clearer to see who was the favorite to win the competition was.

In golden armor detailed with the red and orange flames of the sun—probably worth as much as a mansion—Damen Martell rode a sand steed in the deepest pitch black, like dark rippling water. His reins and saddle glimmered with inlaid topaz and the silks under the saddles were in the fiery colors the prince favored. Lazar was unsure which would be worth more: the horse, the armor, or the ransom for the man.

In a golden-black blur he unseated every opponent that raced toward him until the sun hung a bit low in the sky and the only competitors were Damen Martell, Torveld Caron, the young Targaryen prince, and the Lady of House Tawney—mostly ladies did not participate, but she was from Halvik’s faction in the Iron Islands and Lazar would have liked to see anyone try and stop her.

The lady rode against the Targaryen prince first, though he lost for being only fourteen and still a bit green in his stature; surely in the coming years he would be a terror on this pitch. Then she rode again and was unseated by Torveld, though she was given a fine silver ring for coming so far in the championship.

Then it was Torveld Caron against Damen Martell, a nightingale against a python bathed in flame. It hardly seemed a fair fight and Lazar knew whom the favorite was to win.

The crowd dulled to a hush as they took up opposite sides on the pitch and saluted one another before taking up their lances. The tension was so palpable, even icy Laurent Tyrell gripped the armrests of his chair so tightly that his fingers trembled.

Then the lords were off in a cloud of dust, to people screaming their names and waving red and yellow silks in the air. The first turn and the lances glanced off of each other; another run would have to be made. They circled around and the hush fell again. Lazar regretted not betting on the match.

They were off again and Prince Damen’s horse reared as he squeezed its’ flanks with his muscular legs. The rider matched the horse for fire. This time the lance found its’ mark and Torveld Caron was knocked off his own horse into the hard-packed earth. Lazar could not control himself and leapt to his feet with what seemed to be the rest of Westeros, cheering for such a fine display of athleticism and horsemanship.

Now the crowd was just a frothing sea of red colored silks and those who had flowers readily on hand threw down petals on gilded Damen and his shimmering horse.

Damen removed his golden-red helmet and his dark hair spilled out in a shining, curly waterfall. His eyes glittered and he smiled with victory and the sounds of the masses cheering his name. Courteously, he bowed to his vanquished opponent and waved to his audience.

There was a feeling of anticipation that swept over the crowds as Damen nudged his horse over to where a set of magnificent flower crowns rested on a table covered in crimson velvet. Lazar realized it was the feeling of another type of competition that was taking hold of the audience.

A victorious bachelor prince about to crown the Queen of Love and Beauty?

Every eligible woman in the crowd sat up straighter, threw her hair over her shoulder in hopes that she would be the victor; every father with a marriageable daughter would have his mouth water at the thought of being father to a princess. Such a choice would be a declaration of overt fondness at the very least.
His hands, rough and calloused from fights, cradled his chosen flowers: the wreath of roses brought from the North, white at the tips but darkening towards the base until it was the harsh blue of a frozen lake. Winter roses, kept on a block of ice to keep them fresh and full.

Lazar felt a premonition at the color and the smile on Damen’s face, as though he already knew his choice and that this circlet matched perfectly. Lazar coughed back a nervous laugh at the impossibility.

Not for one moment did he ever think the crown of roses would go to Jokaste Dayne, for he had seen the breathy way she and Kastor Sand circled each other. No, Lazar’s mind went to the impossible. It was impossible, wasn’t it? He was hated. It was hatred…wasn’t it?

Lazar was shaking with laughter over the scandal and the spectacle, his ribs hurt from holding in his laughter as Damen galloped up to the noble side of the stands, crown in hand. Good god, the man was a masochist.

Surely the only sound in the entire arena was Lazar’s choking, stifled laughter as Damen Martell gently placed his blue flowers on the golden head of icy, vengeful Laurent Tyrell.

To be fair, the blue of the flowers suited him. It brought out the stark blue of his eyes and the white blond streaks in his long hair. No one else would be so well suited in the crown of blue roses. No one was half so beautiful.

It was like everyone else had forgotten how to breathe, save Lazar. Oh, the irony of it all!

Laurent was pink from the roots of his pale hair to the exposed bits of his chest as Damen kissed the top of his hand. Auguste and Aleron—hell, every person from the Reach—looked at Damen with a white face and an expression of baffled dislike. Ser Stone Eyes looked as though he might have need of smelling salts; anyone else who was privy to Laurent’s famous hatred of the Martells simply looked thunderstruck.

As the audience found their voice and the arena became awash with shouts of dismay, whispers that were barely whispers, and—above all—Lazar’s seemingly endless laughter.

It was the penultimate banquet, a level of finery and variety that would not be seen again for the next five years or until someone very important was getting married. Lazar had been to such feasts before, but he never tired of them.

Better yet, it was the kind of dinner where rumors were swirling, where there was something to talk about.

Lazar poured himself some sweet wine and eavesdropped on no less than seven conversations about what scandalous events had occurred previously. It was only made worse by the distinct absence of Damen Martell and Laurent Tyrell at dinner. Perhaps Laurent wanted to avoid the whispers and stares—Lazar could hardly begrudge him that—and Damen risked his life coming to dinner with so many Tyrell bannermen feeling he had laid insult to their young golden lord.

Careless of decorum, Lazar wandered from table to table, filling his plate and eavesdropping on everyone close to him.

When he returned to his seat, he caught a swirl of yellow and blue from the corner of his eye and wondered if it was Laurent Tyrell arriving late with head held high.
Ser Pallas Santagar draped in white and black and dark blue, an entire spotted leopard skin draped over his left shoulder. The leopard skin was tremendously valuable but the man wearing it was worth a hundred leopard skins to Lazar. He felt the fire in his throat as the young man sat next to him.

“You didn’t win,” Pallas smiled at Lazar as he sat next to him and Lazar could smell the oil of oranges he favored coming from his skin, “but I’ll still let you whip me with that belt tonight.”

Lazar grinned at him, already half drunk from the wine and the smell of Pallas’ skin. It didn’t matter really; tonight was the proper occasion to get so drunk that poor decisions were made and you awoke in bed with a throbbing head and sore ass. Never had he met someone so suited to his tastes.

“And what did you want?” he asked, leaning closer so that he was obscenely close to Pallas’ ear, “a consolation prize for the both of us.”

“I still haven’t decided.”

Lazar was filled with something warm and pleasant for the young lord next to him and—quite heedless of the fact that they were not in private—began to feed Pallas food with his fingers.

He called for all the aphrodisiac foods that were served in the whorehouses of Lys. The sweetbread dipped in honey, crabs and oysters dripping in lemon sauce, the delicate spiced lamb chops, tender cuts of meat drizzled in melted cheese, dates and strawberries and oranges and succulent pink peaches…all of the food evaporated in Pallas’ hot, wet mouth and Lazar made a mental note to have a pitcher of cream sent to their rooms that evening.

Together he and Pallas ignored the awkward atmosphere that was swirling around the Martell and Tyrell factions, as Damen and Laurent refused to show even past the first course. Of course, Auguste, ever the diplomat, tried to lighten the mood but even he looked a little tense while not having his brother and friend by his side. Ser Stone Eyes certainly had to grit and bear several rude comments about his prince but Lazar could have cared less.

He did notice when their lady friends from the Iron Islands—a lot he liked due to their shared love of piracy—grew tired of the tense atmosphere and brought forth a most welcome addition to the festivities: barrels of their own dark, spiced rum.

Lazar knew all too well the dangers of pirates’ drink and would normally refuse. The last time he had gotten drunk on rum, he had woken up in a lord’s manor in Pentos apparently having deflowered two daughters, the captain of the guard, and the lord himself. He had had to escape the manse by sliding down through their privy and into the ocean where his ship was anchored.

Still…he had some weaknesses and felt that the trouble he could get himself into in Highgarden was minimal.

When Kashel Pyke offered him a goblet, he took it and downed it in one gulp.

Lazar shivered as the familiar flavor burned through him.

Pallas’ eyes were the same color as the dark rum. “Is it good? What does it taste like?” Lazar poured himself another as the heat hit his toes and passed a second goblet to Pallas.

“It’s beautiful. I prefer it to wines—your Dornish reds don’t heat me like this does—but be careful, it hits late.” Pallas eyed it warily and Lazar continued as he sipped his second cup. “It tastes like…licorice and vanilla and honey but to me it always tastes like a bit of sea salt too. I’ve only ever drunk
Pallas downed it in one gulp and Lazar saw the fire take hold in his dark eyes. The more you drank, the longer the fire stayed. “Tell me about the ports.”

More glasses were poured and Lazar’s tongue became loose with stories. They spilled out without pause, blending together in a ribbon of sound and taste and memory and several people around him began to listen as well. Pallas’ rum-black eyes never wavered and their glasses were never empty, no matter how much he drank.

Lazar told them about how he had learned High Valyrian from a Lyseni slave girl and how he learned the proper way to walk on hot coals from a guard who used to be an Unsullied soldier. He had sneaked into the maester’s library in King’s Landing and been unable to actually read the books, but had enjoyed the pictures. He would tell of these Great Games someday, of the Lord of Love and Beauty with the blue rose crown and his own lover who was sweeter than rum.

Before any of them knew what was happening, the candles burned low and the flames of the rum had set in; everyone, everyone, was drunk.

Lazar could hold his liquor a little better so he saw what the effects were.

Auguste, Halvik Greyjoy and Torveld Caron were red in the face and giggling like children as someone clumsily spilled wine and capers all down the front of their white lace shirt. Jord was flushed deep, his jacket off and shirt unlaced as Aimeric Florent slid a hand very high up on his inner thigh; Jokaste Dayne and Kastor Sand had given up on their thinly veiled flirtations and were sneaking kisses outright. Ser Stone Eyes was smiling at some jest of Vannes Redwyne’s and any woman nearby was struck dumb by those silvery grey eyes set in a face that was not unpleasant to look at. It was as if the rum made everyone lose their inhibitions or allowed them to let out who they truly were, what they truly wanted at their core.

It made Pallas erotically sensitive.

Lazar ran his hands through that wavy, ink-black hair and Pallas shuddered the way he did at climax. One finger tracing down the curve of his jaw raised goosebumps on his dark arms. He was not going to last much longer in this dining hall.

“Come on,” Lazar murmured as frenetic dancing began to start in the center of the hall. He did not trust himself to dance in this state.

Pallas’ hand was warm and dry in his as Lazar pulled him up, snatched a silver pitcher of cream and pulled his lover through the crowds.

It was the witching hour; all decorum had gone out the window and the revelries swirled in color.

Kashel Pyke stood at the main doors with a small barrel of rum. Her braids had come loose and she swayed as she tried to understand her instructions. “…take another to Damen Martell, gods know he needs it.”

Lazar kissed her on her raspberry red mouth and she grinned at him. “Giving up already?”

“I have someone to warm my bed. I can only hope the same for you.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and Pallas blushed.

Some people had the same idea as Lazar, escaping before they were too inebriated to enjoy the
charms of their lovers. Jokasted sprinted past the two of them, a blur of gold with her loose hair, her chain jewelry and her gold lamé dress; Kastor Sand was running behind her, his hands reaching out for her slender waist as they disappeared into the darkness of the labyrinthine hall.

Further down, Jord and Aimeric had both lost their shirts as they had attempted to open the door to Jord’s room but had temporarily abandoned that enterprise in favor of kissing sloppily as though they intended to swallow each other, Jord’s hands were in Aimeric’s lush curls, Aimeric’s hand was down the front of Jord’s pants; Lazar guessed their ‘secret’ was out.

He swore he heard bells, like the slaves wore in Lys, but it could have been someone’s belts or jewelry clinking together.

A quick glance out of the windows provided even more entertainment.

Three women ran nude through the gardens, a man had begun to swim in one of the marble fountains and two figures on horseback galloped towards the gates of Highgarden as though they were escaping for their lives. He wondered if there was some drug in that particular batch of rum…

Lazar must have been drunker than he realized, as he could not remember the way to his rooms and it felt like hours they had been wandering the halls. His feet hurt, his cock hurt, he was tired of carrying the pitcher and so he simply pulled Pallas into the first empty room he came across.

“Lazar!” Pallas gasped as Lazar shut the door and began fumbling with his own clothes, “These aren’t your chambers!”

“Can you wait?” Lazar asked, in between pulling Pallas forward for heated kisses. “I cannot.”

“These are Prince Damen’s chambers!” Pallas gasped, although he allowed the leopard skin to be unpinned and discarded. Lazar ripped off his own leather jacket and stroked Pallas’ fine cheeks.

“And he’s not here. Live a little, lover, and I’ll apologize when he returns.”

It didn’t take much more than Lazar’s promise and Damen Martell’s lush feather bed to convince Pallas of the fine idea and it wasn’t long before he was naked. Personally Lazar felt a body like Pallas’ should never be covered with cloth. Pallas spun cheekily, showing off the cock ring he was still wearing, and Lazar pulled him down. Little Ser Santagar was tough enough that no normal man could pull him down but the rum plus his love of Lazar made it so he fell easily across Lazar’s lap.

His buttocks, so sensitive and smooth, quivered on the leather of Lazar’s pants and Lazar trembled in turn as his hand closed around the thick leather of his discarded belt. Pallas was warm as the sun, like a plank of sun-warmed wood across his hips. He wanted to be rough…he wanted to be gentle…he was filled with wanting.

“Do it Lazar, I want it!” Pallas begged, his dark eyes glazed with drink and lust.

Lazar brought the impromptu whip down just enough to sting and sensitive Pallas cried out enough to make him stiff. Another strike and a red line showed up on Pallas’ curving cheek. Lazar kissed it.

By the fifth spank, tears were rolling down Pallas’ cheeks but his cock was leaking onto Lazar’s expensive pants and he was crying for more.

Lazar looked down at his pretty lover and was filled with that something that he couldn’t name.

Pallas was precious to him, he knew, like a fine statue or a chest of gold but…no, it was deeper than that. He could spend a chest of gold or sell a statue without a second thought; he could leave a
courtesan with a fond memory and some gold, but nothing more.

He wanted Pallas like he ached for a sight of the sea or like the way his heart raced as he rode a horse through the Great Grass Sea. He wanted this man so badly and the thought that he would have to leave Pallas Santagar within the week—paired with his drunkenness—made him weepy. His tears hit the welts he made as he kissed Pallas up and down his beautiful bottom.

“What? What is it?” Pallas shifted in attempt to see Lazar’s tear-streaked face but Lazar held him in place. “Lazar, lover, why are you crying?”

It bubbled out of Lazar without his permission. “Your request, use it Pallas! Tell me to come with you to Dorne. Order me to stay with you. Please, I…don’t want to be without you, Little Ser Santagar! Order me to stay by your side…”

Gentle hands sifted through his hair and Lazar felt like this was something like the ‘home’ everyone was going on and on about. It felt nice.

Pallas rolled over in his arms and moved so that his lips were right by Lazar’s ear. It was a heartfelt, lover’s whisper that made Lazar hotter than a barrel of rum could. “Stay with me, wild Lazar. Come with me to Dorne, to Spottswood by the sea. I want it more than anything. Don’t…leave me.”

They were not the type of men to say ‘I love you’. They could easily show their affections through action.

Lazar sat up properly and Pallas followed him, his hand closing over their impromptu whip. “So…you’re coming with me? Really?”

“I am.” Lazar grinned, his tears gone as quickly as they had come. “I’ve never been to Spottswood before.”

“We have proper whipping crops there.” Pallas smiled and Lazar swelled with adoration.

“For now…we’ll just have to make do.”

With the speed of someone who was very used to wrestling, Pallas rolled and flipped Lazar so now their positions were reversed. Lazar found himself laid across Pallas’ knees and began to consider the possibilities of ripping clothes before sex as Pallas yanked his leather pants down to his knees.

“Are you going to whip me now, Leopard Lord?”

Pallas stroked his back, like he would with a favorite hound. “It’s your turn, Dog Knight. Five for me, five for you.” It was Lazar’s turn to cry out as the belt lashed against his ass and the welts bloomed hot. He had never felt so happy in living memory.

There was the sound of pounding and Lazar wondered if this was the most hungover he had ever been in his life.

He had a dull awareness of Pallas’ warm body being under his arm and the light that streamed in over his body. But the pounding drowned out all other feeling, as it seemed to vibrate the bed and his entire body. It was with great effort that he managed to open one eye…

…just in time to see a dozen Highgarden soldiers burst through their locked door, with swords drawn.
Lazar sat up slowly, attempting to remain calm, only angling himself slightly so that his body was in front of Pallas’. Pallas had also roused quickly and was attempting to cover himself like a maiden would. It was definitely the wrong time, but the thought of Pallas in a maiden’s dress aroused Lazar.

“Good morning gentlemen.”

It was obviously mid-afternoon at least, judging by the orangey light warming the beautiful wooden floors. The soldiers also had the distinct symptoms of a long night, what with their clenched jaws, reddened eyes, and the greyish tone to their skin. Lazar wanted to laugh at them but he felt that they would not appreciate his good humor. They looked grim.

The lot of them respectfully parted the way for Jord, resplendent in his official robes. “He’s not here, Ser.”

Jord looked vaguely ill. “Fuck. He…won’t like that. Gods…” He looked up and there was something in his eyes, something like regret and suspicion and exhaustion, “I’m sorry. Ser Pallas Santagar. You are under arrest by order of Lord Auguste Tyrell. Please come with us immediately and without a fight.”

The hell they wouldn’t fight. Lazar felt his hackles raise but he held himself back.

“Wait, wait!” He said as the soldiers moved forward, “At least let the man get dressed for god’s sake. And let us know what he’s being charged with… other than buggery, of which I am also gladly guilty of.” To keep eyes off of Pallas and his beautifully sculpted ass, Lazar tossed the sheets back so that the soldiers could see the rope marks across his torso and the enormous wooden dildo next to him.

“Gods, Lazar.” Jord groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “This is serious.”

“I’ll fight you naked.” Lazar hissed. “Captain of the Highgarden soldiers beaten to death with a wooden cock—.”

“Laurent Tyrell is missing!” Jord snarled and the fury in his eyes already gave Lazar hint as to who was the first suspect, “No one has seen him since the joust yesterday, his room is empty, and his horse is missing. As is the horse of Prince Damen Martell. We have been unable to locate him either, as you can plainly see. You two are sharing his bed at the moment.”

Ah, so the Prince stole the pretty little lord then. Lazar didn’t think he was the type. He had Damen Martell pegged as the chivalrous, storybook type. Those types did not normally kidnap people they courted but…exceptions could be made for anyone so beautiful as Laurent.

“Prince Damen would never!” Pallas heard the insinuation and blazed with anger. “He would never do something so dishonorable!”

“Until the both of them have been found, not a single person from Dorne will be allowed to leave this castle!” Jord insisted and Lazar knew he was at war between his duty and his genuine affection for his new Dornish friends. “I’m sorry Ser Pallas but…we have to find him.”

“Don’t worry, lover.” Lazar assured Pallas cheerily as they began to escort him away, “I’ll be with you shortly. Wait for me.” Jord shot him a confused look and Lazar bared his teeth; how dare they touch his lover?

“Did you see anything Ser?” Jord asked, white in the face. Auguste with a missing brother must have terrified him.
Lazar wanted to be contrary but Jord was so quaint and kind—a little stuffy at times—but he was the only one courteous enough to call Lazar ‘Ser’. “I was too drunk to recall.” He admitted. “And I was busy with fucking. I’m sure you can empathize.”

Jord blushed and Lazar pitied the man. He looked stressed even after a night of fucking.

But Lazar... he lived for this.

He thought the shine of Highgarden would wear off after the Games but now... this was interesting: the Lord of Love and Beauty stolen in the night by his bitterest enemy, the Prince of Dorne. Gods only knew why, though Lazar had an inkling what a man like Damen Martell would like to do alone with Laurent Tyrell.

For now though, he was off to find his lover and watch the chaos unfold. And indeed, it was chaos outside Prince Damen’s rooms.
6. Nicaise

Chapter Notes

I am going to try (TRY) to update every 10 days or so but...I'm not sure how well that will work out since the last 3 chapters might be 30 page monsters again. Haaaaa....we'll see!

In any case! Welcome to Nicaise's chapter! If you've been hearing bells around, you can thank him for that and his fondness for spying on the people of Highgarden. He is also got a hero-worshipping obsession with Auguste, he's jealous of/aspires to be like Laurent, and added with his love of causing chaos, well...nothing good can come from it haha! I tried to make his POV very childish; a lot focused on himself and not what others may want or feel and he can be sweet and selfish (hey, he's only 14 and he's never had a loving family before, cut him some slack!).

And now you can understand why those 2 fools escaped in the middle of the night. Apparently pirate rum=poor decisions in Westeros!

Anyways you can see where the drama is gonna start! I hope you enjoy this chapter and thank you for all the lovely comments and kudos! I know I don't update this story as often but I swear I'm working hard to finish it ;)

6. Nicaise

In Essos, his insipid customers and lack wit owner had called him The Bower Bird of Lys. ‘Bower’ because he had been a pretty little painted whore, to be forever trapped inside the bedroom, and a reference to that clever little bird because he favored blue gems—sapphires, aquamarine, blue diamonds, blue opals and the like—as payment above all others. It sounded foolish, yes, but the stones matched his eyes! Anyways, he was no longer in Lys but the nickname had stuck. Here in Westeros, those that knew of him called him ‘The Bower Bird of Highgarden’ but his given name was Nicaise. And no longer was he a boy whore; now he was a spy under the personal employ of Auguste Tyrell.

He knew all the secret passageways and hidden spots inside of Highgarden; he lounged in the rafters and hid behind the intricate partitions of people’s personal chambers. He was so small and quiet that no one noticed as he watched the comings and goings. But mostly the comings.

He dealt in secrets, in dramatics.

Who was fucking whom? How did they like it done? Who hated whom? Who was stealing? Who was lying? Who was taking liberties in abandoned hallways? Who needed to be punished? Nicaise knew it all, so long as it was inside the walls of Highgarden.

He knew that Jord Oakheart was fucking Aimeric Florent (the two of them were overtly fond of sixty-nines, in case the issue was brought up) and lost sleep at his guilt over the fact. He knew that Jokaste Dayne had missed her courses that month and was wondering whether she would keep the child of a bastard or order some moon tea brought to her quarters. He knew what Auguste Tyrell was capable of. But most importantly, Nicaise was the only one in all of Highgarden who knew where Laurent Tyrell was.
He watched with delight as people began to rouse from their drunken revelries to discover what kind of horrible things they were going to attempt to cover up or forget. But Nicaise had seen and he would not so easily forget.

It was Auguste he waited for with bated breath.

When the man woke from his bed and found Kashel Pyke naked next to him, Nicaise left that particular scene—as funny as it would be to witness—to go put on the proper clothes. Today was finally the day.

His own room was intimate and with a view of the lake on the west side, practically a broom closet compared to his old quarters in Essos, but it was his and he didn’t have to surrender his ass and mouth for it.

He pulled his chest of clothes out from under his bed and began to rummage through it, searching for the correct garments. His heartbeat was in his throat.

In the end, he chose a fitted white shirt that hung to his slender ribcage, revealing most of his torso, but he amended the revealing shirt with a voluminous pair of high-waisted harem pants that clung tight at the waist and ankles, the crotch almost at the ankles. They were the same bright blue of Laurent’s baggy jacket from the previous day though Nicaise felt the color suited him better anyway.

He hated shoes and never wore them.

Next was jewelry and this was more to his liking. He had a chest nearly the size of his own torso filled with valuable baubles that he had either stolen from the brothel or had been given to him by Auguste, which to him were far more precious.

Most were given to him for reporting on which lords put their hands on Laurent.

Precious Laurent. Stuck up bitch. Nicaise had to shake the sour thoughts from his head as he put on his jewelry.

His earrings were long silver crescent moons with fat star sapphires cradled inside. His necklace was a silver chain choker with another sapphire hanging on a pendant. His bracelets were the same he always wore: bangles hung with tiny silver bells.

He knew how to move without shaking the bells, thus alerting people to his presence, but sometimes he let them jingle just to remind them to be on their toes. A dab of lavender oil behind his earlobes and on his wrists and he was presentable.

He spun in front of his mirror and then fell backwards onto his bed with a laugh that matched his bells. Now all he had to do was wait.

He knew it would not take long. Auguste knew everything that went on inside of his castle and he would notice soon that his perfect, precious baby brother was missing. It only took him until a little after mid-afternoon.

Nicaise heard a knock on his door and when he opened it, it was to the haggard face of Jord Oakheart.

“Good morning, Ser. Rough night?” He inquired as sweetly as he could, giggling to himself when Jord winced at his high, unbroken voice. The normally straight-laced captain of the guard had not had the time apparently to properly fasten his jacket and Nicaisa was willing to bet silver that he had recently been buried root deep in Aimeric Florent’s mouth. Slut.
“Nicaise. Auguste needs to speak with you immediately. Please follow me.”

Nicaise leapt to his feet and gave Jord his most winning smile. “Lead the way, Ser.”

Nicaise was skilled at hiding in the shadows of larger men and he was sure no one noticed him behind Jord’s figure as he surveyed the damage from last night’s festivities. Most people weren’t even awake thanks to the rum and fucking and those that were awake looked positively miserable.

Jord did not attempt to go into Auguste’s chambers so Nicaise went in alone.

Seeing Auguste sitting in his favorite chair with his head a fiery crown of golden sunlight, Nicaise felt as though he had shrunk and gone back. He was nine years old, almost ten, and he was walking through the incensed interior of his ‘house’ in Lys.

He could hear it, feel it, smell it…

“He’s sent back all the girls,” he heard one of the older ones say as he passed them, “so they’re sending out the boys now. Young handsome lord like that,” she hissed through her teeth in disappointment, “I could scream at them.”

Nicaise rudely pushed past them and ran out to the viewing chambers before anyone could stop him.

There were the older boys, men practically, and they were not as pretty as Nicaise was. No one asked for them half as often as they asked for him. None of them had sapphires dangling from their ears. The bell around his throat rang lightly as he swallowed and peered out from behind Isander’s dark hip.

Their guest was sitting in the place of honor in the cloth of gold chair. He had a pitcher of chilled white wine and a very fine jacket in the same color.

At first he looked like a god.

With the sunlight streaming in behind him, his golden hair looked like a crown of light. He smiled and Nicaise thought for a foolish moment that this must be what all the stupid girls dreamed of when they thought about handsome princes and golden knights. But all illusions faded.

As he moved, Nicaise saw the way he favored his leg, saw the fine polished cane and the sadness that saturated his handsome face. Besides it was rare that someone handsome, young, and wealthy visited.

“Do any of these please you, m’lord?” The serving boy asked, gesturing to the line.

The man’s cheeks colored and he attempted to hide his discomfort behind a laugh. Obviously someone had smelled money on him and pulled him in here despite his protests. “I-I don’t think—I mean, you’re all lovely but…I don’t like boys. I don’t want—is that a child?”

They parted for him then, parted so the man could see Nicaise, and Nicaise glared at him. Customers liked that for some reason; they liked him when he spit fire and did not lower his eyes submissively. Maybe they liked the idea of breaking him. They never would. He had been born to two beautiful whores here in Lys where they bred slaves for greater beauty. He was born in this perfumed hell and in this place no man would scare him.

“Come here, boy.” His voice was smooth, like honey.

But Nicaise refused to come out and the other older boys had to part around him so their patron
could see. It was disappointing, he could feel it come from them, that someone so young and handsome had such deviant tastes. Still, if he had the gold, he made the rules.

The young lord sucked in breath when he saw Nicaise’s youth and finery. “You are... so small. How old are you? What is your name?”

Nicaise held out his hand, just as bold as ever and blue eyes flicked to it. “If you want answers you have to pay.”

There was a moment of startled silence.

Nicaise gambled with his own body. If he played this saucy brat in front of cruel men, his body would suffer. But this fellow... he smelled like weakness as much as gold. He laughed. He was more handsome when he laughed.

When the laughs subsided, he sighed. “You people will not let me leave will you? Fine. An hour with the cheeky one.”

Within moments Nicaise was sitting on their finest bed, now glancing out from behind the gauzy bed curtains at his guest. The young man sat on one of the armchairs nearby and poured himself some more wine. He did not seem at all concerned about the hour of his time ticking away; perhaps he meant to watch only. Nicaise twisted his lips in annoyance.

“I am not going to touch you.” He admitted before Nicaise could needle him. “I have no interest in boys, much less ones your age. I only meant to slip away from my guard for a few hours and I suppose I might as well sit and have a drink while I let him panic.” There was something so childishly wicked in the way he smiled, in the way his blue eyes sparkled that made Nicaise smile too. He was like a prince from a story: escaping his loyal guard. “Now. I paid. What do they call you? How old are you?”

“I am called the Bower Bird of Lys but my given name is Nicaise. I am nine years old.” He took care to make his voice sound as clear and adult-like as possible; he refused to force a lisp like some boys did.

The handsome face darkened only a moment but he recovered with a sip of wine. “Nice to meet you Nicaise. My name is Auguste Tyrell and I am the future lord of Highgarden in Westeros. Have you heard of it?”

Nicaise had not but he nodded anyways.

Oh, he had heard of Westeros but he had never been, he could not read, and what kind of a brothel had maps and books anyways?

Auguste Tyrell smiled like he knew Nicaise was lying. Without any prompting, Auguste happily began to describe Highgarden, his home, his castle, his family. His descriptions made Nicaise see it in his mind’s eye: the large golden roses, the pink-white marble parapets, and the lush green maze.

He flashed gold and sunshine at times, lifting up his wine more and more. Sadness clung to him like a shadow.

“Do you drink often?” Nicaise asked as a third goblet was poured. Auguste stopped.

For a moment Nicaise thought he might cry but he composed himself. “It makes my leg hurt less... when I drink.”
“What happened? To your leg?”

“My friend…there are Games every five years in Westeros you see where all the noble young men go to compete. And my friend he…threw a spear that hit my horse and the horse fell on my leg. The bone mended poorly and now,” Auguste gestured to his cane and his leg, “There are Games now, which is why I am in Essos. I cannot compete and my family would kill my friend.”

Ah, he was running away then. It was too painful.

Normally Nicaise would debase him as a coward but none of this was Auguste’s fault and the emotional and physical pain were probably excruciating.


“No, of course not! It was an accident.” Auguste set his wine glass down. “It was an accident and… the gods determined it was my lot to be crippled. If anything, it allowed me to meet you, little Bower Bird.”

Nicaise would have died for him then. This handsome man with the sorrowful shadow.

For once he wished the hour would drag on.

When the serving boy knocked on the door, he must have been very confused to see Nicaise relaxed and fully clothed on the bed conversing with Auguste Tyrell. The sheets had not even been mussed.

“Oh well Nicaise, it seems I must go back to my men.” Courteously he helped Nicaise down from the bed; his hand was warm and dry. “Keep yourself safe little Bower Bird.” His robes were a whirl of wine white and Nicaise felt words bubbling hot in his throat.

“Auguste Tyrell.” Nicaise wanted to see him smile one last time. “I wish I could see it. Your home. Highgarden.” Auguste smiled at him. “I want to see it.”

Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine.

Never did he imagine that the next day he would wake to find a sober man bearing a purse of gold and instructions to buy Nicaise permanently. Nicaise had sewn his jewels into the lining of his voluminous pants and within the week he was on a ship to Westeros with Auguste and his men.

It was there he got an inkling of the importance of Laurent.

Laurent, Laurent, Laurent.

It was all Auguste talked about at times. His precious little brother, so intelligent, so poised and beautiful, one would have thought he was a prince of light come down from the heavens by the way Auguste talked about him. Nicaise remained silent and listened as they sailed over the grey-green sea.

By the time they reached Highgarden, Nicaise was torn between curiosity and outright jealousy at the thought of meeting Laurent Tyrell.

Now…it was only jealousy.

When he first met Laurent it had washed over him in cold, salty waves. The precious brother. The beautiful lord of Highgarden and the first person in Auguste’s heart. And there was no denying it, as much as Nicaise bitterly wished it was not true, that Laurent was better than he was.
His eyes were the costliest blue diamonds, Nicaise’s were cheap paste jewels; golden hair in comparison to muddy curls, a young man with a core of white diamond, intelligent, kind, and graceful. He could read and write, he could turn heads without being sluttish, he was a lord with polish and poise. All Auguste had said and more. And Nicaise knew he had lost.

All he had wanted was to get out of the brothel. Now that he was out he wanted nothing more than to have a brother like Auguste. And he would never take that place with Laurent Tyrell around. Auguste had taught Nicaise to read and write but if Laurent came to him for any reason other than to help, Auguste put the lessons aside until later. Nicaise had asked for lessons on riding until he found out that Laurent would be accompanying them as he was ‘the better horseman’, potential self-defense classes had gone in a similar fashion. One would think the brothers were joined at the hip and their shared blood seemed an insurmountable obstacle. Nicaise just wanted Auguste to himself without having to feel the constant unfavorable comparison. A prickly little foreign whore in comparison to a perfect, lordly brother.

It was even more painful because Laurent was really and truly kind to Nicaise. But he did not value Auguste as Nicaise felt he should. And that was unforgivable.

The first time Nicaise realized was when he came across Laurent, fifteen and slender, pressed hard against the wall and attempting to push off a man twice his size as the man tried to unlace Laurent’s trousers. Nicaise froze; they had not seen him but he had seen this scenario a thousand times and for a moment he was afraid he was back in Lys.

But then Laurent had elbowed the man hard in the throat and he had crumpled to the floor. Laurent’s eyes had been hard and shiny when he pulled Nicaise behind him and whispered hot and fast: “Don’t tell Auguste.”

So Nicaise told Auguste.

His heart raced as he saw Auguste’s face darken. Murderous fury, guilt, sickness and protectiveness had all swirled in his dark eyes as he thought of someone putting hands on his beloved brother. It took him a moment to speak and Nicaise wondered if Auguste would ever spare that look if he were in danger.

“My brother…he is trying to spare me of more pain.” Auguste admitted. “He knows that I would be honor-bound to defend him if I knew of such a thing. I would—.” Auguste gripped the thigh of his ruined leg with a pain that was not physical.

Nicaise was struck by the same fear as Laurent.

He did not want the man he wanted as a brother to die in a duel. Instead, he knelt at Auguste’s feet, placing his head on Auguste’s knees in the way he had seen Laurent do.

Large, warm hands stroked his curls and Nicaise sighed. “I wish there was something I could do to help you.”

This was how Nicaise became the little master of whispers for Auguste Tyrell.

Originally he was only meant to watch Laurent—precious, perfect Laurent—but soon he watched everyone, just out of habit. He liked the secrets, he liked knowing that he could blackmail anyone and everyone in the castle, and, more than anything, he loved the praise he got from Auguste.

Laurent had no idea the lengths his brother had gone for his safety, the ungrateful bitch.
Every man who pushed Laurent into a dark corner, every person who Nicaise overheard making lewd comments felt the full force of Auguste’s wrath after Nicaise told him. For all his kindness, Auguste had a streak of fire in him that blazed out of control when he was angry. Laurent did not deserve such a kind, attentive, and loving brother. Nicaise would be a much better brother. He had never wanted anything so badly in his entire life.

He just needed Laurent out of the way.

When Auguste looked up at him now, he looked tired but there was an edge of desperation underneath it all, like a gilded knife, razor sharp. He smiled and Nicaise rocked up onto the balls of his feet before running to Auguste.

“You called for me?” He made his voice as sweet as possible.

“Nicaise.” Auguste took Nicaise’s hand in his own and his fingers trembled slightly. “You were watching the halls last night, weren’t you?”

“Of course I was.”

“Do you know where Laurent is?” Auguste continued. “He didn’t come to see me this morning, he’s not in his quarters, and Jord says his horse is not in the stables. I know he is skilled with swordplay but…I only hope nothing untoward happened to him during the night. Do you know where he is?”

No one would believe him and that was the beauty of it all.

Nicaise had seen them.

Kashel Pyke had brought rum to Laurent’s chambers so he could drink off his supposed embarrassment. That alcohol had made him weepy as he realized their time together was coming to an end and he might not have an excuse to see the one he loved for another five years. Nicaise had to hand it to him: they had hidden their affection well to avoid a scandal. It had taken him a long while to see it himself.

But Laurent, beloved Laurent, had lost his mind in that drink and raced through the corridors with the blue roses still resting on the top of his head. Everyone was deep in food and drink and music, so they did not hear his desperate pounding on the doors or see the dark arms wrap around his waist and pull him into a loving embrace.

Kashel Pyke brought more drink and did not notice that two were in the room instead of one.

An hour later, when the moon was high, Laurent ran back to his rooms, stumbling slightly, the roses askew. In a wobbly hand he wrote a letter to his brother and nearly burned himself with the sealing wax. He trusted no one with the letter so he simply left it on his bed, where he knew Auguste would check the next day.

Nicaise watched as he raced back through the halls in a golden-blue blur, more radiant than any time Nicaise had seen him before, as he met with his lover in the shadows. No one coming out of the hall gave them a second glance, everyone was so inebriated.

They went to the stables, giggling like children, too drunk to even put on the saddles and bridles. Bareback they rode out of the gates of Highgarden and Nicaise watched Laurent go with the greatest elation.

Because today was the day.
Laurent Tyrell had shamed his family and run off with their most hated enemy. Without permission he had fled. Who knew when or if he would return? Auguste would see it as betrayal of the deepest kind; his brother he worked so hard to protect had thrown it all away. He would be heartbroken and furious.

And Nicaise would be there. He would be there. He would be the brother this man deserved.

So he widened his eyes to make them heartbreaking and clutched Auguste’s hand with all of his tiny strength. “I…don’t know how to tell you this but,” he bit his lip and nursed it between his teeth to color it cerise, “but Damen Martell has taken him.”

It was exhilarating.

So shocked was Auguste Tyrell that he got to his feet without assistance, his cane clattering to the wood floors. His grip was vice-like on Nicaise’s hand but Nicaise gritted his teeth as his knuckles were ground and he became transfixed watching Auguste’s reaction.

His handsome face turned white as a sheet, white as ivory as Nicaise’s words took root. He thought of his dear friend and beloved brother gone to gods knew where. Then he thought of them again, the pair; surely he must know of Damen Martell’s sexual appetites having grown up together and of Laurent’s abject hatred of the prince. Of Damen crowning Laurent the ‘Queen’ of Love and Beauty, of the two of them disappearing under cover night when everyone’s ears were dulled with rum, and what kind of reason a strong man steals a beautiful one in the middle of the night.

Then his face became mottled crimson with rage and his eyes burned. If Nicaise were the target of such intense rage, he would be afraid for his life but Auguste had never threatened him nor hurt him physically. Right now only Damen Martell was in danger.

“Are you sure?” His voice was so choked with fury that it was a miracle any of it was intelligible.

“His highness’ form is not easily mistaken.”

“My brother—Laurent, did he fight?” Now there was a bit of anguish as he tried to deny it to himself, “Did he show any sign of distress? Did he fight?” Those were the reports that hurt Nicaise most to make, was Auguste’s expression when he had to listen to how Laurent had been forced to struggle and fight, taking up the mantle his older brother had lost with the wholeness of his leg. It was like his heart was being torn from his chest.

Nicaise knew the feeling. He probably made a similar expression every time he saw Laurent in a space he could not occupy: brushing Auguste’s hair, walking with him to dinner, sharing a private joke…a place Nicaise could not occupy no matter how hard he wished he could.

“It did not appear so,” Nicaise admitted truthfully, “But…Damen Martell is the strongest man in Westeros.” Laurent was good with a sword, probably the best in Highgarden, but Damen Martell had easily beaten him twice and Auguste knew that.

All fear and fury and no sunshine, Auguste collapsed back into his chair and chewed nervously on his thumbnail.

“I don’t want to do anything rash. I’ll have Jord search for Damen. I’ll need to—and Laurent’s rooms! If there is a logical explanation, I’m sure he will have left something to…to let me know where he has gone.” He dropped Nicaise’s hands so he could pick up his cane, “I will go and check myself.”

Nicaise inclined his head respectfully. “I will listen while you do so and see if I can find out where
specifically Laurent has gone.”

Nicaise simply lounged in the rafters, watching as Jord was found and set to task. He smiled at their determination. They would not find anything no matter how hard they searched.

Damen’s silken black sand steed would be missing from its stall, as would Laurent’s misty grey-white mount. The guards could turn Highgarden upside down, the entire city could be searched but those two would not be found. Neither would any word from Laurent telling Auguste of safety or distress. He only had to wait.

Within the hour, Auguste had returned with a face like murder.

Nicaise was back in his chambers immediately and tried hard to make his expression grave. “They aren’t here, are they?”

“Nicaise,” Auguste gripped his chair so that his knuckles and arms bulged, “you are all I have.” Joy unparalleled coursed through Nicaise’s heart. “Please tell me you have heard something. Anything.”

“Only a rumor,” Nicaise bit his lip again, “that Damen Martell wanted to take your brother…to sing. No song sweeter than…” Auguste looked on in confusion until Nicaise made the sounds. Those sounds that could not be mistaken: the moans and cries that rang out like songs from the brothels of Lys and Oldtown. Nicaise made them a little high-pitched, a little tinged with desperation.

“No.” He was glad there was no weapon readily at hand.

“I do not know for sure.” Nicaise lied, “But I think it is a play on words. A clever play on words to give hint as to…where they might have gone…” Nicaise refused to help any more than that and besides Auguste would be clever enough to figure it out after a short while of asking around.

A tense hand patted the top of Nicaise’s curls and Nicaise felt the glow of victory drowning out his guilt. “Thank you Nicaise. You have helped me beyond measure this afternoon. I’ll not soon forget it.”

“Anything for you.” Nicaise assured him. Everything had worked out perfectly and he had barely had to lift a finger.

Nicaise watched as the guards of Highgarden were alerted and the halls seethed with activity. Auguste saw to it that every Martell bannerman was hunted down and sequestered in the cells below the main floor while the Dornish ladies were informed that they were under house arrest and would not be allowed to leave their room until Damen Martell and Laurent Tyrell were found.

Nicaise picked his way to Laurent’s empty chambers and surveyed it.

He didn’t know why but he felt as though a weight had been lifted off of his chest. It was the feeling the girls described when a beautiful rival courtesan was bought off or lost her appeal. The sudden loss of competition was a relief.

Nicaise flopped down on Laurent’s lush feather bed and wondered if the prince had fucked him on these sheets. He reached into the voluminous folds of his pants and searched the hidden pockets sewn within. In the old days they would be filled with jewels and coins he had filched off of the brothel patrons but now…

His hands closed around the stiff envelope and he drew it out so he could read it again.

Nicaise was adept at opening a letter without destroying the wax seal and he took care with
Laurent’s messy blue wax. He had to hand it to Laurent, even after an entire cask of rum his handwriting was still lovely, even though there were some uncharacteristic spelling errors and a tilt of haste to the writing. Nicaise read slowly.

‘Brother, Auguste,

I should have told yoo. By the gods, I am drunk. When you wake tommorrow in the morning I will be away and I’m sure everyone will think I am been taken.

But I’m not. Not taken. I am so happy. I have never been so happy in my life. I love him, gods forgive me, I love him and I want to be with him. Damen Martell, can you even imagine? I know I sad I hated him so many time so many but I did not know how to tell you that my affect feelins have changed. I love him I do. I swear it.

Father will not aprove and I do not know if you will either but I am no on fire. I cannot hide it any longer. I am bruning alive and I feel I should not be so frank with my brother…

Damen is taking me to Nightsong. I will not shame father and our men by loving my ‘enemy’ in our home. Forgive me if you are angry. I hope you are not. Please write to me and let me know when I can come back.

Know that I am we are so happy. So happy. I love him. He loves me. Gods Auguste he loves me.

Laurent’

Nicaise twisted his lips at these drunken ramblings.

It was clear that Damen and Laurent had been inflamed with rum and passion but were too self-conscious to fuck inside the castle. Hell, if word got out of their clandestine love then Damen might be chased from Highgarden with arrows and spears flying at his back. So—in their drunkenness—a foolish decision was made and they decided to run out of the Reach. Wild things done in the name of alcohol and lust.

Of course, Auguste didn’t know any of this since he had not seen the letter.

Nicaise thought about burning the parchment but…part of him could not bring himself to destroy it. He did feel a tiny pinprick of guilt after all. Perhaps he would keep it as a memento, more precious than sapphires.

When Auguste fought with his brother and inevitably had their falling out, then Nicaise would be safe.

He would never again have to worry about losing his home in Highgarden. With Laurent gone, he would be Auguste’s primary companion, they could ride horses together and Nicaise could learn to fight with a little cat’s paw dagger. If anyone tried to push him into a dark corner, Auguste’s eyes would flash over his defense and someone would pay for laying hands on a former whore, on the beloved Bower Bird of Highgarden.

He would have a brother he loved; more importantly he would feel safe. He had not felt safe in his entire life.
Hey everyone! I am very bad at dates haha! It's only been 9 days but I'm going to indulge because maybe it will inspire me to write this story faster! Nicaise made most of you all angry last time, and he is being a little brat so now we have the nuclear fallout, courtesy of Auguste. I like writing Auguste into my stories because I have so much freedom with his personality. In Love of the Second Star he was Damen's bff and just the perfect brother to Laurent; in Touch You he was a huge dick to Damen and overprotective of Laurent. Here...he's kind of a psychopath actually haha! I swear it happened by accident but I have a feeling it was a good thing Auguste Tyrell is not as mobile as he used to be or he would very well have killed someone. Hell, he's 100% set on killing Damen now.

In any case, I hope you all enjoy Auguste going crazy! I think his convo with Jokaste is my favorite. As always thanks for the comments and kudos! They really keep me going when I get stuck writing haha!

7. **Auguste**

Only people who had known him since childhood knew that Auguste had a streak of fire in him that occasionally flared out of control.

To all who respected his home, his family and friends, Auguste Tyrell was the placid, generous, perfect lord. To his enemies, he was deadly. Almost the mirror opposite of his brother who was prickly and cold on first glance, but was endlessly sweet and sensitive beneath that.

Once, at the age of eight, another older boy had knocked a toddling Laurent into the dirt to see if he would cry. Auguste only remembered a feeling like fire behind his eyes and when he came to his senses, the older boy was beneath him sobbing with two black eyes, a split lip, and a broken arm. He had to be dragged off the boy by the master at arms.

An apology was formally issued to the boy and his family but the boys of the Reach knew then that Auguste Tyrell had a murderous temper on him.

When he met Damen Martell for the first time, it was the fire in his dark eyes that drew Auguste to him. The fire he felt, he saw reflected in his friend. A man after his own heart was Damen Martell.

In Oldtown, in the whorehouses they spent as much time beating the hell out of belligerent or violent customers as they did enjoying the company of the ladies within. Even after the pain in his leg made proper sparring nearly impossible, Auguste had not lost any of his intense anger. He only tempered it and honed it for the proper times before he let it spill out.

The first time after his injury was for Laurent, of course.

Auguste knew of his uncle, the maester in King’s Landing, and why he had been sent far from Highgarden in the first place. Many had forgotten, but he would never forget.

He would sooner give up his other leg than let beautiful, innocent Laurent go to that monster. He felt
no guilt, only burning determination, as he consulted Paschal and made the proper orders. The man was burned away to ash now and all that remained were unfounded rumors and Laurent’s safety.

His next great fire was for Nicaise.

After recovering from his shock at seeing such a small boy in a brothel and the realization that the timid way he watched Auguste from behind the bed curtains was due to fear, Auguste made up his mind. He instructed Jord to buy the boy’s freedom and, while he was away, Auguste sought out the more unsavory characters of the city. The gold of Highgarden combined with the white-hot fury in his eyes allowed him to find and employ the Sorrowful Men, those unflagging assassins, to hunt down and kill any man who had ever bought the boy.

Someday he would tell Nicaise that every person who ever touched him against his will had died with fear in his heart, but he didn’t want to scare the boy with his savagery.

Most recently, Auguste had the man who publicly requested that foul song about Laurent to go up first against Damen Martell in the wrestling competition. His back was still out of sorts, much to Auguste’s delight.

But all those times before were nothing, kindling, in comparison to what he felt now.

He had heard Laurent’s vocal dislike of Damen Martell and allowed it to fall on deaf ears. He had invited his old friend into his home—brought a viper into his nest—and even tried to match the two of them so that they might overcome old wounds. How he had forgotten that men could change in ten years.

He thought Damen was too good and noble to steal someone. And Laurent hated him, by his own admission, so there was no question that he had been taken against his will. And then…and then?

Auguste felt sick at the thought; it was as Nicaise had said, in his sweetly poisonous way, that Laurent was skilled and strong but Damen was stronger. He could pin anyone he down…he could…

Auguste did not want to act in a rash way, did not want to lose himself in the heat of anger but…

The other, less rational part of him wanted to start cutting off hands.

One Dornishman’s hand for every hour his brother was gone. The anger, like some sort of clawing beast, rejoiced at the idea but he held it back for a moment. Laurent was more important than his bloodlust.

Surely someone aside from Nicaise had seen something.

The castle was full of people and if not then someone could solve that fucking riddle that Nicaise had given him. There was no doubt in his mind that the wicked boy knew *exactly* where Damen had taken Laurent but his little games forced Auguste to pause and think.

*Singing*. The cries Nicaise mimicked beat against his skull. He massaged his temples to avoid the thought of Laurent crying out.

“Auguste, my lord.”

Jord. Jord looked as exhausted as Auguste felt but he was reliable and Auguste waved him forward. Given the tense situation, he gave an uncharacteristic bow before launching into his explanation.

“The Dornish men have been taken to the cells as per your instructions. The ladies have been confined to Lady Jokaste Dayne’s quarters and all of Highgarden has been searched. Your brother
and Prince Damen are nowhere to be found. I have sent our men out into the city to look for them but I fear they may have fled out of Highgarden entirely.”

“That is my fear as well.” Auguste said grasping for his cane, “No, no, I can stand alone, thank you. Report to me when they have returned. In the meantime, I am going to question the prince’s men to see if he has mentioned anything to them.” He took such long strides that he was abreast of Jord within a few moments, as opposed to his usual, glacial pace. “After you have given the necessary instructions, I want you to ask the lords and ladies if they know of a place in Westeros that has to do with song. ‘No song as sweet’ or ‘no song so sweet’, Nicaise said. That’s where Laurent is being held.”

Jord’s brow also furrowed at the riddle. It sounded so familiar but through the haze of anger, exhaustion, and lingering drunkenness, it was hard to place…

Despite the speed his anger had given him, he had only just reached the entrance to the cells when Jord arrived, winded and perspiring. “I have asked the remaining guards to distribute the puzzle out to the remaining lords and ladies and to alert me if any come up with an appropriate solution. I thought…I might accompany you down to see if I can glean anything from my former friends.”

That was very diplomatic of him, Auguste thought. He was so loyal that he once again distanced himself from his Dornish friends but he knew enough of Auguste’s anger to go and attempt to have him see reason if he lost control.

“I agree. Come then.”

The cells of Highgarden were unusual in that they were beautiful for the purpose that they served. The halls were white marble that was heavily veined with shimmering black and silver, there were thin, slitted windows to let in light during the day, and there were torches lit every few feet during the night so that the cells were well lit. It was clean and did not have the lingering smell of blood, piss, and fear that plagued most other dungeons in Westeros. Perhaps one of his past ancestors had wanted even the prisoners of the Reach to enjoy the beauty of Highgarden.

Normally it was relatively serene in these sparsely populated halls, but this evening there was a din thanks to the two and a half dozen loyal Dornish lords sequestered within. The moment they caught sight of Auguste, heard the faint thump of his cane against the smooth floors, it went eerily quiet again. Auguste rather liked that about the Dornishmen, that they were silent and coiled like captive snakes, rather than yapping like dogs.

The first cell was occupied by two people: that handsome Ser Pallas Santagar and that oddly wolfish hedgeknight, Lazar, who was fond of groping him. It seemed that that was what they had been doing up until Auguste and Jord had arrived and Lazar bared his teeth when he saw them.

“Lazar!” Jord gasped on recognizing the man. “You’re not Dornish a—and how the hell did you get—did you break into the cells?”

“Let him be,” Auguste said with a groan, “He’s obviously happy here. And he might bite if you try to remove him.” It begged the question though, how he managed to sneak in and whether he had any intention of sneaking out.

There were a chorus of groans at the announcement over Lazar being allowed to stay but Auguste ignored them in favor of seeking out Nikandros Gargalen.

Given that he was Damen Martell’s closest companion, he had been given the largest cell to himself and was staring out the window with his unnerving pale eyes. He did not look over until Auguste...
was right outside of his cell door.

“Lord Auguste. Ser Jord.”

“Ser Nikandros.”

“Your brother Laurent is missing, I heard.” Nikandros’ absolute calm made Auguste want to rage at him, but such a tactic would be utterly useless. He forced himself to remain just as calm.

“He is missing. As is your prince.” There was a hiss of discontent that went up at his insinuation. “I intend to find them both.”

“And you believe locking us up is conducive to finding the both of them?” He could tell Nikandros was needled by his actions and his blame of Damen. “You have no proof of foul play.”

“I have a witness who saw them flee the palace.” Auguste replied and a murmur rose amongst the Dornishmen. “My brother hates your prince, forgive me for saying it. His hatred has kept us apart for years and even you cannot be ignorant of it. Laurent would not have willingly gone anywhere with Prince Damen.”

The tension broke and the snakes lashed out.

“How dare you!” Kastor Sand slammed his fists against the bars of his own cell, shared with two others. “You think my brother would impugn his honor by stealing a boy? That he would be so disrespectful to his host? You go too far!”

Auguste whirled on him, not cowed in the least. “I go far enough for my brother. As for yours…I have not seen him or known his character since we were but children. What I do know is that he is the strongest man in Westeros, he has an infamous appetite for beauty, and above all others he has recently crowned my brother, my Laurent, the most beautiful and beloved. If you seek to revenge your prince’s impugned honor, by all means conjure him here.”

“You know Prince Damen as well as I do,” Nikandros said in his deadpan voice, “and you know I could sooner stop the sun from shining in the sky to get him to go against his own nature. And it is not in his nature to be monstrous. He is not a kidnapper or a rapist—.”

“Don’t!” The ideas and sounds pounded in pain through Auguste’s mind; he could hear Laurent crying out for him. “Don’t…try to defend this.”

That seemed to spur them on even further and their shouts echoed. “Ser Stone Eyes is right! Prince Damen would never!” “He is a man of honor! He’s never forced anyone!” “There must be some explanation for this misunderstanding!”

Laurent was missing? Did they care? Where was their honor?

Auguste waited until all of their chatter had died down before he spoke. His voice was calm but it sounded like another man’s voice to his ears. He was so sick with anger he could barely control it.

“Regardless of your professions, the fact remains. My brother is missing and I intend to find him by any means necessary. If any harm has come to him,” he made sure to meet Nikandros’ slate eyes, “then you know what I am honor bound to do. If any of you know where I can find him or Damen Martell, speak now.”

There was a moment of silence before the meaning of his words sank into the minds of the Dornishmen.
Kastor slammed his fists again. “We do not know where Damen has gone! You dare to threaten him though? Where is your honor as a host? You lock up your guests like animals and make heinous accusations without proof! Do you intend to dirty the walls of Highgarden to such a degree?” The Dornishmen hissed in their approval of Kastor, eyes blazing in the semi-darkness. Lazar laughed into the dark curtain of Pallas’ hair and Auguste felt as though they were mocking him.

Dirty the walls of Highgarden? If Damen Martell had raped Laurent then Highgarden could burn to the ground with every Dornishman locked inside. Auguste gritted his teeth, the bloodlust close to overwhelming him.

It was Jord’s reassuring hand on his shoulder and Nikandros’ calm that prevented him from demanding hands.

“I assure you, Auguste Tyrell, I have no knowledge of where my prince has gone or…if he has indeed stolen your brother. But on my honor, I swear that if I were privy to such information, I would tell you. I do not know where either of them are.” He spoke with such utter seriousness that all extraneous noise died down and Auguste could not help but believe him. “Moreover, I would stake my life itself that if any one of the Martell’s loyal bannermen knew of their location, they would have the honor of a good man to tell you.”

It was a challenge to Nikandros’ own men. And yet they remained silent.

Nikandros held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “I am sorry. But we know as little as you.”

Auguste felt the bitter taste of disappointment on his tongue. “I cannot let you leave these cells until they are found. You must know that.”

Nikandros held his gaze and did not blink as his fellow Dornishmen raged around him. He must have seen the determination and desperation in Auguste’s eyes because he gave a near imperceptible nod and turned his back. The rest was in the hands of the gods.

“You cannot keep us down here forever!” Kastor Sand screamed as Auguste and Jord turned too exit the dungeon and the shouts of the angry Dornishmen echoed behind them, even after they shut the doors behind them.

Not any richer in information, but still confident that Dornishmen must know something, Auguste decided to try discussion with a more reasonable group.

It was almost sundown by the time Auguste stood outside Lady Jokaste’s rooms and he was feeling just as much panic as anger. Laurent had been gone almost an entire day and Auguste was no closer to finding out where he was than when he had first woken up that afternoon.

Even though two Highgarden soldiers guarded the door and he could enter at his leisure, Auguste’s manners were such that he still knocked and waited for a favorable reply before entering.

Lady Jokaste opened the door and the scent of flowery lotion assaulted Auguste’s nostrils. Unbidden, he remembered the feeling of Kashel Pyke’s smooth, pliant skin under his hands. He forced himself to focus and faced Jokaste. She stood confident and assured knowing Auguste would never harm her, arms crossed over her chest and a similar look of flinty dislike in her grey-blue eyes —the same her countrymen in the dungeon had assumed.

“May I come in?”

Jord had told him that Lady Jokaste was just as crafty and perceptive as Nicaise and she spent a great deal of time around Prince Damen’s companions. Perhaps she had overheard some clandestine
She inclined her head but she looked as though she might like to poison him. “It is your castle. Do as you wish. You’ve done as you liked thus far.”

The other twelve or so Dornishwomen inside her quarters did not scatter or twitter amongst themselves at the sight of their captor turned visitor, but stood and stared with unabashed judgment over the indignity of being held hostage. With a single gesture from Jokaste, they left the main visiting area to give them some privacy, though Auguste assumed they would all be listening through the walls with empty crystal glasses.

Jokaste seated herself into one of the more comfortable set of chairs in the room. Auguste’s seat already had a cushion on the seat and a small footrest close by; perhaps the gesture was in an attempt to soften Auguste’s mood. She would be trickier than the men.

“Are you and your ladies comfortable?” Auguste asked as Jokaste poured him a goblet of red wine. He accepted the glass but refused to drink in case she had laced it with something.

Jokaste on the other hand downed the entire glass in one impressive gulp as if she needed the liquid courage. “As comfortable as one can be under house arrest. Now, Auguste, let’s do away with the niceties, the small talk, and get to why you have seemingly lost your mind.”

“I have not lost my mind, my lady.”

“Please.” She hissed, pouring herself a second glass. “I have decided to throw in my lot with the man I love who happens to be so far below my station that I may be turned out of my house as a result. I know madness all too well. I see it in the mirror every morning.”

“Very well,” Auguste said in return, “I have lost my mind. Are you pleased to hear me say it?”

“No. I’ll be pleased when you accept it and attempt to see reason.”

“Surely you must know what has happened.” Auguste argued, trying very hard not to let fury creep into his tone. That would only encourage her to irritate him further.

“You have misplaced your brother.”

“That I have not.” Auguste almost wanted to laugh, as he was not sure which poisonous emotion was at the forefront of his heart. “Your prince has taken him from the palace in the dead of night, forcing me to jail some of my guests against my better judgment. But I intend to get Laurent back.”

“Do you have any proof to support this claim?” She asked sensibly.

“I have no proof to support the claim that Laurent went with him willingly. And I think you’ll find that, given Laurent’s overt prejudice, that option is far less likely. I will be frank with you—‘do away with the niceties’ as you put it—my brother hates Damen Martell. He has balked at every effort to change his affections and refuses to even speak to the man unless absolutely necessary.” Auguste hoped to appeal to the feminine fear of cruel men, of being spirited away in the dead of night and Lady Jokaste was staring at him as if she was making a decision. “If you have proof to the alternative, I beg you, my lady, let it be known immediately. I…want to know that my friend is not a villain and my brother is unharmed. That is why I came to you this evening. I want to know what has gone on in my home.”

Jokaste tapped her bottom lip and furrowed her brows. “I cannot…provide proof. Only my honest word that I think you are wrong about this. Damen may be many things but he is not a scoundrel.”
Auguste tired of this defense.

“Your honest word cannot negate ten years of vitriol. Let me have your word on this, my lady. Given your love of your lands, your house, and your prince, if the Martells had sworn you to silence, would you tell me of Damen’s whereabouts?”

She did not attempt to avert her gaze. “No, honestly, I would not. Truer than the North Star, we Daynes are.” She quoted the old adage of her family, shaking her head. “I am not in the business of betraying my countrymen.”

“So you see, I cannot trust your word.” Auguste replied.

“I suppose that is fair. And if it esteems me in any way, I honestly do not know where the two of them might have gone. I was…uninhibited last night. If your brother joined me in bed, I wouldn’t have remembered.” She smiled at him though it was tinged with sadness. “They love each other, you know.”

Auguste wanted to be angry, but he also did not want to raise his voice at a lady.

“I will not dignify that with a proper response, Lady Jokaste, save that I will let you and your countrymen return home the moment my brother is back in Highgarden.”

“And Prince Damen?”

“If he has touched my unwilling brother intimately you know I am honor-bound to challenge him over it,” Auguste feared such a thing had already happened and had already steeled himself for the duel, “and if such a thing has occurred, I swear I will kill him by any means necessary.” If he had to douse his blade in poison—the most dishonorable course of action—he would do it. “Laurent is so dear to me, I will not hesitate.”

Jokaste nodded, though her beautiful features were still sorrowful. She had accepted the shadow of death that courted all wild and reckless young men. “I understand your mind is set. We have both gone a little mad, so I suppose I cannot blame you for your stubbornness. But, promise me one thing.” Gently, she slid Auguste’s untouched wine glass in front of her. “Promise me before you attempt to kill Damen Martell, you retain the sense of mind to speak to Laurent. Swear it to me.”

Her eyes burned with the determination that showed Auguste she would not let him leave until he had extracted said promise. It may have been a trap but it was not an unreasonable request.

“I swear, I will.”

She nodded and, without breaking eye contact, downed Auguste’s wine. “Thank you. I must say…they told me you men from the Reach were sweet, chivalrous, and utterly unremarkable. Quite the contrary, you certainly know how to keep your guests on their toes.”

“I’m sorry it had to end like this, my lady.” Auguste said as he stood in preparation to leave and she got to her feet as well. “I had…such high hopes for these games. For my friendship.”

She extended her hand and he gave a cool kiss to her knuckles. “I know Prince Damen did as well.”

Then why did he stalk Laurent? Why did he ignore all rules of decorum and chase a man who had no interest in him? Why did he steal Laurent? It was inexplicable.

Auguste let her slender hand drop and resumed his cold, business-like demeanor that would rally his men to his cause. “If you or your ladies are in need of anything or if you happen to remember any
information, Lady Jokaste, please alert the guards outside of your door and they will assist you. Good day.”

“Good day, Lord Auguste.”

He was halfway back to his room before he realized that he had forgotten to ask her about Nicaise’s cryptic quote. But it didn’t matter in any case, as Jord came screeching around the next corner, slim eyes bright with excitement.

“Auguste, my lord,” he spoke rapidly, as he took Auguste’s arm so they could walk at a similar pace, “Lord Torveld Caron has requested an audience with you immediately. He believes he knows where Prince Damen and Laurent have gone.”

Hope, which had been denied to him up until this point, burned hot and bright in his chest. “Where is he?”

“He is waiting for you in your study. I thought not to ask him in case the information was sensitive.”

It was as close as Auguste could come to running and his leg ached a bit by the time he reached his rooms with Jord. Torveld Caron stood awkwardly at their entrance, his normally jovial features looked drawn and pale from the rum and the activity buzzing in the palace.

“Lord Auguste! Ser Jord! Thank the gods.” His grip was vice-like as he took Auguste’s hands in what was probably meant as a gesture of reassurance, “The entire castle is in turmoil. Your very brother, kidnapped by the Prince of Dorne! Who could have imagined such a thing! Everyone is—.”

Auguste felt that Torveld could probably go on at length about the reactions of every person in Highgarden but Auguste interrupted. “Thank you, Lord Torveld. I appreciate that you all are concerned for Laurent. But Jord has told me you may know of their whereabouts.”

“Oh yes, yes.” Torveld sat back down and Auguste took the seat across from him. “There was much debate on the riddle though I know it is not a puzzle of any sort. Nor is it any entendre, contrary to what many of the young men considered.” Auguste remembered Nicaise’s lewd moaning and grimaced. “I recognized it immediately. ‘No Song So Sweet’, correct?”

“Something to that effect,” Auguste and Jord both nodded, leaning forward, as though that might allow Torveld to impart his wisdom faster. Torveld shrugged.

“That is the motto of my house, House Caron.”

It hit Auguste then, like a slap in the face, all the mottos of the houses he had been forced to memorize as a child. The motto of House Caron emblazoned in yellow and black, forgotten in his panic and anger. He turned to look at Jord and knew.

“They’re in Nightsong.”

It made perfect sense really.

With so fine a rider as Laurent and Damen’s swift sand steed, Nightsong was within a night’s ride of Highgarden and a half-day’s ride from the border of Dorne. Auguste seized with fear at that thought of them being inside of Dorne.

“Prince Damen asked me in these past few weeks if I would ever visit Sunspear in Dorne,” Torveld continued as if he too was realizing what a hotbed of activity Nightsong was about to become, “and I extended the same courtesy to him; inviting him to my home, I mean. I told him he was welcome any
time b-but…I never dreamed this would be the reason. You must understand, Lord Auguste, I had no idea that—.”

“No, no, I understand.” Auguste interrupted again before Torveld spent the entire night in defense of his actions, “No one had any idea.”

“What will you do?” Torveld asked.

Auguste’s mind had been made up the moment he first heard the news and truly believed it himself. “Ser Jord.” Jord snapped to attention, already aware of what his orders would be. “Alert the bannermen immediately. I want you to assemble two dozen of the strongest and most discreet of them and tell them to prepare to ride in an hour’s time.”

Jord nodded quickly and left the room at a run, while Torveld stood when Auguste did. He looked distinctly nervous now. “Lord Auguste, forgive me for prying into the affairs of Highgarden but…is your intent to—?”

Auguste was now overcome with vast irritation.

He wanted to be in Nightsong immediately. He wanted to leave as soon as possible, in the next five minutes, yesterday if possible. His limp irritated him, his presence in Highgarden irritated and Torveld’s inability to get to the point irritated him. So perhaps he was a bit more candid than he normally would have been.

“I am going to ride with my men to Nightsong to retrieve my brother and I will kill Damen Martell.”

And before Torveld could speak again, Auguste snatched up his cane and limped from the room, making for the maester’s quarters.

He needed something from Paschal before he left. Riding a horse was of no concern to him, it would be swordplay that would be difficult. For though he did the daily exercises that kept him trim and fit, he needed something that would allow him to move unfettered for a brief period of time and he knew such things only existed in the spire where the maesters and alchemists worked.

Maester Paschal looked up from he work desk and gave his trademark wry smile as he saw who his visitor was. “Lord Auguste…I wondered how long it would be until you came to visit me.”

“You know why I’m here then?”

“Dirty business. Very dirty.” Paschal sighed, wiping his hands. Paschal was discreet, contemplative, and if he recognized the lists of things Auguste requested from Essos, he was intelligent enough to keep any opinions to himself.

“I need something,” Auguste insisted, refusing a chair, “I need something that will numb the pain in my leg and allow me to move unfettered for a short period of time. Perhaps only fifteen to twenty minutes…do you have anything like that?”

Paschal looked at him with a level gaze. “Yes.”

He bustled about his quarters—surprisingly bright and airy for a maester’s apothecary—to fetch a variety of dried and powdered ingredients to crush and grind together in his pestle. As he did he began to explain how to use the medicine. “As soon as you dismount your horse, drink it all in one gulp. I’ll add lavender and lemon juice to mask the taste; trust me you’ll want it. You should begin to feel the effects within five minutes, faster if you begin to run. It will wear off slowly; over the course of a half hour I believe.” With a deft hand he mixed in the lemon juice, creating a horrible yellow-
brown colored liquid, which he then poured into a glass vial and stopped with a cork. “And you don’t want to use this too much. The ingredients are poison in heavy doses. You cannot have a second dose for a long while.”

“Thank you,” Auguste said, accepting the vial and tucking it into his jacket pocket.

“It’s my duty to assist you in this way.” Maester Paschal said with a shrug. “The advice comes unrequested. I think you should proceed with caution.” When Auguste did not respond, Paschal continued. “Westeros is already in possession of a famously bloody history; they do not need you to help add a few more drops to the page.”

“I don’t know why people insist on deterring me from avenging my brother’s honor.”

Paschal’s eyes flicked to Auguste’s leg and then back up to his face. “Just make sure it is vengeance for Laurent and not…” He shook his head and smiled as though he had said too much.

“I am set in my mind.” Auguste insisted.

Paschal sighed. “Then you had best hope they have not left the Reach.”

“And why, pray tell?”

“If you kill a lord, a prince, in another part of Westeros, Dorne will not be your only problem…”

Auguste considered Paschal’s words for a moment and recalled the large map of Westeros that was spread out over the desk in his study. He remembered in perfect clarity the elaborate script of ‘Nightsong’ over the small dot just outside the Red Mountains and the Prince’s Pass. The city closest to the only land entrance of Dorne. And at once, Auguste realized Paschal’s wise counsel, his fair warning.

For if he continued his plan to slay Damen Martell in the halls of Nightsong then the Dornish would howl for blood. They would march on the Reach and to do that they would trapse straight through the stormlands, past Nightsong, trampling crops and generally just causing chaos. The lords of the stormlands would not stand for it and Auguste would find himself and his home in contention with two enormous powers of Westeros.

For a brief moment, his raging bloodlust was stilled by his cool common sense.

But Laurent would be furious by the whole ordeal no doubt, and no honorable lord would begrudge the death of a kidnapper and rapist. Laurent’s testimony would quell any attempts of a war. And Auguste comforted himself with that; his raging heart and his statesman’s mind would both be sated.

He tried not to let the words of Paschal and Nikandros and Jokaste sway him as he left the maester’s quarters in search of his sword.

The retinue Auguste took with him was no more than two-dozen men simply to increase their speed. Despite this specific intent, nearly every man sworn to House Tyrell had volunteered to ride out with him, due to their combined love of Auguste and learned hatred of Dorne, and he was able to choose the strongest among them. Gods knew they would need it.

Auguste had his sword strapped to his hip and a special stirrup in place to keep his injured leg from jostling too much as he rode. He was so focused that it did not occur to him that he should have been exhausted from the stress and lack of sleep.
The moon was a quarter of the way to its’ zenith by the time they had ridden out of Highgarden and into the depths of the Reach.

Jord estimated that they would reach Nightsong a little before dawn and Damen Martell would have only had Laurent in his clutches or twenty-four hours. Auguste wanted to spur his horse to run until it foamed at the mouth, but the animal would die and he would be stranded. It was a normal pace then.

There was not much conversation throughout their ride as they considered what would be waiting for them in Torveld Caron’s home.

Perhaps Auguste was just in a daze from everything that had gone on during the day, the vortex of his thoughts at being betrayed and having to lock up his honored guests, it seemed like no time at all had passed before they crossed over into the stormlands and the black towers of Nightsong appeared on the horizon.

The castle itself was not even half so large as Highgarden, was completely made of black stone—onyx, black marble, and even decorative windows of inky black dragonglass—and the thin spires were arranged so that the palace looked like the circular bell of a lady’s wrought-iron birdcage. Though it was a lovely and cunningly made palace the moon hanging heavy in the sky above, Auguste could find it nothing but sinister. The sight of it gave him a second wind and he led the charge through the empty streets of Nightsong. At the sound of so many clattering hooves, some people were roused from sleep and threw open their shutters to see what all of the commotion was about.

Typical of a small castle, the main courtyard was basically empty so late at night and Auguste simply abandoned his horse to roam as he dismounted and tossed back the entire bottle Paschal had given. He was glad for the lemon, as the rest of the mixture seemed to have that sickly sweet medicinal flavor he despised.

But the effects were ungodly.

It felt like his stomach and throat were laced with fire and suddenly the world seemed to enter perfect clarity around him. Everyone else seemed to move sluggishly in comparison.

An elderly steward and a few green-looking guards materialized from one of the stairwells, hastily dressed and with sleep-wild hair, to inspect who had arrived with no invitation or forewarning. They seemed shocked, to say the least, to see two-dozen armed men from Highgarden in their courtyard.

“M-My Lord?” The steward asked, coming awake as he realized his duties, “To what do we owe the…the pleasure of your visit? S-Ser? Ser?”

The pain in Auguste’s leg had become to dull and, for the first time in ten years, he was able to walk unassisted. It was exhilarating.

Auguste was already striding toward the main entrance, followed by most of his men, leaving Jord to hastily make introductions and explain their situation. Apparently he left it at the barest minimum because he caught up to Auguste as they reached the main double doors to the highborn living quarters. They were enormous and made of black oak with golden nightingales fashioned on each side. Auguste and his men were putting their elbows into one when Jord appeared, gasping, at his side.

“They’re in the guest suite in the eastern spire. Have not emerged since yesterday morning. The steward seemed surprised by our arrival. He said Laurent did not seem distressed but…” Jord
chewed on his bottom lip, “that was because they were both nearly passed out and still very drunk; Prince Damen was carrying Laurent. Their clothes and horses were enough to identify them as lords. The key, Auguste, let me…”

Jord unlocked the main door and the lot of them streamed through the opening into the empty halls.

Auguste drew his sword and moved eastward, his entire body throbbing with fire, demanding payment in blood. Only Lady Jokaste’s request, the plea to talk to Laurent before he did anything too rash, was the only thing keeping him somewhat sane as he ran through the unfamiliar halls of Nightsong.

“Men, stealth!” Jord insisted in a harsh whisper behind him. “We will need that element of surprise to arrest Prince Damen.”

A servant, awake early to stoke the fires in the kitchens, pointed them in the general direction of the best guest suite and the eastern tower. And Auguste began to run up stairs. He felt he was halfway up the spiral staircase when he heard something over the sound of footfalls.

He held up his fist for silence and all the men behind him stopped. He swore they all held their breath for his benefit.

Then…there it was again.

It was a cry, plain and simple. A moan that was undeniably sexual in nature seeping through the stone floors and spearing Auguste’s heart. For a moment, he prayed that his ears had failed him. But it was not possible; Paschal’s medicine made his senses overtly sensitive.

There it was again, longer this time, and Auguste—gods help him—could not tell if it was of pleasure or pain. Either way, it was the sound of his life’s greatest fear, the sound of his failure.

He raced up the remaining stairs, sweat and blood running cold in tandem.

The door appeared before him, black as the mouth of death itself. The golden nightingale on the door seemed to mock him with its greedy golden eyes and open beak, as though Laurent’s following moans and the unmistakable creaking of a bed frame came from the bird. Auguste’s fingers trembled on the hilt of his sword but the door did not budge when he tried the handle.

For the first time in years, Auguste moved without worrying about the strain it would cause his body.

With one smooth move, he shifted his entire body’s weight to his injured left leg and he kicked the door handle with his stronger right leg. The handle snapped off, and the door swung inward.

Before Auguste could think about what horrible scenarios he might discover on the other side of the threshold, he raced through the doorway and into the guest suite, his men close behind him.

There was the slightest purplish tint to the room from the sun beginning to rise in the east and a few thick candles had been lit so that it was not completely pitch black inside. As his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, Auguste could tell the room was garishly decorated in varying shades of yellow, most of the hangings, upholstery, and ceramic decorations emblazoned with the nightingale crest of House Caron. Auguste reminded himself to burn all of Torveld’s decorations before riding back to Highgarden. All of Torveld’s future guests would thank him.

His eyes moved to the bed next and that was where he saw the flash of gold.

Laurent’s long wavy hair hung to the middle of his shoulder blades in a rippling curtain of gold.
Beneath that was the curve of his waist out into the ass that everyone in Highgarden sang about and
slavered over, all of him milky white in contrast to the sea of yellow around him. He was naked,
straddling the dark, naked body of Damen Martell; Damen’s hands were around Laurent’s waist,
holding him down as they…

Auguste screamed and his promise to Lady Jokaste went up in cinders in the face of his anger. He
was going to kill Damen Martell, there were no two ways about it.

Their gazes turned to him and Laurent looked astonished.

“How dare he?”

Damen, for his part, saw the men loyal to House Tyrell and grimaced at them before pulling Laurent
off of him, rolling as though he was going to shield Laurent’s body from view with his own. How
dare he?

“Auguste, what are you—?”

Auguste sprinted forward, taking advantage of Damen’s apparent shock at seeing him move
unassisted. He sliced down hoping to catch any part of Damen, but the man was too quick. Laurent
disappeared from view as Damen rolled over and off the bed, Auguste’s sword slicing through sheets
and into the soft down of the mattress. Feathers exploded into his vision.

Damen stood, making no attempt to cover himself, hands outstretched, but Auguste ignored this
paltry gesture of peace.

“You raped my brother?” Auguste screamed and his voice sounded inhuman to his own ears.
Damen’s eyes went wide at the accusation and Auguste decided he would gouge them out.

He sprinted around the bed, knowing his men would come to his aid if Damen should overpower
him. But defense came from the unlikeliest of places.

Laurent leapt to his feet and now had one of the sheets wrapped around his waist to cover his
modesty. He also had a long, silver dagger in his dominant hand that met Auguste’s steel with a
harsh screech. His blue eyes were sparkling with a similar madness, his teeth gritted in similar fury as
he used his strength to push Auguste back.

“Brother, have you gone mad?” Laurent hissed.

“Have you?”

“How are you standing?” Damen gasped from where he stood uncertainly behind Laurent.

“My lord, are you all right?” One of the Tyrell bannermen shouted from behind Auguste, all two
dozen of them unsure of what to do. “Has this giant animal harmed you?”

Damen snarled at the derogatory insinuations and Laurent’s eyes sparked with blue fire. Auguste
didn’t want to believe it but it looked as though Laurent was angry on Damen’s behalf. Was it a
symptom of being held prisoner? No…Laurent was not so easily swayed.

With Auguste clearly distracted, Laurent pushed back hard and sent Auguste stumbling back a few
steps. His breath was hard, cheeks flushed as he looked at Auguste as though he had never seen him
properly before. He seemed almost…anguished. This was not how Auguste imagined their reunion.

“What has something gone wrong?” Laurent asked, sounding scared. He kept the dagger extended in front
of him, bracing his entire body to keep his own loyal men from reaching Damen Martell. “Was father…shocked?”

“Of course he was shocked!” One of the bannermen exclaimed and Laurent’s cheeks blanched; Auguste almost told the man to hold his tongue, “You were kidnapped in the middle of the night by your sworn enemy and we find you…trapped here in his embrace.” Damen clapped a hand over his mouth.

“No, no, no.” Laurent argued. “No, no, I left you—I gave explanation: my letter!” Laurent looked around and must have seen only blank confusion. “Auguste I left you an explanation to…to avoid something like this!” His tone rapid turned accusatory, shot through with adrenaline and embarrassment.

“There was nothing. We turned the palace upside down looking for you. There was no letter.”

There was an explosion of accusations at Damen after this pronouncement, years of vitriol for him and his loyal men spilling out after a month of being held in. Laurent did not flinch, even though many of the sentiments were his own only a few weeks ago.

Damen only seemed touched by one when someone shouted about his countrymen being sequestered against their will within the walls of Highgarden. His eyes caught fire in the dark and Auguste gripped the handle of his sword a little tighter.

“You had no right.” His voice was the hiss of a flint before an explosion of fire. “If you’ve hurt any of my men, you will regret it, I swear.”

“You had no right to take my brother against his will!” Auguste shot back, “And yet here we are.”

“You’re wrong!” Damen yelled passionately at the same Laurent squared his shoulders and said, “It wasn’t against my will.” From behind him, Jord gasped like a maiden about to swoon. It was so silent Auguste swore he could hear the crackling of the wicks burning in the candles.

It was impossible. It was some cruel joke wasn’t it?

Auguste tried to think of any proof to support this wild claim, other than the profession of Laurent himself. He recalled every Dornishmen insisting that Damen Martell was too honorable for the actions of a scoundrel. The two had not attended events unless one of them had been competing, otherwise no one had been able to find them. Laurent had been taking early rides every day and wearing the elaborate new clothes he swore he would never wear. They had been drunk; the rum, that blasted rum that made people lose themselves.

Why had they not just stayed in Highgarden then?

Laurent’s face had blazed with the blush of embarrassment and parchment white with anxiety by turns. He was a private young man, Auguste knew that better than anyone else, and of course he would have wanted to get as far away from his family and loyal men to avoid…this. He would have run to Essos to avoid making a scene like this, to avoid disappointing his brother and loyal men.

Auguste felt a little cold.

Lady Jokaste…

She had begged him; talk to Laurent, she had insisted, before you make any rash decisions. Somehow she had known. ‘They love each other,’ she had whispered to him and he had ignored it.
It was impossible; everyone knew it.

Then why was his anger evaporating?

Laurent was defending Damen against Auguste, in spite of being nearly nude. He said he left a letter. Maybe in his fury, he had overlooked it. Perhaps he should have sent a raven to Nightsong, but he had been too overcome with uncertainty, fear, and abject fury.

“Jord, take them out of here.” Auguste spoke before he even realized what he was saying. “I need to be alone with my brother for a moment.” Before he dropped his sword to the horribly patterned yellow rug, Auguste sheathed his sword.

Despite some disbelieving gasps and grumbles, Jord finally managed to convince the other men from the Reach to exit the room and wait outside in the stairwell.

As soon as he heard the sound of the door shutting behind him, Auguste lurched forward, his strength giving out a little. There was a clatter of metal on the floor as Laurent dropped his dagger and went to catch Auguste in his arms.

“Brother you were running!” Laurent whispered, squeezing Auguste.

Auguste clutched him back, delighted to have Laurent back in sight. He thought he would not ever get Laurent back the way he was: happy, sweet, and not a sex slave in Dorne. Relief washed over him in waves.

“For you, Laurent, I would fly.”

“Auguste, are you alright?” Damen had taken the moment of no one brandishing their blade at him to retrieve his trousers and slip them on. He seemed to have forgotten any anger over the insults lobbed at him and Auguste envied his mercurial temper.

His leg was not in pain, but he could tell that the effects of the medicine were beginning to wear off. The weakness in his knees could only be attributed to relief. “I’ve been better…”

“Why did you come?” Laurent asked. He jumped as Damen draped a length of persimmon-colored silk over his bare shoulders—it was one of Damen’s long scarves, Auguste realized—and Laurent looked back over his shoulder to smile at Damen.

Auguste’s breath caught in his throat.

He had watched over and loved Laurent every since Laurent was a toddling baby and Auguste had seen every expression Laurent had to offer. Very rare and precious were Laurent’s smiles.

He smiled with gentle delight for children and animals and books. His smile was polite and close-lipped for guests and their father, but bright and disarming when he saw Auguste. But never anything like this smile.

It made him glow, his cheeks flushing, eyes sparkling, as he looked up from under his long, pale eyelashes. He looked so happy in that split second that Auguste thought Laurent might curl in on himself and shiver with delight. It was a grin so alight with joy and want and promise that Auguste actually felt as though he were intruding on something he shouldn’t see and averted his eyes.

He couldn’t look at Prince Damen either.

He too was warm and glowing with a sort possessive tilt to the way he stood next to Laurent. It was
a hopeless case, that much Auguste could see.

The words spilled out, even though Auguste’s heart had not caught up with what his mind knew. “You love each other.” He said, looking between Damen and Laurent. He almost laughed at how everything had changed in so short a time. “You love him, don’t you Laurent?”

Without missing a breath, “I love him Auguste. I do.”

Auguste could do nothing but shake his head and laugh. Now he dreaded the return to Highgarden. What on earth would he tell the people of the Reach? How would they react to his lovely, perfect brother in love with the Prince of Dorne? What in the name of the gods would they all do?
8. Laurent

Chapter Notes

It's only been 7 days but...I'm trying to post this story to completion by the end of
November and there are only 2 chapters left after this!
To Dorne we go!
Bit of info, 4 months have passed since chapter 7’s drama and Laurent is going to be
VERY generous with the flashbacks about their courtship (as per you guy's desires) and
you get to see Nicaise discovering the consequences for his actions. As well as an
intense reunion between Damen and Laurent. These last three chapters are going to be
mostly fluff and delight and next chapter will have something that will delight all of you,
I'm sure (a tag that I haven't really touched on yet but has been SO FUN to write)!
Enjoy and once again thank you all for your sweet kudos and comments! Y'all have
stuck with this for so long!

8. Laurent

There was something to be said for the harsh, alien beauty of the desert. Yes, the air was hotter than
sticking a hand into a lit fireplace and the sand was abrasive when the wind picked up, but the
orange-yellow dunes seemed to be alive with the way they breathed off their top layers and rose and
fell again the endless blue sky. At night it was cool, even cold at times, but the sky was unparalleled:
heavy bands of twinkling diamond stars and at the center the giant pearl of the moon set on the
jewelry-velvet violet of the night sky. While it was not anything like Laurent had ever seen before,
he could call it nothing but beautiful.

He would be sad to see it go, he thought as he looked down from the dune at the shining green
ribbon of the Greenblood River and all the surrounding vegetation, sucking up that rare, precious
water.

Laurent tucked the scarf closer around his head to block the glare from the river.

His entire outfit had been sent from Damen for the express purpose of this visit and Laurent loved it.
One of the many gifts the two of them exchanged during their time apart.

The silk pants were the color of cream, detailed with golden roses and tucked into his golden boots,
the sashes at the waist a twisting knot of aquamarine and teal. Though he would not dare to ride
shirtless as Damen did under the sun, he did concede wear the linen shirt Damen had sent in the very
palest sky blue wash and most of his arms were bared. His hair had been braided and pinned to his
head to avoid filling it with sand every day, and over that was the scarf that Damen had given him:
long enough to cover his head, wrap around his neck and shoulders twice and still trail down to his
behind. It was breezy, lighter than air, fastened with a coral pin carved in the shape of a rose, and
was the same color as his eyes.

To be honest, he found Damen’s obsession with blue a little sweet, especially since he was always
wearing colors of fire and earth.

The grounds of Highgarden had been bathed in blues and blacks and deep greens, the air heavy
with the smell of night-blooming jasmine, so deep in the night and the gardens that no one would
discover them. Laurent sat on one of the marble benches and allowed Prince Damen Martell to longingly kiss from the tip of his littlest finger down to the skin of his wrist.

Laurent shivered at the chaste, deliberate kisses, at the heat coming from Damen’s dark skin. He wanted those kisses peppered along his entire body but they could not, would not go further so long as they were here.

He was greedy, he realized as Damen looked up at him with awe and desire raw in his glittering, dark eyes.

He must have felt through his lips when Laurent’s pulse quickened, because he smiled.

That smile could make Laurent come undone; he was hot as though he had gone for a hard ride, drank too much wine and lay in the sun for a moment too long. It was so dangerous.

“Laurent, my oasis.”

Laurent used his free hand to play with Damen’s silky-soft curls and Damen leaned into his hand. “Why do you call me ‘oasis’?” Laurent asked. He didn’t mind the strange nickname what with the way Damen said it. It was the first thing he heard from Damen’s mouth upon his arrival in Highgarden.

“You were wearing blue the day we met. In that sea of green and red and white, only you wore blue like an oasis in the desert. You are as precious to me as water in a desert.”

“You are foolish.” Laurent chastised but he felt himself burn with blush.

He would tell Damen someday that, as a boy, he read about great warriors and chivalrous princes, silver-tongued rogues and gentle lovers and secretly wanted a man to love and speak to him like a character from a story. That he secretly liked the way Damen spoke to him. It was almost like Damen considered each meeting the only chance he would get to court Laurent and it was almost more than Laurent could bear.

“Now I drown in blues.” Damen admitted, pressing closer. “I can find solace in no other color.” Laurent noticed his nipples and navel both had a wicked wink of indigo benitoite. Those piercings…

“And I am consumed by red and orange.” He joked in return.

Damen kissed the hand that had been entwined in his hair. “I have a gift for you.” Damen liked giving gifts and Laurent now knew it was no use trying to reject them. He would simply think the gift was not to Laurent’s liking and try to find another more suitable one.

So when Laurent was presented with a flat wooden box from the recesses of Damen’s pockets, he simply accepted it without argument. His fingers quickly popped open the golden latch and he opened the lid slowly.

It was a necklace of deep, cobalt lapis lazuli backed in gold and connected with golden links. Simple, elegant and costly, Laurent ran his fingers over the smooth blue stones, admiring his present.

“Do you like it?” Damen asked.

Laurent simply unpinned his hair from its’ braid and let it cascade down over his right shoulder; he had seen the hungry look in Damen’s eyes when he let down his hair like this and knew it drove the man mad. White throat exposed, Laurent leaned down. “Put it on me?”
Damen’s fingers shook as he worked the delicate golden clasp of the necklace and looped his hand around Laurent’s neck. He got so close, that Laurent felt lips rest lightly under his right ear. Laurent inhaled in a sharp gasp as he felt the cool stones rest heavy against his collarbone.

“Does it suit me?” He asked in a whisper as Damen pulled back to see the results. Already he loved this token of affection so much, he never wanted to take it off.

The look in Damen’s eyes was enough to tell him how he looked.

The necklace was securely packed in one of Laurent’s saddlebags, too fine and precious to be worn while riding through the desert of Dorne, though he brought it out whenever he and his party stopped for the evening at the nearest manse.

Jord Oakheart along with their guides, Kastor Sand and Lydos Greenhill, had plotted out their journey and decided on which lords and ladies would host them on their journey.

Laurent was amazed that some of these Houses, who might have been his bitterest enemies a year ago, were now jostling to gain his favor. Every noble Dornish lord wanted the Prince’s lover, the Lord of Love and Beauty to stay at their home on his pilgrimage to Sunspear.

From Highgarden, their group had taken the half-day’s ride to Nightsong to bring gifts to Lord Torveld Caron. Namely, a wagon filled with the Reach’s finest furnishings to redecorate the destroyed guest suite, at Auguste’s express insistence; Laurent had struggled not to laugh as he saw the damage his brother and his lover had wrought. Every piece of cloth had been sliced to some degree, wine had been splashed over top of that, and every delicate piece of decoration had been smashed to pieces.

“It must have been a duel for the ages,” Torveld said by way of thanks as he surveyed the damage in the sea of black and yellow.

Laurent had nodded, simply hoping that Torveld could leave him so he could toss himself on the ruined coverlet. Perhaps some of the scent that Laurent dreamed of, the scent of Damen’s bare, warm skin, would be left on the fabric.

After leaving Nightsong, their group had been invited to several castles near the Dornish side of the Prince’s Pass, including a very generous offer from the Daynes to come to the beautiful, pearly castle of Starfall by the sea. Laurent had smiled sourly at that invitation and had replied in his finest hand that he and his companion, Kastor Sand would be so pleased to see Lady Jokaste upon their visit.

Laurent knew very well now that Jokaste had decided to keep the bastard child of Kastor’s she carried, her own house had turned her out. Kastor explained Damen was allowing her to live with them in Sunspear until peace could be made. Laurent would not let the Daynes forget that she had powerful friends indeed.

Friends…

After Jord had apologized to Jokaste for interrupting her supposed intimate encounter with Damen in the gardens, she had pulled him into a secluded corner with eyes that demanded answers.

“I have no recollection of spending time with Prince Damen in the gardens.” She was so perceptive, so quick, Laurent had felt the rush of fear like a swallow of icy water. Something must have shown briefly on his face because she laughed, “Oh, don’t worry so. The only loose lips I have, I would argue, would be the ones between my legs. Your secret is safe with me though…I can scarcely believe this myself.”
Laurent breathed a soft sigh of relief. “Thank you my lady. I cannot believe it myself, that my feelings have undergone so...drastic a change.”

Jokaste had shrugged. “I believe the gods themselves cannot stop Damen Martell if he loves someone. And despite your heavenly beauty, my lord, you are not a god.” She smiled then, wicked and delighted at the eventual scandal it would cause. “You may rely on me to be the soul of discretion,” she promised, “though I doubt anyone would believe in the existence of your relationship. I will provide a convenient excuse, though...I do expect to hear the full story someday.”

He kissed both of her silken cheeks. “Thank you, my lady.”

She was perhaps the first of the Dornish he felt affection for.

And needless to say, the Daynes of Starfall had not sent a reply to his scathing inquiry as to Jokaste’s health.

Instead, his party had lodged with the Fowlers of Skyreach before moving northeast to Lydos’ home of Yronwood. From their view now of the Greenblood River, they would now follow the water east and rest at some of the lesser noble estates before reaching Godsgrace. From there it would only be a day’s ride from Sunspear and the Water Gardens, where Prince Damen was currently waiting for him.

“Ser Pallas and Lazar will meet us in Godsgrace,” Kastor was explaining to Jord and the rest of the men from the Reach, “and they will escort you to the Water Gardens. Ser Lydos and I will diverge to go to Sunspear, as I wish to visit my lady.”

Aimeric Florent, already burnt red in the cheeks from removing his scarf too often, smiled at Kastor’s chivalry and love. He squeezed the solid part of Jord’s thigh when he thought no one was looking.

Laurent had been unspeakably jealous of them during the past months of deliberation.

It was hard to see them kiss, to hear them make love while his own arms were painfully empty. During the four months of separation and on the ride through Dorne, Laurent had to make do with his own memories, as precious and safely guarded as any tangible treasure Damen had ever given him.

The steady bouncing of his horse had him recall his daily morning rides with Damen, where Laurent had willingly given up his first kiss. He closed his eyes and remembered…

It was honestly a miracle Laurent did not once fall asleep while in the presence of others.

So intoxicated was he with the first man he had fallen in love with, he was loath to part from Damen’s side. Every parting, their embrace broke apart so slowly that they would end the encounter several paces apart with only the pads of their longest fingers touching, still desperate for each other. Even though they stayed together until deep in the night, talking and touching with some leftover hesitancy, the two of them still rose before dawn, hungry for more contact, as they raced to the stables for a ride to the lush green outskirts of the city.

Of course they had found solace in a grove of peach trees and Damen had utilized his ridiculous height and long arms to pluck the ripest, sun-warmed ones from the outer branches.

Damen bit into the pink-yellow flesh, nearly devouring half the peach in one bite, and juice lewdly ran down his chin and forearms. He did not even move to wipe them clean as he reached up to snatch another to present to Laurent. As Laurent took it with both hands, he leaned his head close to lick some of the nectar from Damen’s warm skin, trying not to smile as he felt Damen’s pulse
He had never been such a flirt before, but he delighted in catching Damen off-guard like this.

“Laurent…”

Before he could say any more, Laurent turned his back and looked out at their horses grazing side by side.

Even though Laurent’s steed was the finest gold could buy, he still coveted Damen’s sleek, powerful horse. A following game of cyvasse had resulted in Laurent’s loss, so he was not able to claim the horse. However, Damen assured Laurent he could ride the horse, so long as they rode double. Laurent had yet to repay Damen’s request for winning the game and the thought made him blush.

He felt warm skin brush against his hand and turned.

Damen was close behind him. He was always a little closer than decorum permitted and he smiled, lips wet with peach juice. “Am I to be jealous of my own horse then? You look at it with love and I burn because of it.”

“You are foolish.” Laurent shot back, though any barb was negated by his smile.

“I will get you a proper sand steed when you are mine in Dorne. So fine the Dothraki would envy you.”

“I like the horse I have now,” Laurent returned, still reeling over ‘mine’, “but I’d not scoff at another. Anything to fan your flames of jealousy. Tell me: do they breed blue horses in Dorne or will you have to settle for another color?” His smile grew wider at Damen’s expression upon being teased.

“If it is your desire, how could I bear to refuse? I’ll not deny the one I love.”

“You don’t play fair,” Laurent accused.

When Laurent went to sit under the tree to enjoy his peach, Damen sat next to him, this time maintaining an appropriate distance. Laurent swore he did this on purpose: get too close when Laurent was not expecting, but when Laurent wanted to be close he was frustratingly out of reach.

“And the taste?” Damen asked carelessly, gesturing toward the peach in Laurent’s hands.

Laurent took a bite.

It was perfect as a piece of fruit could be, the velvety skin tearing at the slightest pressure and juice exploding into his mouth. The taste was of sugar and sunlight and summer…

“Try it.” Laurent offered and placed the peach in Damen’s open hand.

Damen never actually got to try the peach for the simple reason that he licked his lips before taking that bite. Laurent moved quickly before he could lose his nerve and lightly tossed himself into Damen’s warm lap. It was the first time he had ever wanted to kiss someone of his own volition.

Damen’s lips were just as warm as the rest of him, one large hand cupping the back of Laurent’s head. Laurent felt as Damen picked at the braids keeping his hair up until the tension released and Damen made a noise of delight deep in his chest and dug in further.
His fingernails lightly scratched Laurent’s scalp, his other arm wrapping around Laurent’s waist like a thick snake. Laurent opened his mouth to gasp as Damen rolled so Laurent’s back was pressed against the tree.

The kiss deepened and Laurent was struggling to strategize how to lead the kiss despite never having kissed before.

And gods it felt so good…

Now that Laurent’s mouth was open, Damen explored at a lazy, practiced pace that made Laurent want simultaneously cross his legs and buck wantonly into the bony crest of Damen’s hips. He tried to suck in air, but it only brought in the heady scent of Damen’s skin, the flavor of peaches, and that clever, clever tongue.

Laurent childishly feared he might drown in this lust.

Though he had initiated, Laurent felt that he was losing control. His limbs were going limp and he was simply allowing Damen to grind closer, to delve deeper than Laurent had allowed any man to go before. Hot fingers slid up under Laurent’s shirt and traced his spine.

Laurent had panicked, despite his joy and all of these new feelings.

He was still…unused to this intimacy and honestly did not want to begin fucking in public under the boughs of a peach tree. Almost as if Damen could hear his thoughts, he pulled back to look down at Laurent, his curly black hair spilling in every direction.

“Do you wish to continue?” He asked, something burning bright in his dark eyes, “I for one dream of ravishing you on a proper bed but I am not opposed to taking your maidenhead here in this field.”

Laurent had been touched.

Not one of the heavy-handed oafs who had expressed interest in him had ever asked him what he desired or even paced themselves. It was usually straight to the laces of his trousers.

“I have no maidenhead.” Laurent smiled at Damen’s syrupy semantics.

“You will know it when I coax it from you.” Damen insisted and Laurent would have gone weak-kneed if he were standing.

“We cannot make love in the Reach.” Laurent insisted, with no small amount of disappointment, “My father and the bannermen will take it as a grave insult and Auguste…” Laurent did not know how to explain to Damen that Auguste did not take kindly to men touching him or that in his most drunken state, Auguste had almost admitted to Laurent that he still harbored some resentment towards Damen for his injury. “In any case, we cannot.” He wanted it so badly, but lovemaking currently seemed an insurmountable obstacle.

Laurent’s concern must have showed because Damen kissed Laurent’s brow where it was furrowed. “Enough. It alarms me that you are still so breathtaking even in the throes of worry. I will not press you, Laurent. Surely the gods will give us the strength to endure until we can finally be alone.” His smile would have melted the North.

As he began to move back, Laurent caught him by the forearms. He had very fine arms…Laurent could feel the hard muscles twitching underneath the skin…Laurent thought of how those arms, those hands would feel on his bare skin…
“Just because I will not let you deflower me, Python Prince,” Damen twisted his lips at the nickname Laurent was beginning to suspect was well earned, “it doesn’t mean…I am opposed to continue with…our earlier…kissing.” He must have been as red as a beetroot with the way Damen was smiling at him.

Laurent shivered as Damen kissed the place under his earlobe, where his jaw met his neck. “I fear I might never want to return to Highgarden, with such a prospect in front of me.”

Laurent yanked him down and Damen practically engulfed him.

Lazar’s skin was much darker after a few months by the seaside and he seemed to have not lost his taste for Pallas, judging from the sounds that came from their bedroom the evening they spent in Godsgrace. Laurent was just glad he would see Damen before nightfall.

They could smell the sea by midday and the scenery took on an exotic tropical feel, with tall, slim palm trees and bushes with fronds the size of serving platters. Kastor and Lydos went their separate ways not long after arriving on the main coastal road, leaving Pallas and Lazar as guides. Though Lazar was much more talkative than Kastor or Lydos had been, Laurent was not exactly fond of his favorite topic of conversation.

“Four months away from him, pretty Peach.” Lazar sighed. “How on earth did you manage?”

Laurent shrugged and gave an elusive smile.

“Was one day in his bed enough to sate you for such a time? I had wondered if you found out whether His Highness’ nickname holds true. Was it a struggle to ride home after such vigorous exercise?” His smile was wolfish and Pallas cuffed him upside the back of the head.

“Tease him not, you rogue!” Pallas insisted, “Not everyone’s bedroom activities are open for public discussion. Incorrigible slut.” Lazar smiled at his new nicknames as Pallas rode abreast of Laurent. His eyes were the same sloe-dark color as that sweet, spiced rum and Laurent shuddered at the memory of the flavor that jumped to his tongue. “I do wonder though…how on earth did you convince everyone in Highgarden not to murder Prince Damen? Everyone in Dorne can speak of nothing else but what may have occurred.”

Sweet Pallas was always hungry for a story, which was why he was so well matched with Lazar. And Laurent could hardly blame him; perhaps only the three of them—Auguste, Damen, and himself—knew of most everything that had occurred during those fateful weeks of the Great Games.

As a result, rumors had run wild for lack of details.

Why in the name of the gods had they run? Had Laurent not sworn up and down that he despised Prince Damen Martell? One flower crown and three days was all it took to change his affections? And now? Now?

The speculations were spoken within earshot, just loud enough so that Laurent knew people were talking. Both Jord and Auguste could be counted on for discretion and Damen treasured Laurent too much to boast, so it was unlikely more details would emerge any time soon.

“How long until we reach the Water Gardens?” Laurent inquired lightly.

Pallas looked around him and then at the placement of the sun. “Perhaps two hours. More if the horses need water.” He looked to Laurent expectantly as though two hours would be ample time to
tell the much-anticipated tale.

It was almost as though a hush settled over the entourage as Laurent gathered his breath and his memory. “Have you any liquor, Lazar?”

Pallas gave a funny little twist of his mouth as if in disappointment and Lazar laughed at his handsome lover. “You chide me and yet your curiosity surpasses my own. Yes, I have liquor, Tyrell. I have it for cold nights in the desert and...though it is not the exact vintage we enjoyed in Highgarden, hopefully it suits your taste just as well.” His wicked eyes glinted in a way Laurent didn’t trust as he handed over an elaborate silver flask.

As of all things that Lazar liked best, his flask was simple, costly and lewd.

Decorated in a thin sheet of pounded silver, the flask portrayed two topless mermaids kissing on one side and an engraving of a youth being ravished by a kraken on the other side. Laurent forced a flat expression and took a long drink…

He almost spat it out.

It was rum. Gods save him, it was pirates’ rum and he was awash in more memories.

Kashel Pyke had brought him a barrel of it that night when he had refused to go to dinner. Of course he had refused to go to the dining hall; the crown of blue roses rested heavy on his head, though he had no intention of taking it off, and he knew it would only inspire whispers and stares.

“All the others drink it, my lord.” Kashel offered, looking up from beneath her long, dark lashes. “They drink in your honor. The Lord of Love and Beauty.”

“Yes, thank you.” Laurent responded, accepting the barrel with a curt bow.

The rum went down like honey; so desperately did he need it that one cup turned into several and the barrel was empty before he even realized he was drunk. He had caught fire from the drink, a hot coal burning in the pit of his stomach.

From then Laurent became maudlin.

He knew that, now the Games were complete, he and Damen would be forced to separate within the week. Panic struck him in the heart. They would not meet again for the next five years, until the next Games. For what reason did Laurent have to go to Dorne? For what reason would Damen return to the Reach? Laurent himself had publicly said he would rather die than venture to Dorne.

Oh, how he cursed his bitter pride. How he wished he had been less poisonous. Then he could have avoided this pain…

At the mere thought of Damen, Laurent lost his inhibitions.

He needed to see Damen now, to spend every last precious bit of time in those dark, perfect arms.

He had run through the halls, nearly stumbling over his own boots and when the door flew open after one knock, when Laurent saw the flames in his stomach mirrored in Damen’s eyes, he could do nothing more than to sink against Damen’s chest. Damen squeezed him and pulled him in so close, Laurent thought his ribs might break.

“I cannot bear to see you leave, lover.” He slurred.
“Nor can I stomach riding from you,” Damen was just as drunk as he ran his open lips sloppily up Laurent’s temple.

They were young, drunk, and in love. Could they really be blamed for a foolish endeavor? And Damen’s subsequent kisses tasted heavy of rum.

Memory was a powerful thing and Laurent recalled that heated exchange and the hard ride to Nightsong after one drink. The burning in the back of his throat reminded him of the exhaustion he had felt on riding into the courtyard of Nightsong. So tired and drunk they were, Damen had grown weary of their pace and simply swung Laurent up into his arms.

He had to pinch his thigh to keep from taking another drink and handed the flask back to Lazar.

“Very well, Pallas.” He said, removing the scarf from his head. “I suppose you deserve something for my fault in having you and your countrymen locked away.”

“Oh, it was none so bad.” Lazar shrugged.

“A pity we were only let out after peace had been made.” Pallas remarked, still hungry for information. “Truly a miracle, if—.”

Laurent broke out into a smile. “My god, Ser Pallas, you have no tact when it comes to asking about these delicate matters. If you are intent on spending any amount of time with people from the Reach we are going to have to work on your coercion.”

“I find no issues with his skills.” Lazar said and Pallas colored deep.

Laurent smiled. He liked the two of them well enough and that part of his and Damen’s time together had been interesting and distinctly lacking in the lewd aspects Lazar liked. He supposed there was no harm in telling them what had happened upon their arrival to Highgarden.

“While I find more joy in reading stories, I am not opposed to telling them. Prince Damen may have mentioned a letter that…I had written prior to our departure that would have sufficiently explained my absence and my affections toward Prince Damen. It had gone mysteriously missing…”

Pallas leaned forward in his saddle and Lazar tried to pretend that he wasn’t listening intently.

Laurent could still feel the impact of his palm striking Nicaise’s cheek as he began his story.

He and Damen had ridden out of Nightsong with Auguste and his men, and Laurent had conceded to ride double with Damen for three reasons. First, he wanted to show the people of Highgarden that he truly did care for Damen and he had not been kidnapped and raped, contrary to what most people believed. The second reason was because he knew how his countrymen regarded their honor and there was no guarantee anyone with archery skills would not attempt to shoot Damen on sight; so Laurent volunteered to act as a human shield. His final reason was silly but…he truly did want a chance to ride Damen’s beautiful horse.

Upon arriving home, Laurent immediately had a suspicion of who would want to cause the chaos of hiding his letter and not consider the repercussions. While Jord was sent off to free the Dornishmen and do his best to explain the grave error that had occurred, Auguste called his little bird into his quarters.

It only took Auguste asking Nicaise outright about the missing letter for the brat to remove it from the recesses of his voluminous pants. It looked as though the wax seal had not been broken, but Laurent knew better.
Before Nicaise could open his pretty, rosebud mouth to lie, Laurent coiled his palm back and slapped him with a satisfying crack, red finger marks blooming across that baby-smooth ivory cheek.

Tears had sprung to Nicaise’s big blue eyes, his mouth a tiny o of shock but Laurent was unmoved. The tears were false and the boy felt nothing other than regret at being caught.

“Foolish boy!” Laurent hissed, shaking out his hand. “You would see Westeros plunged into war over your pettiness and love of chaos?” He towered over the brat and Nicaise’s eyes flicked, once, twice, toward the only man he ever listened to. “My brother will not rescue you! Look at me and only at me.” Laurent liked Nicaise’s spirit and wit—much like Laurent had been at fourteen—often trading good-natured barbs with him. But there were some things that bratty young boys should not trifle with. “I want you to know, if either my brother or the Prince of Dorne had gotten so much as a scratch because of your meddling, if they had been harmed in any way then not even the gods themselves could have protected you from me. I would have seen you pinioned, little bird.”

“And what stops you now?” Nicaise shot back, displaying his swelling cheek.

Laurent grinned. “Because we are all safe and you are not my property. You belong to my brother.” And, though it was cold-blooded and cruel, Laurent turned his back on Nicaise as though he did not even merit attention.

Nicaise choked a little, perhaps beginning to cry for real, and Laurent heard the sound of bare feet slapping against wooden floors as Nicaise ran from the room to cry in private.

Auguste had stared at Laurent with some concern. “It was cold to call him ‘property’, Laurent.”

“And it was colder for him to see your pain and not alleviate it.” Laurent shot back, dropping the letter on Auguste’s lap. “And like it or not, it is true. Now you must take accountability for him, Auguste. He’s fourteen and should no longer be allowed to run wild in the castle. He should be educated and brought to heel before he tries to inadvertently start another war.”

Auguste gave Laurent a pained expression as he opened the seal and Damen who, up until this point, had been silently watching, crept up behind Laurent so their bodies were almost pressed up against each other.

Laurent felt faint.

Though he conveniently left these next reveries out of his story, lest Lazar torment him for the rest of his life—Laurent was drawn in inexorably to Damen Martell’s energy. Like the sun on his banner, he had a personal sort of magnetism, and...a great deal of sexual pull, that Laurent was helpless against. It was the feeling of that energy that had made his hand so sloppy that night. He had to work hard not to succumb to it in front of his brother.

Auguste had not noticed his brother’s current agony, as he was too involved with reading.

Auguste read once, shook his head in near disbelief, and read the letter a second time before setting it carefully on his antique, cherry wood table. Then he folded his hands over his mouth and looked at Damen and Laurent.

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“Are you sure y—?”

He could not finish his thought before Damen and Laurent both smoothly interrupted him. “Yes,” Damen said as Laurent felt like he was regurgitating fire, “I love him.”
Auguste pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, yes that has become readily apparent.” His blue eyes, the same blue Damen loved, the blue of that magic wine that held people captive, swiveled to Damen. “I can deny my brother nothing that he truly loves. Since he says he loves you…I can do nothing more than to give you my blessing.”

Laurent was about to leap forward to embrace his brother but Auguste held up one hand.

“Not so fast. I give you my blessing but you must tell father.” Auguste almost laughed at Laurent’s expression. “Yes, yes I don’t relish the idea either and this is my way of retaliation for not telling me sooner. You must tell father. And the bannermen.” He stood, patting Laurent on the shoulder as he went to embrace Damen. “Forgive me for trying to kill you. And for locking your men away.”

Pallas was practically up against Laurent by the time Laurent had gotten to this point. His dark eyes were sparkling.

“And?”

Laurent shrugged. “And you were there for the rest. Of course my father was furious at the madness this whole ordeal brought about—I believe he consented just for the idea of getting me out of his sight. I’m sure his opinion was helped by Prince Damen’s generous dow—.”

“The Water Gardens are up ahead, Tyrell!” Lazar called out, pointing to a pink, shimmering spot by the coast that Laurent had thought was a mirage. “Maybe another fifteen minutes and you will be able to see it better.”

He was not exaggerating.

The gardens in Highgarden were lovely and legendary in their orderly, vast way but to compare it to the Water Gardens would be a comparison of which flower was the most beautiful or which scent was finer. Was it the delicate, fleeting quality of jasmine? Or the full, robust bouquet of summer roses? It simply could not be said which was more wonderful than the other.

It was made from pink marble, like something out of a little girl’s fantasy, but it was not childish in the least. Greenery grew untamed over it in a way that somehow enhanced the beauty of their surroundings: ivy climbing runners up the walls, flowers so abundant it looked like carpeting, and fruit trees heavy with growth. The reason Laurent had thought it a mirage was thanks to the dozen pools of clear spring water, set like mirrors amongst the buildings, giving the retreat its illustrious name.

*Damen Martell was somewhere in this tangle of greenery*, Laurent thought to himself and he felt as though he had to swallow his rapidly beating heart.

“At this pace,” He asked, “how long until we reach it?”

“Oh twenty minutes, or maybe a half an hour if we—.”

Laurent did not wait to hear the rest of what Pallas had to say. His horse was one of the finest in Westeros and it could run that kind of distance in fifteen minutes. *Fifteen minutes and he would be back in Damen’s arms.*

As if his horse felt the excitement rolling off of Laurent, she took off at a speed previously unheard of and thundered into the main courtyard of the water gardens in a neat eleven minutes flat. Everyone else in his party had been left in the dust.

She was snorting, in high spirits, as Laurent handed her off to the first person that had a free hand to
take the reins. A short inquiry told him that Damen Martell was currently in his personal suite of rooms on the second floor, northernmost door.

He sprinted through the unfamiliar halls, taking in none of the beautiful views, as his billowy clothes streamed out behind him in a cloud of blue. Though the main building was enormous and in possession of countless rooms, it was not difficult to find the Prince’s chambers thanks to the massive Martell crest gilded onto the enormous double doors.

He opened them quietly, hoping he could surprise Damen.

Laurent’s breath caught in his throat when he saw Damen’s fine form on the eastern balcony, looking out towards the coastal road Laurent had just arrived on.

It looked as though Damen had entered the room relatively recently and had shed his scarves and shoes because he was bare from the waist up, his impressive back muscles flexing just from breathing. Laurent ached with want at the sight of him and regretted not washing or putting on fresh clothes and his necklace. He was sure he was covered in grit and smelled of sweat.

“When Lord Tyrell and his men arrive, let me know immediately.” He ordered without looking over his shoulder. He probably thought Laurent was one of his servants.

Laurent heard the tremble under the iron baritone of his voice.

He had heard that tremor before, but only on the most beloved of his memories in their time together. His voice had been touched when he asked Laurent if he dreamed of these dark arms, when he had gently told Laurent that he never wanted to be parted again, when they were on the yellow coverlet in Nightsong and Damen had been so, so gentle, even though his hands and voice shook…

The excitement and nervousness seemed to vibrate off of his dark skin and Laurent stepped forward, unable to play any more tricks.

Damen jumped, his skin breaking out in goosebumps as Laurent twined his arms around Damen’s waist and pressed his cheek against that beautiful, warm back. “I believe Lord Tyrell is close…Your Highness.”

“I might argue he is not close enough for my liking.” Damen said before twisting so Laurent was pressed against his chest. “I have missed you, my Laurent.”

“You talk too much and kiss too little.” Laurent insisted.

Damen made an immediate remedy of the issue and immediately a hand slipped under Laurent’s shirt, possessively cupping the small of his back. Laurent began to wantonly wonder if they were going to leave this room. The four-poster bed with its’ gauzy hangings and dozens of gold brocade pillows was looking very appealing at the moment. Laurent was breathy when Damen pulled back.

“You were watching the road.” Laurent realized with a bright grin.

“You ran to me.” Damen responded, matching Laurent’s joy. “I assume you did not pause to admire your surroundings?”

“There was only one view I cared to see.” Laurent said.

Damen gently tilted Laurent’s chin up with one large hand. “Then I hope to slake your desire as I show you around my gardens. And then…” His eyes were glassy with desire as he looked at Laurent.
Laurent gingerly took Damen’s hand as they turned toward the door. “I have missed you…”

Laurent could not focus on Damen’s tour—the villas somehow free from servants or…anyone else really—as he was too overcome with the sensations. The warmth of his lover, the smooth sea breeze, the smell of flowers…Laurent could see nothing around him, but his body could have sensed a single petal falling against his skin. He feared his cheeks would crack from smiling.

From the cool shade of the marble walls, Laurent was prepared to wander back out into the oppressive heat but he was in for a pleasant surprise.

Like a ceiling made of the faceted inside of an emerald, Laurent found himself under the canopy of some of the largest orange trees he had ever seen in his life. The rustling dark leaves sent small pinpricks of light dancing over his skin and quite suddenly he was awash in the smell of orange: the sweet remainders of the blossoms, the tang of orange peel and juice mixing with the salt of the sea. Ahead of him was a fresh water pool, almost as long as the front path of Highgarden, populated by lotus flowers as large as dinner plates.

It was silent as paradise until Damen leaned down and kissed Laurent’s ear. “Welcome home, Laurent.”

Laurent did not tell Damen but the heat and the smell and that whisper nearly caused him to orgasm in his billowy trousers. And then he did something he knew was very foolish and would only lead to one thing for the both of them: he unpinned his hair.

It fell around his face in a wavy sheet of gold and he heard Damen suck in breath as the wind naturally blew it over his shoulder, exposing his neck.

Laurent dropped Damen’s hand to open his arms and they were filled immediately.

Even when the actions seemed rough and rushed, Damen Martell was gentle. His kisses were passionate but deliberate, his hands strong and firm but never ripping clothing or claiming with a vice-like grip. When Laurent yanked Damen closer, stumbling backwards until they hit something solid, Damen cushioned Laurent’s back with his arms so the rough orange tree bark would not tear Laurent’s shirt or scrape his back.

It was hard to believe that the body pressed against him now was not some figment of his imagination, the phantom hands that sometimes haunted his dreams in Highgarden. This was painfully real.

Part of him balked at the idea of making love outdoors but it was a small, quiet part of him. The rest of him rejoiced as Damen easily undid the silks wrapped around Laurent’s waist and allowed the cream-colored pants to fall slack around his ankles. The ocean air kissed his bare skin.

Damen’s kisses were sweet and sloppy on his lips, up his sweating temple, down his pulsing neck. Laurent made little helpless noises in the back of his throat and it was need, all-consuming, just like…

...in Nightsong, when Damen had first circled Laurent’s bare, chilled nipples with his warm thumbs and Laurent thought he might cry it felt so good. Just the fact that Damen was touching him; and his nipples did not lie flat with the warmth, but hardened even more and for a week after he couldn’t bear to wear tight jackets because they were still so sensitive.

And Laurent yanked off his own shirt next, leaving him only in the long blue headscarf and his riding boots as Damen’s hot, desperate mouth latched onto his left nipple. Laurent bit his knuckle to
keep from crying out and his other hand…

…his other hand gripped the silk bed sheets as hot fingertips traced his skin. In the dark he could not see them well, those phantom hands that explored places even he hadn’t the courage to explore. A virgin’s wanton body, he had, too shy and stubborn to allow himself to fantasize about…

…one hand traced the length of his arching back, curving down with confidence between his legs. Half of him was hard and still dry, the other half was wet and twitching. Damen startled back when he encountered the slickness and looked up at Laurent when he saw that his index and middle finger were coated in clear oil that would smell like peaches if one got close enough to investigate.

“Laurent?”

Laurent smiled at him, knowing it was probably a sad mimicry of Damen’s rakish grin. “Did you honestly think…I would come to you without making the proper preparations? You should have tossed me back on your bed, you foolish prince.” Laurent had packed the oil himself; he did not think he would have courage to ask Lady Allyrion for any, though he had had no trouble easing the fingers into himself.

Damen’s eyes were burning hotter than ever. “Oh…oh.”

Nearly struck dumb by Laurent’s brazenness, Damen seemed choked for words. And why wouldn’t he be? When they had only spent one heated night in each other’s arms before remaining celibate for four months. When he must have remembered the first time he had opened Laurent up and made him wet…

…and Laurent had actually wailed.

*He moaned like an Oldtown whore as the Prince of Dorne flipped him onto his stomach and began to lick him. It was beautiful torture, Laurent thrashing helplessly on the bed as Damen sucked and lapped the first of many orgasms from Laurent’s hips. Laurent had seen such filthy acts in a lewd book once at the age of thirteen and it had stirred feelings in belly; but never did the book describe the delicious feeling that made his toes curl.*

*His modesty ached to snap his knees together, but his hips revolted and his left hand clamped down on Damen’s curls.*

*This action had the unintended consequence of forcing Damen’s tongue in, and in deep.*

Laurent stifled a scream of pleasure as Damen sank to his knees and began suckling with his well-practiced mouth. Two thick fingers thrust up, deep to the knuckle, and Laurent was sure he was going to faint in these gardens.

He *did* have the sense of mind to notice that Damen was not wearing any of his golden rings. Laurent was not the only one who had been anticipating…

“You need not hold back,” Damen gasped, his lips as wet as Laurent’s cock, “you’re in *my* gardens now, my lair, and I have no intention of letting you go. Ride me like you ride that pretty horse of yours.”

Laurent was more than happy to oblige and thrust into Damen’s mouth until he had spent twice and four fingers were plunging into him at a steady rhythm. He feared Damen would be content to do this until Laurent melted away in his warm mouth. He pulled back and twisted so his chest was pressed against the trunk of the orange tree.
He curved his body out in one smooth line, his song-worthy ass on display. In a swift, fluid movement, Damen had molded himself to Laurent’s back, gyrating his whole body against Laurent’s. He was going entirely too slow for Laurent’s liking. Laurent felt heated breath by his ear.

“Damen…I have not had pleasure in four months. You must…save me from this heat.”

He was being dramatic but Damen liked that. As much as Laurent liked the theatrics of romantic ballads and tales of chivalry, Damen also seemed to like moments when they spoke as if in a maiden’s tale. Truly, the only one who needed rescue from the heat was Damen himself.

Laurent heard the rustle of fabric falling to the dirt and a familiar length of heat pushing between his buttocks. He exhaled with anticipation and shivered as…

…Damen slid into him, his arms crossed over Laurent’s chest to hold him safe. Laurent simply scrabbled to hold on to something, anything as his sanity seemed to be slipping away with each thrust. His nails found purchase in the slippery flesh of Damen’s upper thigh and Damen hissed. Python Prince, a nickname well-earned as he was rubbing places Laurent didn’t know could be rubbed. Damen shifted and…

…Laurent threw back his head, his mouth open in a soundless cry as he looked up at the gold and green above him.

Before he could recover from climax, Damen pulled his torso away from the tree, holding Laurent tight against his body. His golden nipple rings were cold kisses against Laurent’s back, and Laurent bent his arm back at an unnatural angle so that he could lightly pull on one. He had done so in Nightsong and Damen had nearly spent, his entire body shuddering.

He must have been controlling himself these past months because the first twist of Laurent’s clever fingers had Damen pool hot halfway inside Laurent. His thick, muscular thighs shook beneath Laurent’s hips but he was still, somehow hard. This suited Laurent just fine as he was still running hot.

They must have looked utterly ridiculous, as Damen pulled out for the briefest of moments so Laurent could turn and face him. Laurent ripped his pant legs out of his boots, tossing them to the side so now he was bare and white, save for the blue length of scarf around his neck and his riding boots, which soon locked around the middle of Damen’s back. Damen, for his part had his pants around his ankles, his only other adornment the gold hoops in his nipples and navel, and the slick of peach-scented oil on his cock and the fingers of his right hand. They were both grinning like fools.

It seemed completely natural, not at all immodest, to make love outside and both Laurent and Damen sighed in sheer and utter delight as they began to move their hips again.
9. Damen

Chapter Notes

ONLY ONE CHAPTER LEFT!
Eek I get so excited to end a story and let you guys be free from wondering what comes
next, but also I cannot wait to post something new! If I neglected to mention last
chapter, from here on out the story will be just so fluffy and sweet.
And I am SO EXCITED to introduce the last batch of new characters (4 to be exact) in
the sole effort of trying to woo Rehsa to draw a family portrait haha! Also I love that
Laurent is humming a certain song in this chapter. He's just too cheeky haha!
Once again thank you all for your love and comments! I appreciate you all so much!
Enjoy!

9. Damen

Damen was a little disappointed in himself that Laurent was walking smooth and unassisted so soon
after their ‘tour’, while he felt as though his balls had been sucked dry and he hobbled accordingly.
They had made love in an orange-scented haze until the sun had almost gone down and Damen
realized that dinner would be served in half an hour.

Laurent had given him a long look at that explanation, as if to say food and common decency took a
firm second spot to such heavenly pleasure.

When Damen insisted, Laurent relented, though he asked to be carried as he did not trust his legs at
the moment. Damen was more than happy to oblige. Though Laurent was no skinny whelp, Damen
liked to cradle him in his arms.

He wanted to do it again now that Laurent was in his new Dornish clothes.

The pants were of the newest style from Lemonwood and Damen loved them. They were black and
long to mid-calf, skintight so they clung to Laurent’s muscular legs and full, pretty ass. It seemed a
shame to cover up the view but Damen wanted to save it for himself. His top was darkest midnight
blue but sheer so that Damen could see the outline of his nipples through the fabric. A cape of the
same fabric covered his shoulders and fell all the way down to the floor and now Laurent was
looking through the chest of jewelry Damen had offered.

He was not fond of over-decorating, like many in Dorne, opting only for his lapis lazuli necklace and
a large golden ring in the shape of a coiled serpent. He looked like a proper Dornishman; a Stony, of
course, but Dornish no less.

“How do I look?” Laurent asked, smiling as he spun in a midnight-colored circle.

He was so lovely and sweet; how could Damen have ever thought he was cold and haughty? He
catched Laurent’s silk-smooth hands and kissed the top of each one. “My people will love you. As I
do. You are a vision. An oasis.” Laurent laughed and blushed.

The candles were not entirely necessary at the moment, as the sky was still streaked with pink and
red and lavender, so Damen knew there was still time before dinner. Dinner in the Water Gardens
was not served until after dark.

Perfect.

“I have…something to show you, Laurent.” Damen said. “Before dinner.”

Everything was new to Laurent here and so of course he assented. Damen stopped him from fetching slippers. No one wore shoes in the Water Gardens. Laurent took his hand the moment the two of them exited Damen’s rooms.

Servants were bustling about in a heavy fervor in the hallways and Laurent looked surprised to see them. “It’s so busy here. It wasn’t like this earlier in the…in the grove.” He was blushing again and Damen was delighted by his disconnect. In the moment, Laurent was uninhibited and shameless, like no decent Westerosi youth should be. But when discussing the act later on, he could barely seem to get the words out.

“Ah yes, well…I instructed the servants to stay out of that area when you arrived.” He laughed at the look on Laurent’s face. “Did you think you were the only one who wanted it?”

“If you tease me, I will make you wait another four months.” Laurent insisted.

“I would have waited five years,” Damen leaned forward to whisper in Laurent’s ear, “and I would have crowned you most beautiful again.” Laurent smiled behind his free hand.

Damen led him to the suite of rooms that was the closest walking distance to the beach and steeled himself for a reaction of some kind. The door was pale, honey-colored wood, the edges inlaid with clever little brass snakes, their emerald eyes sparkling wickedly in the torchlight. Laurent’s fingers traced their curly bodies and looked up at Damen.

“What is this room?”

“It’s easier for me just to show you.” Damen admitted and he pushed the door open.

There was a chorus of lisping, “Papa!” And several blurs connected hard with his legs, tiny fingers gripping hard at his pants. He pretended to stumble backwards as he always did and tiny giggles made his heart ache with delight. Laurent was looking around with an expression of disbelief.

It was clear to see now what this room was meant for.

It was bright and open with cheerful animals painted along the walls not made of marble. Soft pillows and toys were strewn haphazardly about the floors, candles were mounted in glass containers high above the wall to prevent hot wax from dripping on tiny hands, and tiny hammocks hung low to the ground, covered in silky blankets in bright colors. It was the nursery, the royal nursery, of the Water Gardens.

The little ones around his legs froze when they caught sight of Laurent; any strangers had the oldest on edge and the younger ones followed the oldest. Before Damen knew what was happening, the eldest two were peeking out from behind his legs, while the youngest two toddled over at a glacial pace.

Damen stroked the closest set of curls to him and looked up at Laurent.

“I…I didn’t know if you had heard from someone else. And I had never quite managed to bring it up in my letters but…these are my babies.” He was apologetic; he knew how many in Westeros would think of his treasures. “My little Sand Snakes.”
“You have children.” Laurent said in obvious amazement. At least he didn’t sound angry. “Four of them?”

“Yes.” Damen admitted. “Perhaps more but these ones have been entrusted to my sole care. I will introduce you but…they are a little shy, as you can see.” Damen attempted to untangle himself from the iron grip of his oldest two before sweeping the toddlers up into his arms. “We have a guest.” He said in his softest tone. “Remember your manners and come greet him.”

By his own admission, Laurent loved animals but it was apparent his gentleness was extended to children as well. He crouched down low so he was at a safe, eye-level and gave his most disarming smile.

Damen shifted so Laurent could get a view of the older ones.

“This is my eldest, Theo.” Damen said gesturing to the sharp-eyed boy. “He’s eight.” Theo looked at Laurent with distrustful blue eyes, his lovely mouth set in a determined pout. Aside from his shocking blue eyes, Theo’s skin was a shade or two lighter than Damen’s, the silky light brown of a fawn. The maester’s said he was tall for his age and was sure to be a giant like his father, but he was still a little shy and surly when meeting new people. Laurent did not seem deterred.

“Hello, Theo. My name is Laurent Tyrell. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Like he had been taught, Theo dipped into a tiny, perfect bow though he never lost his wary look. His voice was high and sweet. “Hello, Lord Tyrell. Welcome to Dorne.”

When it became clear that Theo was not going to offer any more pleasantries, Damen moved on; only time would endear Laurent to Theo.

“Next, we have my sweet little lady, Nymeria, but we call her Nym for short. She’s five and she’s my only daughter.” Nym was more inclined to friendliness than her older brother and Damen was sure there was no little girl more beautiful than she was. She looked the most like him, with her dark skin, curly black hair, and dimples, and Damen knew he was helpless to her wide, dark eyes and childish lisp.

Laurent looked equally enchanted and kissed the top of her hand like he would do for a great lady. “Hello, my lady.” Nym, overcome with Laurent’s handsome appearance and gallantry, blushed and smiled into her chubby hands as she was quite flustered.

Laurent grinned back as Nym stroked the wavy gold of his hair, and after he touched the curls hanging by her round cheeks he seemingly pulled a golden rose out from behind her ear. Nym squealed at the sight, clapping her hands together as the flower was placed in her hands.

“Papa! Papa! Wook!”

Even Damen was impressed. “Where were you hiding that? How did you keep the petals fresh for so long in the desert?”

Laurent was now putting the bloom in Nym’s wild, tiny bun as she was babbling to him, and he looked up to Damen with a sparkle of wickedness. “I cannot reveal professional trade secrets to you.” As he stood up to greet Damen’s youngest children, Nym, now quite obviously in love with him, tossed her arms around his neck so he would pick her up. She hummed and touched Laurent’s necklace as Damen made the final introductions.

“And finally we have my twins Leon and Malon. They’re only two years old.” Their wild curls were almost as golden as Laurent’s, but they were still too young to tell if they would take after Damen or
their mother.

Damen used his own hands to shake their arms in a gesture like a wave as Malon bit his own knuckles and Leon gazed sternly at Laurent.

“Is it too much?” Damen asked with a self-conscious smile. “I hope I am not scaring you out of Dorne on your first evening here.”

“Of course not.” Laurent insisted as Nym tugged on his hair. “I thought…I never thought I would ever have children. And now I find that I shall have four. I’m sure their Uncle Auguste will spoil them to rottenness.” He looked so genuinely pleased and had accepted the babies so quickly, Damen felt his heart beat unevenly.

“They need no more of that. Everyone in Sunspear dotes on them.” Damen replied, ruffling Leon’s curly hair. Leon responded with a gurgle and a wide grin. “Time to eat then, my snakelets. Laurent are you all right to carry her?” Nym was currently attempting to braid Laurent’s hair but was mostly just yanking it.

“Part of me wishes to never put her down.” Laurent laughed.

“I am also fond of your arms so I’ll never allow it.” Damen laughed. “Well I will have my twins. Theo—.” Damen felt a small tug on his pantleg and looked down to see the imploring eyes of his eldest.

“Can I ride on your shoulders, Papa?”

All the babies loved to ride on his shoulders and be so high above the earth, but Damen wanted to force Theo to be sociable. “I swear, another time. But today you must be a good host and show Laurent to the dining hall.” Theo bit his bottom lip and furrowed his brow at this order. He looked as though he wanted to refuse, but Damen knew Theo wanted to do his best to please.

Unwillingly he shuffled over to Laurent and Laurent offered his hand. “Would you like to hold my hand, master Theo?”

A perfect bow ensued and Theo’s tone was decidedly frosty. “Thank you, my lord, but I can walk unassisted. Please follow me.” Rather than be offended at the shift in Theo’s attitude, Laurent looked as though he wanted to burst into laughter.

“Lead the way then.”

Theo’s stubbornness did have its’ benefits, as Laurent looped his free hand around Damen’s waist as they walked down the halls together.

Theo, as well-behaved as he was—especially given his father’s temperament—was still an eight-year old boy and sprinted ahead, whirling around the marble pillars in a blur. His younger brothers watched him with solemn eyes and Nym squealed. At least this gave Damen and Laurent the privacy to talk.

“Theo talks like Nikandros.” Laurent said, now unable to hold back his giggles.

“He does have a great many lessons with Nikandros.” Damen admitted. “He must learn how to be a good and proper prince for m—our people.”

“I have…a lot of questions.” Laurent admitted, still flushed at the ‘our people’ remark, and Damen nodded. “I am not upset. I just want to know why you did not tell me earlier.” He had to pause as
Nym poked her finger at his teeth. “And why did you not bring them with you to Highgarden?”

“They are bastards, every one, and I know the rest of Westeros does not approve as we do. And I can bear any insult laid against myself, but gods forbid someone say something in regards to my children. I would be banned from decent society.”

“Dorne does not mind bastards.” Laurent said it to himself, as though repeating a fact. “So they are all named ‘Sand’?”

“No we do not mind…usually. The Daynes are closer to Westeros so it will take them time to come to terms with Jokaste’s pregnancy. Theo’s mother was a Stony Dornishwoman who died after giving birth to him, so I took charge of him at seventeen.” Laurent gave a laugh of baffled amazement and then a real laugh as Nym mimicked him. “Little lady is half Dothraki. I got…carried away at one of their weddings in Essos and the khal was not keen on letting Westerosi blood continue to mingle with theirs, despite his comments on my impressive size. If you take her riding on the horses, she will love you forever. It’s in her blood, I suppose.”

“Horsies!” Nym piped up in delight.

Laurent had a very soft expression on his face as he looked at her. “I like horses too. We can ride my horse tomorrow on the beach.”

“The twins are half-Lyseni; their mother was a lady in the pleasure house I visited on a trip to Essos and she…thought they would have a better life here in Dorne. That is why the boys have much lighter features than Nym.”

“And these are the only four?”

Damen sighed. “I will be honest with you: I am entirely unsure. From the age of sixteen until around twenty I was completely uninhibited. I suppose it could be the recklessness of youth, the discovery of my own virility combined with my guilt over…” He shook his head thinking of the loathing he had had for himself during that time. “In any case, there will be no more bastards. I…I swore to myself that when I took a partner to help me rule Dorne, I would find comfort in no other touch besides theirs. I would not dishonor you Laurent, by laying with another.”

Even in the low torchlight, Damen could tell Laurent was flushed. He hid his expression behind Nym’s tiny body and she nuzzled her cheek into his golden hair. At first Damen thought their conversation would end there, but of course Laurent had to outdo him with the sweet remarks.

“When I realized I…when women never—I suppose, I should say that I never thought I would have…children in my lifetime. I hope…I can—I don’t know how to put this into words.”

Leon and Malon babbled, Malon almost taking hold of Damen’s white gold nipple piercing, as Damen leaned over to kiss the fine curve of Laurent’s cheek.

Laurent Tyrell, convinced he would never be able to marry a man, never able to have babies to teach and protect and love was now in Dorne. Damen fully intended to give the young man everything he had ever wanted, even as Nym attempted to push his face away.

“Stop Papa! No kisses.”

“One night.” Laurent said by way of promise as Damen pulled away. “It appears I have already curried Nymeria’s favor. I suppose it makes sense as she is the most like you. Next, I will have to find some way to make Theo love me.”
“Give him time.” Damen promised seeing the sweet face poking out from behind a corner. “Everyone will love you. As I do.”

It was nearing midnight by the time Laurent and Damen finished dinner, tucked the little ones into their hammocks in the nursery, and returned to Damen’s rooms to have some more time to themselves.

Servants had lit the torches and thick sticks of incense, so the air was heavy with the scent of spices and fresh fruit, carved into the shape of flowers and set in a chilled silver bowl. Laurent immediately walked to the balcony facing the ocean and the wind whipped his long hair to the side.

Damen followed him closely and rubbed his knuckles lightly into Laurent’s shoulders. Laurent made a small noise of pleasure and leaned back into Damen’s hands.

“You like Dorne?”

“I love it.” Laurent admitted. “I had thought it would be a desert, a barren wasteland but I love it. I cannot wait to see it all. Sunspear, Spottswood, all of it. I want to see all of your homeland.”

“Our.” Damen corrected. “It will be ours within the month.”

Laurent smiled back at him.

Gently, Damen removed Laurent’s necklace, tucked it into his front pocket and began to run his hands through Laurent’s silken hair. “And you find my children tolerable? Even Theo?”

Horse or no, Laurent had quickly become one of Nym’s favorite people and she was constantly handing him sugared orange slices, half-eaten chunks of almond bread and babbling to him constantly in her lisp. When she inevitably toddled off to see Nikandros and look through his pockets, as she liked to do whenever she saw him, Laurent was able to bond a little with the twins.

Malon cried a little when Laurent set him on his lap, Leon watching him with some concern, but all tears and fears were quelled when Laurent spooned fresh mango ice into their rosebud mouths. Damen had laughed at Laurent’s orgasmic expression as he tried mango for the first time; he and the twins nearly ate themselves sick on the sweet yellow-orange ice. By dinner’s end Malon had fallen asleep on Laurent’s shoulder and he did not awaken even after Laurent carried him back to the nursery and lovingly tucked him into one of the low hammocks.

Laurent had gently stroked Malon’s soft golden curls and smiled in a soft, possessive way that speared Damen right in the heart.

Theo was the only one who had not warmed up to Laurent. Perhaps he had spent too much time with Nikandros or was just wary by nature but had kept Laurent at a polite but chilly distance throughout the evening. He answered all of Laurent’s questions but made sure his answers were not conducive to conversation.

Laurent gave Damen a strange look. “Tolerable? I find them wonderful. They are so sweet and even Theo…” Laurent grinned wickedly, “Just give me some time and I’ll have him figured out. I like the challenge. I suppose I take after his father in that respect.”

Damen smiled back. “He must learn to be diplomatic for when he becomes the ruler of Dorne.”

“He will?”
“Of course.” Damen replied. “Unless he does not want it and then the title would pass to Nym. I do not intend to force my children into roles they do not wish for themselves.”

“Even though they are bastards?” Laurent, with all of his eastern Westerosi sensibilities, seemed shocked by the very idea.

“Since I have chosen you, I had plans to legitimize them.” Damen said. “But I can only do so with your permission. A caveat of my people for having chosen a man to rule Dorne by my side.” Laurent seemed amazed by this.

“Of course I would seek to legitimize them! You need not even ask…”

“I am glad you love them.”

Laurent turned away from the sea so that he was nuzzled against Damen’s chest. “It is you I love most. I only regret I cannot bear you children of my own.”

Damen tilted that beloved face up to his own and kissed Laurent’s left cheek. “Nothing bars us from trying, my Laurent.” He laughed aloud at the blush and expression on Laurent’s face after this offer. He was caught off-guard when Laurent pushed him solidly in the center of the chest so that he stumbled backwards into his rooms.

Laurent continued pushing him until Damen collided with his bed and fell back onto it. Before he could shift up onto his elbows, Laurent was straddling him; he unpinned his gauzy dark blue cape and it slithered lazily down his back onto the floor. Damen wanted to put his hands on Laurent’s waist and slide them down until he was cupping Laurent’s plentiful backside, but Laurent shot him a glare and placed Damen’s hands firmly by his sides.

“It is my turn to seduce you.”

“Turn around and see it done.” Damen responded quickly.

“I never said I wanted a quick seduction.” Laurent laughed. “Now be still and let me discover you again.”

Laurent slid smooth hands over Damen’s face; through his dark curls, over his jaw and lips, down his throat. He trailed his fingers down Damen’s chest and grasped hold of simple golden nipple hoops and twisted them gently. Damen groaned and Laurent glared at Damen’s dark nipples.

“These fucking things…” He hissed under his breath.

“You don’t like them?” Damen asked and shuddered as Laurent pinched a little harder.

“I cannot focus with these gaudy things flashing in front of my eyes.”

“I can remove them.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Damen could not help it and closed his eyes as Laurent toyed with his nipple piercings and rocked his hips gently back and forth on Damen’s lap. It was a quiet sort of heat, one that promised ample time to explore their vices.

Damen tried—he really did—to keep his hands by his sides but as Laurent gave a particularly delicious roll of his hips, Damen could not restrain himself any longer. His hands clasped onto
Laurent’s hips, his longest fingers pressing into the softest ass in Westeros, and his own hips bucked up with abject need.

Laurent gave a gurgled sort of gasp and his fingers gripped Damen’s nipples so hard that Damen nearly spent in his trousers. He had to stop Laurent’s hips from moving before both of them soiled their clothes.

Laurent was somehow not shuddering in pleasure; in fact, he looked very smug as he looked down at Damen.

“Laurent—.”

“You can hold my hips,” Laurent instructed, the tone in his voice assuring Damen that he would find any other action reprehensible and would probably force Damen to hold in his orgasm until dawn, “but otherwise you cannot touch me until I instruct you otherwise.”

“I shall call in my guards,” Damen joked, “if I suspect the Reach has sent you to torture me.”

Laurent laughed. “How very elaborate!” But the wicked idea seemed to take hold of him and he made sure to undress them both with slow deliberation; silks, cottons, and the gauzy midnight blue fabric of his shirt slid over their bodies in the absence of searching hands. Damen could not get over how lovely Laurent was in the nude and it was not often he used ‘perfection’ in a description of something. Laurent placed Damen’s hands back on the bed.

Damen had to grip the bed sheets to keep from making sure if the beauty in front of him was real and not a figment of his imagination. Laurent laughed at his trembling fingers.

With the smooth twist of an athlete, Laurent turned so he was now facing Damen’s shivering legs and Damen could get an uninterrupted view of Laurent’s back. This…was almost worse.

Most of Laurent’s gorgeous, thick hair was tossed over his shoulder, but a few stubborn golden strands hung to the center of his back. It was a muscular, masculine back, tapering at the waist, and curving out into the peach of his behind.

“I suppose you might be tired of hearing this, and forgive me if I cause offense,” Damen interrupted whatever wiles Laurent had been in the midst of planning, “but your rear is the finest I have ever seen.” He left it unsaid that he planned to firmly drive the point home as soon as Laurent allowed him to move.

“Compliments will get you nowhere.” Laurent responded, smiling over his shoulder.

He hummed to himself as he traced the tense muscles of Damen’s stomach and legs and Damen realized the melody as Laurent ran one teasing finger up the hot length of his cock. Laurent was singing ‘The Tyrell Peach’ under his breath and Damen laughed aloud in amazement. He was going to marry this man.

“I love you Laurent Tyrell.”

“As I said,” Laurent leaned down and Damen could hear the smile in his voice as the aforementioned peach slid higher up his chest, “compliments will get you nowhere. And I love you too.” Damen very nearly choked on his own tongue as Laurent’s slowly wrapped around the head of his cock and descended down.

And it was indeed torture. Warm, wet torture…
Laurent was gone from his arms when Damen woke up and Damen had a stirring of annoyance at himself. He had seen how enamored Laurent was of his children and just how sad Nym and the twins had been to see him go that evening. He would stake a good deal of money that Laurent had gone back to them. He cursed himself jokingly for introducing them too early as he was now finding himself in fierce competition with his own blood for the attentions of his betrothed.

He rolled out of bed in one smooth move, stretching out his arms and shoulders before locating a pair of pants. His nipples still ached, so he did not change the studs and remained shirtless; Laurent’s clothes were missing.

His servants seemed surprised to see him out of his rooms so early after the first night spent with his lover.

“I assume they are not in the nursery,” he said simply to the first servant he cornered, “so do you know where Lord Tyrell and the Sand Snakes have gone this morning?”

The woman inclined her head respectfully. “Yes my prince. Your lord, Ser Santagar, and that pirate took the Snakes down to ride on the beach. They left perhaps half an hour ago.”

“My thanks.” Damen responded and took off at a light jog.

He heard Nym and the twins squealing in delight before he passed the dunes and arrived on the flat stretch of white sand. The sand throbbed beneath him as three horses went running at a dead gallop in front of him. Laurent’s dapple-grey mare pulled ahead easily and won the apparent race in a whirl of white sand and silvery grey legs. Lazar somehow came in second and Pallas was in last, though he seemed to be laughing at the entire spectacle.

“Wowent! Wowent!”

Theo stumbled after his sister as she sprinted with open arms for the horses, but Lazar intercepted her before she could collide with the long dangerous legs. Laurent accepted her and nestled her in front of him as she continued to lisp his name and pat the horse’s perspiring back.

“I have ridden with the Dothraki,” Lazar piped up, stroking the horse’s graceful neck, “and yours is as fine as any horse I’ve ever seen. Will you let me sire one of my stallions on her, Peach Lord?”

“If you call him that again, I shall have your tongue Dog Knight.”

“Papa!” Theo called, hoisting Malon up into his arms as Leon toddled behind him. Their curls were wild and windswept from the sea breeze, eyes shining from the horse races. Damen ruffled his eldest’s hair and picked up Leon.

“Good morning, Python Prince.” Lazar said, quite unaffected by the threat on his tongue.

“You left without waking me up.” Damen said to Laurent.

Laurent leaned down on his horse for a kiss and he looked so brilliant and happy, Damen’s annoyance evaporated. “Lady Nym woke up very early and I didn’t want to rouse you. You look so very handsome at rest.”

“May I ride a horse Papa?” Theo asked, desire stark in his large blue eyes.

Theo liked horses and had a stubby pony of his own but he was still a bit too small to ride these high-
spirited chargers. Laurent seemed the type to let him win if they were to race.

“Ser Pallas, will you fetch my horse?” He asked. “Nym and I will race Laurent and Theo.” He was determined to push Theo and Laurent into close quarters, even if Theo’s face fell a little.

Pallas did not dismount but galloped off towards the stables, as Damen hoisted an unwilling Theo up onto the horse. Nym screamed and burst into fat tears as Damen pulled her off Laurent’s horse. At the sound of her crying, Laurent looked truly pained until he saw she was in no real distress but did not wish to be parted from Laurent or his horse. Her tears stopped when she saw Pallas return with Damen’s sleek black sand steed and Theo’s shaggy desert pony.

“Big!” She squealed her nickname for his horse as Damen hoisted himself up with her in his arms.

Lazar scooped up the twins and set them up on his own placid horse—though the beast was surprisingly nimble—while Pallas kept the pony at bay. Damen loved a good competition and was actually unsure of who would be the victor in this particular race. His horse was finer, fresher, and used to running across the sand but Laurent was a lighter rider and a much finer horseman.

They lined up parallel to the surf, a piece of driftwood chosen as the finish line.

Damen glanced over at his lover and son. Laurent’s eyes were narrowed at the piece of driftwood in utter concentration while Theo’s blue eyes were enormous.

It was up to Pallas to call the beginning to the race.

Nym screeched as Damen spurred his horse into a gallop and Theo gave a similar scream, though it had an edge of fear to it that Nym’s did not. Damen trusted Laurent would not let Theo fall so he did not give Laurent an inch as they raced across the sand.

As they passed the driftwood that was their mark, Pallas could not help himself and whooped loudly as they sailed past him.

Laurent turned his horse in a graceful circle so he was facing Pallas and Damen laughed at Theo’s expression. Damen also turned back to Pallas and Lazar, “Who emerges the victor?”

Pallas looked at him apologetically. “It was too close to call, my prince.”

“Again, again!” Nym insisted.

“I’ll have to insist on a rematch in the future.” Damen said to Laurent who was windswept and glowing from the sport.

“Be careful what you wager. I’ll have your horse if you show weakness.” Laurent shot back and held his horse steady so that Theo could safely dismount and run to his pony. Now that the fear had worn off, adrenaline was the only thing left in its place and Theo was excited to ride on his own.

“All right Nym, it’s your brothers’ turn to ride.”

Nym would have started crying again had Lazar not put her on his own horse; Damen placed Leon in front of him and Malon was placed in Pallas’ very capable hands. Damen led them forward before Theo could notice and would be forced to bear Laurent’s company yet again.

Pallas noticed and his smile was indulgent. “Forgive me if I speak out of turn, my prince, but I am sure Theo will come to like Laurent Tyrell of his own accord. You need not force them into close proximity.”
“Oh, I know.” Damen laughed in response and Leon giggled as well, “But my Theo is so cheeky and Laurent is stubborn. I like to see them both work hard. Besides, Theo is darling when he pouts.”

“You are a fool for your son,” Pallas shook his head, but he smiled to show his statement was not meant with cruel intent.

“I had thought that was obvious.”

The four of them returned to their original spot on the beach after only fifteen minutes or so, but Lazar and Nym were the only ones left, Lazar allowing Nym to gently touch the velvety hair on his horses’ ears. Lazar talked to babies the same blunt, crass way he talked to adults, but the sight of his lover holding a child and engaging with her had Pallas looking enflamed all the same.

“Papa!” Nym yelled as she saw him approach, “Big!”

“Little lady,” Damen grinned at her before turning his attentions to Lazar, “Where have my son and my Laurent gone off to? Hopefully not back to the gardens?”

Lazar inclined his shoulder. “No they chose the opposite direction of you and little Ser Santagar. Well…Tyrell chose in any case. He was talking the boy’s ear off last I heard of them.”

Damen nodded and did in fact see two small figures a little further down the jetty. “Ser Pallas, will you take Leon for a moment?” Pallas reached out and grasped the boy around the waist, Damen turned his attentions back to Lazar, “I’ll return shortly. And if I find the two of you fucking in front of my children, it will be the last time your cocks ever stand again.”

Pallas blushed furiously and Lazar—the biggest hypocrite in Westeros—covered Nym’s ears halfway through the threat.

At Leon’s disappearance, Damen’s horse could feel the change in Damen’s careful handling and ran as soon as Damen turned him in a direction with ample space. As soon as he could see Laurent and Theo riding side-by-side and hear Theo talking, Damen slowed down to a walk so that he could hear the conversation.

“Papa says I can have a full-sized horse on my twelfth birthday but…” Theo was obviously biting his lip as he thought on the fairness of said promise. Five years seemed like an eternity to an eight year-old boy.

“I had a pony myself when I was your age.” Laurent said. “His name was Symeon.”

“Like Symeon Star-Eyes?” Theo piped up. His nursemaids in Sunspear told him such stories regularly.

“Exactly. Though my pony was not blind. I was just exceedingly fond of the stories. I used to race my brother through the hills of Highgarden and I won quite often. It didn’t occur to me until much later in life that he was letting me win.” Laurent said with such light humor that Theo giggled a little. “And now many say I am the finer horseman.”

Theo’s shoulders slumped a little at that. “P-People are always saying that about Nymeria. That because she’s half Dothraki she’s going to be good with horses.”

“And would you let her win a race?” Laurent asked kindly.

“Maybe,” Theo shrugged, “But…I know she’ll get a proper horse before she’s twelve.” His voice was awash with jealousy that he was trying to suppress. “The Dothraki riders across the sea will send
Laurent glanced back at Damen—he had known all along that Damen was there—and gave a sly wink when he was sure Theo wasn’t watching. “Well…that may be so, but perhaps I can help you in this respect. Your papa occasionally listens to my very wise counsel and I may be able to convince him to give you a horse a year or two earlier than promised.”

Theo obviously had to curb his rabid joy at this pronouncement as it took him a moment to compose an answer. “I…would be very grateful, My Lord.”

“Please, call me Laurent.”

“Ok…”

They trotted a little further, Laurent keeping his pretty grey mare reined in so that the stout black pony could lead, and Damen was about to call out to them. But Theo spoke before he could.

“Were you…angry when you found out your brother was letting you win, My—Laurent?”

Damen almost revealed himself from laughing at Theo’s mistake and quick correction, though it made it sound as though he was using Damen’s possessive nickname for Laurent.

“No, of course not.” Laurent said easily. “I have a tremendous amount of love and respect for my older brother. He has sacrificed a great many things for my happiness and safety. I will be eternally grateful to him and…in a way, jealous of him. I have never experienced being an older brother myself nor any of the responsibilities that come with that title. He is the man I look up to most…like you will be for Nymeria, Leon, and Malon.”

Theo looked down thoughtfully. “I…will try my best but I am not sure I want to let them beat me in horse races yet…”

“Then we will have to practice your horsemanship regularly.” Laurent replied, already scheming. “I will have to speak with the stable master or whoever your father is trying to pass of as a riding teacher and we can set you up with some proper lessons.”

“Ok…” Theo responded, apparently giving in to Laurent’s persistence.

It was here that Damen decided to reveal himself to his fiancée and eldest son, lest his heart explode at how sweetly Laurent had charmed Theo. He nudged his horse into a livelier step and hailed them at about four lengths away.

“Papa!” Theo called, wrangling his pony in order to turn it back toward Damen.

Laurent turned his horse much more smoothly and his expression was that of barely concealed victory. Damen quickly understood that Theo stood no chance against Laurent and now he could only hope that his careful son did not develop Laurent’s wicked streak.

“I had thought to escort you both back to the gardens so that we might take breakfast together.”

Like most little boys, Theo loved meal times and his blue eyes became very wide at the thought of frosted almond milk, hotcakes with pomegranate syrup, green papaya salad, and fried, spiced ham with pineapple glaze. He looked up at Laurent without even thinking and seemed surprised to have Laurent smiling back at him with a sort of gentle joy.

“Well, master Theo? Shall we go back then? Or would you like to continue our conversation while
we ride?”

It must have touched Theo that a great lord and his father’s future partner would defer to him on such decisions. His small, tan ears flushed pink until they looked like little seashells set on the side of his head. Laurent waited patiently.

“I would…like to go eat. I-If it pleases you…Laurent.”

“It does.”

Damen rode a little behind the two of them, allowing Laurent and Theo to continue their chat about horses and food, books and life in Sunspear. Laurent asked a great many questions and nodded solemnly as Theo gave more and more detailed answers. He fell into a respectful sort of silence when they were reunited with the others and Nym monopolized Laurent’s attention.

But when they arrived in the dining hall, it was Theo who sat at Laurent’s left and explained each dish as it was presented.

And Damen was not oblivious to the fact a few days following that Theo and Laurent regularly went for a ride before breakfast or that Laurent made a point to go watch Theo spar with Lazar or Nikandros or Damen. And one rainy day Damen walked into the small library of the Water Gardens to find Theo and Laurent asleep on one of the window seats, a stack of children’s books around them.

On one sultry evening a week and a half after Laurent’s arrival, Jord—who had gotten quite dark during his time by the sea—caught Damen before he could go off in search of Laurent and his Sand Snakes. Damen heard a sound like the tinkling of gold or silver bells.

“Prince Damen!”

“Jord,” Damen smiled at him, “how many times must I insist you drop my title and just call me ‘Damen’? Do you still refer to your own lover as ‘Master Aimeric’?”

Jord smoothly ignored both his questions. “I must beg a moment of your time.” Damen assented immediately but Jord was not forthcoming with any more details as to why he wanted Damen to come with him. “I had hoped to catch you alone. Is Laurent with the children?”

Damen smiled helplessly. “I am not sure what I have wrought. Either my children have stolen my love with the ease I could only wish for myself, or my Laurent has swiftly taken my place as the favorite in my children’s hearts. In both cases I find myself at a disadvantage in my own home.”

Though he complained, Damen actually found the entire situation touching. The Sand Snakes had taken to Laurent so well that the six of them were sure to be a perfectly happy, if unconventional family.

“Laurent is an unstoppable force of nature when he wants to be,” Jord said simply as he led the way through the halls.

“And Aimeric?”

Aimeric had truly gotten comfortable in the Water Gardens, wearing the most scandalous clothing his maid could locate and spending nearly as much time sequestered in his room with Jord as Laurent and Damen spent in theirs. However, Aimeric’s skin was even more delicate than Laurent’s and he had been miserably red anytime he spent more than a half-hour under direct sunlight. Nym called
him ‘Red Man’ (though in her delightful lisp it sounded like ‘Wed Man’) and Malon had nearly incapacitated him during one lunch after smacking Aimeric hard on his burnt shoulder.

Jord smiled, twisting the heavy golden house ring on his finger. “He is dressing at the moment. Very gingerly I might add. Please send my gratitude to whomever creates that green cooling gel as…we are very fond of it.”

Damen nodded, wanting to laugh at Jord’s candor. He was as Laurent had said: only talkative when Aimeric Florent was the topic.

“Aloe is a necessity here in Dorne.”

“Indeed.”

Damen hesitated as they reached one of the many open arches that led out to the white sand beach, though Jord continued, unperturbed. “Ser, are you leading me out here to kill me?”

Jord looked highly offended. “I would never dream of injuring my host!”

“Carry on then.” Damen realized he was just going to have to follow this madman onto the semi-dark beach. Fortunately, they did not have wander long before Damen saw… “Is that a boat?”

The ship was moored a few knots offshore, but a smaller dinghy was resting in the surf as a single figure dismounted and began to hobble up the beach towards Jord and Damen. Damen smiled as soon as he recognized the gait and soon jogged forward to embrace Auguste. His clothes smelled of roses.

Auguste grinned widely as Damen pulled back, revealing the beginnings of a dark golden beard. “Hello Damen.”

“You were not supposed to arrive for another week and half!” Damen accused as Auguste lightly ignored his accusations, “And you were supposed to meet us with the rest of your guests in Sunspear!” Auguste shrugged as though it did not concern him in the least.

“I am bored to tears in Highgarden without you and my brother making mischief. And I didn’t come alone. I brought Nicaise along as well to alert Jord.” Damen shuddered remembering the bells he had heard earlier. “Don’t worry; he is seeing tutors to work on his etiquette though…he still tends to disappear at times. Jord, will you see that our effects are brought in without complication?”

“Of course,” Jord nodded and stepped quickly down to the small boat to oversee what luggage Auguste and Nicaise had brought along.

“Walk with me, Damen.” Auguste said, taking Damen’s arm with a spring in his step. “Gods, it smells like heaven here. I can see why Laurent waxed poetic about it in his letter.”

“You are walking without a cane.” Damen noted.

Auguste glowed at him. “Maester Paschal has been experimenting with tinctures to dull the pain. I curse my foolish, youthful pride for not accepting such help sooner. I could have saved myself a great deal of pain, but I was stubborn in my own ability to carry on as normal.”

“I am…so glad.” Damen felt the familiar rush of guilt but it was drowned a bit by his genuine love for Auguste.

Auguste looked around swiftly, scanning the tall grasses on the dunes for any unwelcome interlopers.
—Nicaise, in particular—before he responded. “I had hoped the chance to speak with you alone before the ceremony. I feel as though every person will want to speak to me and I will not want to leave Laurent’s side if I can help it.”

“I must already fight with my children, a battle I am losing I might add, for Laurent’s attention. I will fight you as well without a moment’s hesitation.”

Auguste laughed. “Gods above! Children…I cannot imagine having them now. But I’m sure since they are Laurent’s children, they are nothing short of delightful.” Damen was about to correct him about the source of the Sand Snakes parentage but Auguste continued on unperturbed. “In any case I wanted to talk with you...as old friends.”

They walked until the Water Gardens was just a glow over the rise of the dunes and Damen was beginning to find the silence oppressive. He was about to begin speaking again, apologizing for all his many transgressions, but Auguste finally continued with what he had come to say.

“I should have been born by the sea. I find it refreshing to hear the tide and smell the salt in the air. But the gods saw fit to place me in the rolling hills of Highgarden, far from the sea. Such is my destiny.” He squeezed Damen’s arm in a show of camaraderie. “And the gods likewise found glory in me losing the proper usage of this leg. Perhaps to temper my anger.”

“How is that working out for you?”

Auguste laughed at his sarcastic tone. “Well...there is a special reservoir of anger reserved for those who seek to harm my brother. I suppose now I would just turn them over to you and watch what new and fresh hell you would wreak. Tear their hands off like the barbarian you are.” The two of them lapsed into laughter at Auguste’s incredible hypocrisy. “In any case I hope you know, from the depths of my heart, that I bear you no ill will for the accident when we were fifteen. No matter what people will have you believe, I am not angry or bitter. You are my dear friend and I will find glory no matter the state of my legs.”

Damen felt the guilt welling up like a stone in his chest, prickling at his eyes. “You must forgive me.” He insisted.

Auguste embraced him then.

They had once been the same height but now Auguste’s head only hit the top of Damen’s chest, the same as Laurent. It must have been slightly ridiculous to see but Damen was thankful for the assurance.

“You fool,” Auguste’s voice was also thick with emotion, “how many times must I say it before you believe me? There is nothing to forgive, my friend. If you wish to do me honor, then make my brother a happy man. I would find it harder to forgive that you have seduced him away from my side.”

“Gods willing, in my arms he will never again feel sadness.” Damen promised solemnly. He knew if Laurent were here he would chide Damen for being a romantic fool but his fine, white cheeks would flush with his secretive love of flowery words.

Auguste looked as though he wanted to laugh. “Good. It hardly needs saying, but if you hurt Laurent in any way, I will kill you.”

“That has become readily evident.” Damen shot back, “Just assure me that you will thoroughly interrogate Nicaise before you ride over the desert to drive a blade through my heart.”
“Naturally.” Auguste did begin to laugh then. “Ah… I will have to sail to Dorne more often. It has only been a fortnight and I have missed Laurent so thoroughly I thought I might go mad. And riding jostles my legs badly.” Quite naturally, the two of them turned so that they were walking back towards the gardens.

“If you find his absence intolerable, I can think of a solution. It is not frowned on in Dorne to take a lover on the side. I could bring you into my harem.” Damen suggested and had to pause as Auguste was bent double laughing at the ridiculous idea.

“I can only hope to receive piercings as tasteful as yours, if that is the case.”

“It can certainly be arranged.”

Their laughter subsided as they walked along the sand when Auguste broke his silence again. “Love him properly, Damen Martell. Treat Laurent well.” He sounded a little pained and Damen realized Auguste had perhaps hoped Laurent would spend his days unmarried in Highgarden, or perhaps partnered with a man of a lower station who would be content to spend his days in their castle.

He must have known deep inside that Laurent was too intelligent and too beautiful to be contained inside those thorny walls. Marriage to a prince was the least that he could have done.

He put a reassuring hand on Auguste’s shoulder and looked his friend in the eye to underline the seriousness of his intent.

“I will cherish Laurent. It is my heart’s intent and I swear it on my honor. I love him.”

Auguste seemed to hear the sincerity in his voice and nodded in thanks, his worries finally assuaged. As they approached the edge of the gardens in companionable silence Damen looked up at the chaos the sudden arrival was causing as some of his servants raced about accepting luggage and preparing guest rooms. Only a small group was not running in a panic, but looking out, scanning the dark beaches.

Theo and Nym were glued to Laurent’s legs, a twin in each of Laurent’s arms, and standing a little further back—perhaps a little taller, though probably still wearing his bells—was Nicaise, out of the shadows. An odd assembly, to say the least.

“Papa!” Came the shouts and there was a disbelieving gasp of, “Auguste?”

The two were mobbed not long after, Laurent nearly falling into one of the pools in his haste and inability to balance properly with twins in his arms. Damen took Leon and Malon so that Laurent could embrace his brother; they were locked together as if they had not seen each other in decades. Damen was vaguely aware that Nym had Nicaise by the finger and was dragging him forward while talking to him without pausing to breathe.

“What are you doing here so soon?” Laurent asked, obviously delighted.

“I missed you so. I couldn’t stay away any longer.” Auguste admitted. “The sea and the desert suit you! You’re glowing.” Damen privately thought it was the hours of lovemaking that provided said-glow, but he was not about to state the thought in present company.

“How long will you stay here?”

“I intend to ride with you to Sunspear.” Auguste said with complete unconcern. “Father can handle matters for a few weeks in Highgarden. He has only been doing so for twenty years. It is only once that my brother is wed.”
“I only hope you did not sneak away in the middle of the night. Also if, you delivered a note, you may want to take precautions to see it delivered personally and not left on the bed.” Damen joked and Laurent rolled his eyes.

“I had Nicaise turn out his pockets before we boarded the ship.” Auguste assured.

Laurent looked down from their rapid jests when Theo joined him. His blue eyes were wider than usual as he looked up at Auguste. “Who is this, Laurent?”

“This is my older brother, Auguste.”

“The one who let you win the horse races?” Theo asked in awe, oblivious to the laugh Auguste obviously had to choke down.

“The very same.”

Auguste, as natural with children as Laurent was, bent down to be at eye-level with Theo. “My name is Auguste Tyrell, future Lord of Highgarden and Protector of the Reach. A pleasure to meet you.” He extended his hand formally and Damen knew Theo was probably about to faint at being treated in such an adult-like manner by a guest.

With trembling, small fingers, Theo took Auguste’s hand and bowed over it. “I-It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, my Lord. I’m T-Theo Sand.”

“My heir.” Damen added, ruffling Theo’s dark curls. “And Laurent’s eldest child. I have given him four within the last fortnight.” By this time Nym had brought Nicaise over to their group and Damen could continue to make the introductions. As Nicaise was persuaded to pick Nym up, Damen saw Laurent smiling softly, unable to keep from looking at everyone in their small group.

Damen understood.

Unconventional though it was, it was sure to be a happy little family.
10. Laurent

Chapter Notes

Haha oh my god this story took so much longer than I thought it would. If you stuck with me so long, I love you and thanks for bearing with me! I had a lot of fun researching and writing this.

This chapter took a while because weddings are incredibly hard for me to write but it was helped with more content about the babies and all of our favorites together again. I also liked writing the last couple paragraphs (a couple months after the wedding) with the happy family just chilling out together. I have so many headcanons about the Sand Snakes, as well as Jord/Aimeric and Pallas/Lazar, I may write some more snips in the future (perhaps when the next season of GOT or the next ASOIAF book comes out).

As always, thanks to my favorite bun, Rehsa, for letting me use your idea and for letting me talk lore with you <3 and thanks to you lovely readers for all the kudos and comments!

As a reward, I have a new story coming out by the end of the week, so keep an eye out for that! As always, enjoy!

10. Laurent

Laurent had to work hard to wake up before Damen every morning and though his exhausted body fought to rest a little longer, the rewards far outweighed the fact that he had fainted during their nightly lovemaking the past four nights. Rubbing his eyes he propped up on his elbow to get a good look at the man he was going to marry in a few short days.

The gods had made the Prince of Dorne for sunlight and sea salt.

The handsome cut of his jaw was golden in the light from the rising sun and Laurent wanted to run his fingers across the dark stubble that grown on his chin and cheeks overnight.

People had always told Laurent he was beautiful, but Damen was lovely in his own way. Even though he was enormous, his face maintained a bit of that sweet, boyishness that managed to cut Laurent to the quick and could rouse a hot, bitter jealousy in him every time someone else noticed. Sometimes he sneaked a quick kiss on the corner of Damen’s mouth and watched as Damen smiled in his sleep, like a baby would. He could break Laurent’s heart like that.

Laurent could not wait to go to Sunspear and see the portraits of his future husband. The canvases would have had to be lengthened yearly as the sunny, adorable baby he must have been grew into a wild, vivacious youth and then into this behemoth of a man with a child’s guileless smile.

It was agonizing to tear away and leave behind the promise of Damen waking with a smile on seeing Laurent’s face, pulling Laurent down against his bare chest with one heavy, muscular arm.

But Laurent liked to have another quiet moment to himself before the gardens were roused into wakefulness. He pulled on a pair of baggy trousers that Nicaise had looked at with an envious eye and a silken robe that did more to cover his modesty than to keep him warm.

Only a few servants were awake at this time of day and they had seen him at this hour often enough
to go about their business as if he was not even there.

Laurent slipped into the shadowed nursery silent as a sigh and basked in the precious, dreamy beauty of his babies. There were his, he had come to realize with a possessive kind of ferocity, as surely as if he had borne them from his own body. Each one he loved so much it felt as though he might cry when he remembered he would be with them for the rest of his days.

No matter his exhaustion or lust for Damen, Laurent had made it his habit to tuck them into their hammocks every night and place soft toys in their chubby arms. Of course Nym liked her velvety horses; Leon and Malon had matching fleecy snakes but Theo refused stuffed animals as babyish. Still Laurent sneaked a well-loved lion into his hammock on occasion.

In sleep, they were darling and Laurent could memorize their faces before they ran wild. He wanted to remember them like this, fearful they would shoot up into adulthood the moment he looked away.

The children had all inherited their father’s dark, smooth skin, wild curls, and long, black eyelashes but Laurent liked to find other parts of Damen in their appearances.

As he smoothed Nym’s curls off of her cheeks, she smiled in her sleep the same way Damen had. He would have died for her, that little princess who loved horses and her newest parental figure. Leon and Malon were sucking on their fingers and did not smile as Laurent stroked their hair but simply burrowed deeper into their blankets until only their blond curls were visible.

Theo, the one Laurent had to love through delicate tact, lost his sharp wariness in sleep and would sometimes cling to Laurent’s clothes or fingers with all his tiny strength.

If he could admire Damen for the rest of his life, he could watch over these babies for an eternity.

“Wowent,” Nym said in her sleepy lisp and he jerked towards her as surely as if he had been electrocuted. She was reaching out for him and sleepy tears poured over her downy cheeks; she was fussy at having woken up and wanted to be comforted. She nestled her head in the hollow of his throat and tried to relax as Laurent shifted his weight in an attempt to rock her.

Her soft whining sent him into a panic that he struggled not to show. He loved children and hated it when they cried but he was unsure of his ability to soothe them properly.

He had heard Damen singing the twins to sleep in his pleasant, deep voice and earned himself bruised hips for his delight.

Still, he wanted Nym to sleep more than he was embarrassed by his singing voice in comparison to Damen’s. Soft as a whisper, he began to sing in Lady Nym’s small, dark ear, the same lullaby his mother sang to him when he was a boy.

“*The maiden dances through the sky, she lives in every lover’s sigh. Her smiles teach the birds to fly, and gives dreams to little children.*”

In only four stanzas, Nym was asleep again, her tears dried in streaks down her cheeks. There was only the smallest whimper out of her as he placed her back in her hammock and she squeezed her stuffed horse. He wiped her cheeks clean and jumped as someone cleared their throat.

Damen was naked as the day he was born, lounging against the doorframe. He knew that Laurent liked to see the Sand Snakes as they woke and no longer had to search the gardens. How he could be nude with such confidence, Laurent still could not understand. He tried to appear cool and unfazed but his cheeks were flaming with blush.
Damen pulled him close, burying his face in Laurent’s hair.

To hide his profound love and embarrassment, Laurent immediately began to whisper chastisements as he tried to pull Damen from the room. “Where are your clothes? You are utterly indecent!”

“It’s my palace,” Damen laughed into Laurent’s hair.

“You would be naked in front of your servants? And your Sand Snakes?” It was unthinkable.

“We do not go clothed into the sea! Or into the pools. They would be naked themselves if guests weren’t here. There is a bet amongst the servants to see how long your western modesty will last.”

He twisted his lips in chagrin over his wayward servants. “As for my servants…if they have not yet seen a man’s nude body then they must be blind or women who only seek the company of other women.”

Laurent tried to twist out of his embrace but Damen held fast. It was as if he was trying to squeeze the truth out of Laurent and Laurent was helpless to that warmth. “I…dislike when people…unduly admire your body.”

It took Damen a split second to discern Laurent’s true meaning and then his joy was palpable. “You’re jealous?”

“I never said that.” Laurent retorted quickly in an attempt to hide.

But Damen would not be deterred. He practically dragged Laurent back out into the hallway and began to spin him around, chanting like a mischievous squire. “You said so, I heard it, my oasis.”

Laurent saw the servants pretending the two of them were not even there. “If it eases your mind I’ll never remove my clothes again.” Ser Nikandros took one step out of his chambers and immediately went back inside. “You must stop saying such sweet things! I cannot fall any more in love with you than I already am.”

When he set Laurent down, Laurent’s vision was spinning and he saw stars. But he was grinning. “You will wake your sleeping babies, you madman. And surely the gods would strike me down for insisting you conceal their greatest work of art.”

“I would only cover your face to shield you from the sun.”

Laurent felt he must have looked like a tomato, his cheeks burned. He could never in a thousand years get used to Damen Martell’s compliments. All he could do was embrace back.

Damen lifted him up again without exerting any effort and carried him into an empty veranda that faced the vibrant blue-green sea. Laurent recalled the first time he and Damen met in the Reach how Damen had compared this lovely teal strip to his eyes. It was no small wonder he was fond of blues.

“Must we leave?”

They had to be off to Sunspear by the end of the week to begin preparations for their guests but Laurent did not like the idea of leaving the pretty gardens after only just getting used to the daily routine there.

Damen kissed the crown of his head. “We can always return. It is half day’s ride. And I want you to greet the Dornishmen. Our people.”

Laurent stood up on his tiptoes for a conciliatory kiss and allowed his disappointment to be soothed thoroughly until the babies woke up. Then it was a scramble to cover themselves in time.
By the end of the week, nearly everyone in the Water Gardens was prepared to ride for Sunspear and—despite the tears that would obviously come about—Nym and Theo were to be confined to a covered wagon for the duration of the journey as they could not ride their ponies such a distance.

Laurent was surprised to see Nicaise able to mount his borrowed horse with relative ease.

“Auguste has been teaching me,” He said defensively when he caught Laurent looking at him questioningly and Laurent turned quickly to hide his smile. In any case, it had the surprise benefit of allowing Aimeric to ride in front of Jord, the spot Laurent suspected Aimeric liked best.

Damen and Laurent led the group by virtue of their rank and having the finest horses of the group, giving them ample time to discuss the ceremony in the coming days and what Laurent’s life would be like in Sunspear. But nothing in the exuberance of Damen’s descriptions could adequately prepare Laurent for the welcome the passionate smallfolk of Sunspear had prepared especially for him.

The moment their party was within view of the massive city, it seemed as if the very walls seemed to roar and even Laurent’s docile horse balked at the noise that shook the ground. Leon and Malon gave a return screech from the safety of their wagon.

Laurent looked to Damen who was grinning with excitement. “I have always wanted a dragon. I find myself the protagonist of those novels I read as a child: engaged to a prince and about to have a dragon given to me as a gift. My eleven year-old self would faint dead away.”

“Never has Sunspear been so excited for a peach.”

Laurent hummed the first chorus of ‘The Tyrell Peach’ under his breath, if only to see Damen grin, but there was an element of truth to it as the group got closer and closer to the gates.

The entire Dornish army seemed to have assembled in their red and gold uniforms and were flanking the Threefold Gates. The gates led their party directly to the palace, rather than having them navigate through the labyrinthine alleyways, but that did not stop the people living there from crowding the streets and walls and windows in shouting packs.

Laurent wondered if they would like his long gold hair as much as Damen did.

The moment he pulled his scarf down off of his head, the crowds caught sight of him and roared again. He saw banners bearing the sigils of House Martell and House Tyrell, children wearing circlets of paper roses that had been painted blue, and of course flower petals.

Flower petals rained down on them in armfuls, Theo and Nym squealing in delight as they were very nearly buried beneath them, though Nym enthusiastically called for more. Jord grinned down at Aimeric who had petals hopelessly tangled in his curls and Nicaise threw a handful at the back of Auguste’s head. And the people cheered even louder for their new Royal Consort as Laurent waved at all of them with the hand that was not holding Damen’s.

Upon reaching the palace, the lot of them were thoroughly carpeted in petals and Lady Jokaste was in stitches in the courtyard at the sight of them. Kastor Sand was also trying to hold back laughter; his father was the only one who maintained decorum until he caught sight of Theo and Nym holding fistfuls of petals to give him.

Jokaste kissed both of his cheeks in greeting. “Welcome to Sunspear, Lord Tyrell! Your Highness.”

“My lady,” he responded, petals falling from his entire body as he backed away from her, “thank you for welcoming me. I assume you will not be responsible for taking my luggage into my quarters.”
She only raised her eyebrow by way of response and Laurent soon found himself having Kastor kiss his hands and being embraced by Damen’s father; a remarkably difficult feat considering that Nym was attempting to stuff petals in their hair. Damen lagged behind as servants streamed from the palace and Laurent felt a quick tug on his wrist.

Before anyone noticed that Laurent and Damen had fallen behind, Damen had pulled Laurent down a secluded side path and led him into the wild undergrowth surrounding the palace. Two plain spun brown capes were produced from seemingly out of nowhere and Damen grinned as he handed one to Laurent.

“Where are you taking me, you wild prince? What is the meaning of this cloak?”

“Of course it is a disguise. Nikandros and I do this all the time.” Damen explained as he paused to adjust Laurent. His long blue scarf was tied like a pirate’s to cover his golden hair and the brown cloak was put on top of that. Laurent knew his head was going to be a sweaty mess by the end of their sojourn. “I am going to show you my city as I know it. As I know you.”

Overcome with illicit feelings, Laurent giggled. “And how is that, pray tell?”

Damen took Laurent’s hand and pulled him through a particularly well-placed grove of fronds to reveal an old and ornate door set in the high walls around the palace, a bolt placed through so it could only be opened from the inside.

Damen slid the bolt out and Laurent heard a din from the opposite side, smelled spicy roasting meats and saw the interior of some nondescript alley. It sounded like a party was in full swing somewhere nearby and Laurent felt his excitement rise; he had never sneaked out before.

Damen kissed the top curve of Laurent’s ear as he passed into the alleyway. “Intimately.”

Tiny fingers opened his eyelid manually and Laurent was pulled into the morning with the brutal help of Nymeria Sand. Her gaze was solemn and concentrated as she determined whether or not Laurent was awake. When he smiled at her, still hazy from sleep, she grinned back and dove into his neck to cuddle up against him. She murmured of parties and sweets and horses into his skin.

“Nym, don’t do tha—oh, you’re awake, Laurent.” Theo and Auguste entered the room, Auguste with a twin in each arm, as Theo went to grab for his sister.

“I couldn’t very well sleep through the day today.” Laurent yawned, sitting up.

“I’m sure Prince Damen would be delighted to marry you in bed.” Auguste responded, setting the twins at the foot of the bed. “It would allow him to skip to the part of the union he enjoys best.” Laurent glared at his brother.

Damen was no longer in bed, but he had had the foresight to slip Laurent into a pair of loose trousers before going off to…whatever part of the event needed his immediate attention. Laurent rolled out of bed and Auguste clicked his tongue at Laurent’s appearance.

“I’ll deal with your appearance. Nicaise!” As if he had been running through the palace before Auguste called him in, Nicaise skidded out from behind the door leading into Damen’s entertaining quarters. His dark brown hair had been polished and set with nets of pale aquamarines and for once that was the only blue—save his eyes—that he was wearing. The rest of his tight vest and billowy pants were made from silver fabric, light and flowing as gossamer or spider silk. “Will you take the little ones back to their nursery?”
Nicaise inclined his head by way of response, still carefully avoiding Laurent’s gaze. “And then can I…observe?”

Auguste laughed and Laurent covered his mouth to hide his smile. “Provided you do not fall from the rafters mid-ceremony. Or attempt to begin another war.”

Nicaise glared at that; he must have heard such a quip endlessly and Laurent promised himself the boy would hear about it until he lay on his deathbed. Laurent would etch it into the side of his gravestone. But he was being tempered, slowly but surely, and nodded in assent. He took two armfuls of Snakes and was followed by two more, Nym chanting his name—though with her lisp it sounded more like ‘knee-kiss’.

Auguste laughed. “Never a dull moment in Sunspear. Come on then, let’s get you cleaned up.”

For the next hour, Laurent and Auguste ignored the chaos that was churning outside of the royal suite and simply spent some precious time together.

Laurent lounged in Damen’s deep bath as Auguste combed out his long hair and rubbed oil into the golden strands. When Laurent emerged from the bathroom, Auguste began tossing him a variety of lotions and creams for his face and body until he was clean and sweet smelling as a Yunkish virgin.

“Despite all the sun you’ve gotten as of late,” Auguste commented as Laurent dropped his towel on the way to his wardrobe, “your skin is still very fine.”

Laurent smiled at the compliment; Damen often stroked his body and said Laurent had the luster of a pearl. “Dornish fashion will give me ample time to show it off. Will you fetch the cedar box from over there? Thank you.”

“My brother, wearing jewelry. You always seemed to hate it.”

“Damen likes giving gifts.” Laurent shrugged thinking of all the elegant, simple pieces Damen had given him the moment they were within walking distance of Sunspear’s royal jeweler. “I’m thinking of having my nipples done. What do you think?”

“You’re out of your mind.” Auguste replied and Laurent laughed.

Laurent had at first asked Damen to commission Dornish-style clothes for the event but Damen insisted that Laurent honor his Highgarden roots and add some of the blue of his eyes. Lady Jokaste had come up with a happy medium to satisfy both parties.

Most of his clothes were white with gold embellishments.

His vest was tight to his body in the style of the Reach but he wore no shirt underneath, leaving his arms bare. His boots too were tight-laced to mid-calf. His roomy pants were in the Dornish style, but his favorite was the gauzy jacket with a train that floated several lengths behind him. The edges of this weightless garment were embroidered with roses the exact color of his eyes and the delicate chrysocolla beads that would be woven in his hair.

That was also handled by Lady Jokaste, whom Auguste called to the rooms when Laurent’s hair dried.

Though she was not yet rotund from Kastor’s child, her frothy dress was cunningly made so that it was tight around the chest and draped to hide her normally slender figure.

Under her expert hands, his long, golden waves were braided with beads and pinned into elaborate
whorls. She left one part hanging down in long curls and stuck a golden rose pin through the thickest part of his hair.

When he was finished, Auguste looked at him with misty eyes and Jokaste twisted her lips in faux annoyance.

“Honestly, Laurent Tyrell, I may have difficulty setting myself apart for my future matrimony. If you go down in history as the greatest Dornish beauty in this age, I will haunt your grave.” Still she gripped both his hands in hers and kissed both of his cheeks. “You will be magnificent, my lord.”

“And you look beautiful in this dress. I shall be pleased to be your brother-in-law.”

She left the room in a whirl of golden curls and vermillion cloth, leaving Laurent with his brother. The two of them would walk together to the sept where the Martells and Tyrells would be waiting to watch Damen and Laurent declare their intentions in front of the statues of the Seven in Sunspear and then drape each other in their house colors to showcase the new bond formed between their houses. Auguste bore the deep gold and green cloak that would adorn Damen’s shoulders as he escorted Laurent to the sept.

The sept in Dorne was located in the very center of the palace underneath a round stained glass window depicting the house seals of every noble family in Dorne, a massive golden sun and spear in the center. Damen had showed him the heptagonal room once at midday when the sun was at its’ zenith and Laurent found a sept that extremely warm but dancing with slices of shimmering colors. It was like standing inside a rainbow.

And though Laurent would not consent to making love in front of the somber white statues, he did strip down to skin and let the colored light stain his skin and hair.

Just remembering that lovely afternoon and what awaited him there now had Laurent’s heart pounding out of his chest. The halls had been cleared for their walk and Auguste smiled proudly as if he knew Laurent wanted to break into a sprint.

“Ready?” Auguste asked as they reached the enormous red and gold doors leading into the sept.

Laurent was vaguely aware of Nicaise seemingly appearing from nowhere and positioning himself behind Auguste’s elbow. He didn’t mind; Nicaise was integral to their courtship, no matter how chaotic his force.

“Open the doors.”

The sept was blazing with color, just as he knew it would be.

He was vaguely aware of his father standing tall and impassive by Ser Jord and Damen’s immediate family standing opposite them. But he didn’t spare them too much of his attention.

With his two eldest children carrying his red and gold cloak, Damen stood in the center of the sept, all the midday colors incapable of overpowering the fire in his dress and the heat in his gaze. Laurent struggled to keep a modest pace as he walked to the center of the room to join Damen. Damen smiled wide as Laurent grasped his hand.

“You look beautiful.” Damen whispered, leaning down for a moment.

“Will we ruin the ceremony if I kiss you now?” Laurent asked in utter seriousness.

“Tempting.”
The septon cleared his throat before Damen could lose what little self-control he possessed. “If it pleases you, Your Highness and my lord, I will begin the ceremony to unite you and officiate Lord Tyrell as the royal consort of Dorne.”

Though Damen was technically the Prince of Dorne, his marriage ceremony lasted only a quarter of the time of other royal weddings; probably it was best considering that Nym’s attention might not hold while she stood in place for so long. Laurent briefly wondered if it was sacrilegious to bring a horse into the sept.

Laurent drowned out most of the septon’s speech, waiting for the moment he would be called on to state his intentions.

“Laurent, son of Aleron and Hennike Tyrell, child of the Reach, and second lord to House Tyrell of Highgarden, do you accept your inclusion into House Martell of Dorne?”

“Yes.”

“Do you swear to uphold the laws of our land and serve our people as Royal Consort of the royal Martell family?”

“Yes.”

“And by entering into this union with our beloved Prince Damen, will you swear an oath to honor him and love him as your partner?” Usually for marriages between a man and a woman there was some promise to bear children, but the septon had tastefully left out that particular line due to the constraints of their bodies; the gods knew it certainly wasn’t for lack of trying.

Laurent looked over at Damen and saw that his dark eyes were brimming, close to tears as he waited for Laurent’s answer. He was foolish if he expected anything other than what Laurent intended to say. Laurent smiled at him.

“Yes. I swear.”

Damen grinned so widely that his cheeks squeezed a tear out of his eyes. Laurent knew he was blushing to the point that his face was redder than Damen’s crimson cloak. Damen accepted his vows with equal relish but Laurent could not focus on what was being said, as he was too busy watching Damen’s cheek threaten to dimple.

The septon noted their obvious disinterest in anything other than each other and motioned for the cloaks to be brought forward. Reverently, Damen lifted the rippling cloth and placed it across Laurent’s shoulders; Damen had to crouch down a little so that Laurent could do the same for him.

The septon looked at them both and shook his head. “Very well. Then…in front of these sacred statues of the Seven, place lips against life’s blood and consider the ceremony done.”

Usually the couple would lay kisses on the wrists but Damen was inhuman with his displays of affection.

In front of their families, Damen leaned down and kissed Laurent on either side of the neck, where Laurent’s throbbing pulse carried blood to his heart. There was a small gasp and Laurent was sure he heard Lady Jokaste snickering into Leon’s fussy outfit.

Trying very hard not to think about what kind of nipple studs Damen would be wearing to their nuptials, Laurent also pressed his lips against Damen’s pulse and felt his precious breath and blood rush beneath skin and muscle.
The septon put a notation in his massive tome and shut it with a dusty thump. “The ceremony has been completed. Go and greet your countrymen.” The last bit of this was drowned out by the applause of their respective families as they were now officially joined in the eyes of the Dornish law. Nym threw the flowers woven into her dark curls at Damen’s face, despite Jokaste rushing to try and stop her.

“What now?” Auguste asked as their happy group streamed out of the sept.

Jokaste foisted Leon off into Damen’s arms and Laurent accepted Malon; she firmly placed her hands in the center of his and Nicaise’s backs and steered them off toward the outdoor banquet hall. “The smallfolk must see the new family before they can begin their own celebrations. We are going down to greet our noble guests and Kastor and I are going to get you a faint-hearted westerners a proper glass of wine.”

“Good luck.” Laurent called over his shoulder. “Avoid the rum, brother.”

Nicaise went scarlet and glared at Laurent.

With Theo and Nym trailing at their heels, Damen led Laurent to a balcony on the west side where Laurent could hear the familiar roar of several thousand Dornishmen waiting for their new royal family to reveal themselves. And it seemed to be a literal sea of people. Laurent had never seen so many people in all his life and they were all cheering for him.

When people saw them draped in the colors of Sunspear and Highgarden, an explosion of petals burst into the air.

“How your people plucked every bloom in Dorne?” Laurent asked in amazement, remembering his first ride through the city streets.

“I’m sure there is a virgin or two left in the mountains somewhere,” Damen joked as he waved and Laurent slapped him on the chest where he knew Damen’s nipple piercing would be. He laughed through his sore nipple, “One might wonder if they think you a maid.”

Laurent scoffed. “Of course not. I am marrying you.”

“Hi! Hi!” Nym called out, leaning over the balcony so that she could wave to her adoring countrymen. She pointed at the crowd while grinning at her father as the people shouted their praise of Princess Nymeria.

“Do they find Laurent a good consort?” Theo asked, concern etched in his features.

Laurent understood his confusion, as it was hard to tell whom the people of Sunspear were cheering for. “Should we find out?” Before Theo could respond, Laurent shifted Malon into the crook of his elbow and yanked Damen forward by the emerald cloak around his neck.

The crowd went absolutely wild as Laurent boldly kissed Damen on the mouth; Laurent could hear some distinct voices amidst the roar shouting directions or praising his looks. He took special care to look smug as he separated from Damen and began to wave again.

He could feel Damen’s stare burning into him. “Are you sure you have no Dornish blood?”

“Positive. Now wave to your people, lover.”

They only stayed out on the balcony for a half an hour, Damen and Laurent spending the time subtly trying to bait the other into kissing. Laurent thought he was about to have Damen’s resolve
cumbling when he draped his hair over his shoulder exposing the right side of his neck, but Pallas rescued them from putting on any further displays.

“Your Highness, Lord Tyrell—.”

“Please,” Damen laughed, “Ser Pallas, you know us well enough by now. We have walked in on you doing unspeakable things. You may call me and my husband,” he looked ridiculously pleased to say such a thing, “by our given names, even on these formal occasions.”

“Prince Damen, Laurent,” Pallas was flushed with pride, “I have been instructed to bring you all to your celebratory banquet.” Nym slammed into his legs and he swung her up on his shoulders so she could pet the leopard skin draped across his shoulders.

“What will the smallfolk do now?” Laurent asked giving one final wave and noticing that the crowds were already beginning to disperse.

“They will go off and drink themselves into a stupor in the name of your beauty.” Damen replied.

“Kitty! Kitty!” Nym nodded as Pallas showed her the leopard sigil he wore on his bracelet.

“Pussy, pussy.” Lazar corrected, stepping out from the threshold, though he did not look at the pin. He ignored the withering gazes of Laurent and Damen in favor of kissing Pallas’ cheek; the damage was already done as Nym began to chant ‘pussy’ under her breath whenever she pet the spotted skin.

“I was going to ask you to help Nym with her Dothraki but now I am concerned she will only be fit to speak in a tavern or…whatever the Dothraki equivalent is.” Damen said to Lazar.

“As a proper lady should,” Lazar replied, ever free with his opinions, “You have your witty husband fill her with cutting remarks and I will have her translating them in the next moment.” He then spoke in the guttural tones of those wild nomads causing Nym to clap and Pallas to look enflamed.

Laurent felt a tug on his red Martell banner. “Will you teach me cutting remarks as well, Laurent?” Theo asked, his blue eyes wide and hopeful.

He did not want to seem less clever in comparison to his extroverted sister. Laurent secretly thought that Theo was much too sweet and shy to resort to sharp witticisms; he wanted to teach the boy to read and dream and protect his sensitive heart—like Laurent had tried to do for himself as a young, bashful boy—but if asked…

He stroked Theo’s dark hair. “Of course. If you wish it.”

“I always say, young Theo, that any prince worth his salt should be able to speak at least five languages.” Lazar said. Theo immediately looked concerned at the thought of such a daunting task.

“You could do it.” Laurent assured him. One of the first things he had done in Sunspear was seek out the Theo’s tutors and question them at length. They had all assured him that Theo was very intelligent and an avid reader. He would have no trouble at all learning Rhoynish or Valyrian.

Theo smiled at the praise, his chubby cheeks staining red.

By this time, their small group had reached the outdoor entertaining area and found a party that was frothing with people in their finest clothes and ever more flowers wound into garlands as thick around as Damen’s biceps. There were musicians playing, female dancers with bare bellies that gyrated to the beat, and performers that spun and breathed fire.
Though no petals were thrown in their direction, there was a hearty round of applause from their noble guests as Damen and Laurent made their grand entrance.

Basically every acquaintance who had been introduced to either of them—or could be a valuable ally to the Reach or Dorne—was in attendance.

There were so many people, it took Laurent a moment to spot the golden heads of his brother and father seated at the table of honor; there was an empty space for Nicaise by Auguste’s left side but he was nowhere to be found and Kashel Pyke had taken the seat to chat with him. _Clever boy._

Someone clapped Damen hard enough on the shoulder to knock him forward an inch and the two of them were greeted by the lady Halvik. Theo hid behind Damen’s legs and she laughed.

“I hope you enjoy ships, Your Highness, or my wedding gift will be a great disappointment.”

“My lady, you are too generous!” Damen insisted, pushing Theo towards Lazar and Pallas. “But to take advantage of our beautiful coastlines and our proximity to Essos, I can only be happy to accept.”

“Perhaps we could bring your iron to Essos as a symbol of our gratitude,” Laurent added, smelling a possible trading alliance. Halvik’s eyes lit up at the very idea.

“Such hospitality, I shall have to visit you in Dorne more often. And such a modest ship will suit you well for when you return to the Reach for the wedding.”

“The wedding?”

Lady Halvik shrugged. “My Kashel wishes to marry your lord brother. I will legitimize her on her name’s day and she will be married before the year is out.” She said all of this with such utter certainty, Laurent was amazed he had not heard word of this before.

“Does Auguste know of this arrangement?” Laurent asked, close to laughing.

“Psh, for what reason would he refuse? So long as she has a strong alliance, a sharp mind and a pretty face. Men are simple creatures, Lord Laurent.” She looked pointedly at Damen as if to say Laurent brought those three exact things to the table himself. Damen could only laugh helplessly.

“Are there to be any festivities during dinner?”

“Yes, but perhaps a little tame than what people might expect from me.” Damen joked. “There will be no loss of fingers or heads, nor coupling center stage.”

“There is always the bedding ceremony.” Halvik winked at him.

Damen cursed under his breath as she walked away to another group. “I forgot about the bedding ceremony! I will have to have the men undress me. They cannot be allowed to strip you down or we shall have another incident on our hands.”

“They may have some difficulty carrying you up the stairs. You weigh as much as a good draft horse.” Laurent laughed at the very thought.

There was another round of applause as Damen and Laurent took their seat at the table and Laurent was pretty sure he saw a slender form lounging amidst the flowers on the trellises. Damen winked at Kashel and she raised a goblet in his direction as she continued to sink her claws into Auguste.

From Kastor, Laurent was presented with one goblet of a matching pair, Damen accepting the other. “You’re going to need this, brother.”
Laurent quickly discovered why as dinner began and food was brought to them on heaping trays of hammerered silver and gold. However, it seemed like not a minute went by without someone coming to him and Damen to propose a toast to their union, their looks, the prosperous future of Dorne and any number of other innocuous reasons that could be used as an excuse to drink. And this was wine pulled from the oldest casks in the Sunspear cellars; it was old, valuable, and wickedly strong. He and Damen had gotten up to relieve themselves no less than six times each but their guests kept coming forth with reasons to drink more.

By the time the sweets and fruits course arrived around sundown, Laurent was drunk enough to forget most common decency.

Once, he had misjudged the distance between the seat of his chair and the table and had stumbled backwards. Damen caught him, pulling him onto his lap, and there Laurent stayed, too comfortable to move, until he needed to get up yet again. None of the Dornishmen seemed to care, in any case, what with Damen’s legendary virility.

Now Laurent was in his own seat but his hand rested heavy on Damen’s muscular leg. Damen pushed a cube of mango past Laurent’s lips and Laurent thought to himself how lovely the sweet fruit would complement the salt taste of his husband’s skin and seed. His hand slid up higher and Damen jolted as he felt Laurent’s intent through his fingertips.

His handsome face was red as the silk hangings and he attempted to grab Laurent’s hand before it touched his cock. It wouldn’t be very long now; one could only touch about halfway up Damen’s thigh before gripping something a little harder.

A chorus of laughter erupted around them as Laurent was hoisted into the air, his world tilting wildly. He laughed and went limp as only the very drunkest could.

“My Laurent and I must go to clear our heads, if you would grant us a moment.” Damen said to no one in particular, though his normally cultured tone was slurred. “Excuse us.”

As Damen turned, Laurent’s boots collided with Kastor’s head and Jokaste laughed hysterically as her future husband spilled a plate of lemon cake and crushed blackberries onto his lap.

Damen slipped off into the slightly quieter halls, though he did not make the familiar path to the privies but carried Laurent off towards the palace entrance, dodging servants with a stumbling gait. Laurent simply gripped Damen’s clothes and tried not to focus on his sloshing bladder.

“Damen where are you taking me?” His voice sounded wanton and breathy to his own ears. “Oh gods, put me down soon or I will ruin these trousers.” He squealed as Damen descended a set of stairs and slapped his bum lightly when they arrived at the bottom.

Laurent slithered off his shoulder and stripped his pants down to his ankles so he could relieve himself in some nearby plants. He felt Damen’s hand lightly cup his left buttock and a warm shiver went up his spine. “I hardly need your help to do this.”

“You’re so lovely,” was Damen’s only gushing response.

Laurent blushed as he pulled up his pants and took a moment to take in his surroundings. They were close to the royal library of Sunspear, a place Laurent had loved the moment he stepped inside. A hopeful part of his wine-addled mind wondered if Damen wanted to consummate their recent marriage against the shelves of said library.

Laurent had often entertained such fantasies in the warm library.
Sadly, Damen pulled him off to an elaborate room that was probably used to entertain important guests and old friends just arriving to the palace.

Stacked in the room were their wedding gifts.

There were expensive, old bottles of liquor—from people who did not pay attention to the story of their impromptu ‘elopement’—and boxes of sweets from across the realm; there were small vials filled with essential oils and perfumes, grooming sets, and fine jewelry. Saddles and animal skins, elaborate bolts of cloth and pieces of finely carved furniture; Laurent could not wait to go through the stacks of books that had been gifted to them.

“Are these all ours?” Laurent asked in disbelief, staring at the piles of things.

“I’m sure there’s even more.” Damen admitted, “I know for a fact we have a boat waiting for us in the harbor and that there will probably be horses for us in the stables. My father will give you the Queen’s jewels and the Water Gardens as a ceremonial gesture.”

“I will take the Gardens but you can rest assured Jokaste will get the Queen’s jewels on her own wedding day.” Laurent assured. “Oh, look Lazar has gotten our children some snakes. If they are poisonous I am going to put them in his boots.” He was simply blustering; Lazar would never do such a thing, despite being an utter scoundrel.

The little cage held four fat brown baby snakes, each curled into a tiny, scaly ball. They looked at him with round, shiny eyes and he found them cute, in spite of himself.

Laurent felt a hand against his chest, which pushed him back against Damen’s body.

“I must give you my gift.” Laurent pulled a blue velvet box from his voluminous pants pocket; Nicaise had showed him how to hide the box without ruining the line of his trousers.

Damen looked at him in confusion as he accepted the jewelry box, but his confusion turned to laughter as he opened it. “Gods, Laurent…”

Laurent joined him in laughing, knowing the perfect gift he had chosen.

Damen donned the present immediately. A teardrop diamond the size of a large grape was hung from his forehead, another large diamond threaded through his belly button. Damen removed his shirt entirely so Laurent could help him put in the matching diamond nipple studs as they were both too uncoordinated to attempt it alone. When they were through, Damen glittered like a diamond mine.

“They are beautiful, my oasis. I cannot wait to have you twist them.”

“You have a perfectly adequate and empty library.” Laurent offered, wedding banquet be damned.

Damen kissed him in a way that did not exactly convince Laurent to abandon his idea of making love before returning. “Something for a later date. I have a gift for you as well.” He stumbled away from Laurent’s side to go fetch an ornately carved cedar box from amongst their other gifts. “It is customary for my family—the Martells,” he added in case Laurent had forgotten, “to give a dower gift of the prince’s weight in gold.”

“I had heard of a dower,” Laurent said through a muddled mind, “But rather than have the gold as you ride off to war…I’d rather have your weight in you.” He thanked his lucky stars that Westeros was peaceful so that he and Damen would not have to ride off to war.

“And I you.” Damen said. “But I don’t mind traditions and I like lavishing you with gifts. So I used
your dower to buy you something."

He handed Laurent the box and Laurent ran his hands over the finely carved surface of the box. The box itself was a work of art, carved in a delicate latticework of secret drawers and latches like twisting snakes. The main lock was also made to look like a coiled python but when he solved the puzzle the pieces then looked to be a wooden rose. It was so clever…

Laurent exhaled in disbelief as he saw what was inside.

It was a crown for the Prince’s Consort, but it had to have been made recently, just for him.

The circlet was gold and fashioned to look like the vines of climbing roses, though they lacked the thorns. But the gold was only visible in snippets between the roses attached to it. Made of a stone unlike any Laurent had ever seen, the petals were carved, interlocking pieces that had a similar texture to ivory. But it was as if someone had detailed the tips in the most delicate swirls and veins of blue and silver and creamy white. The carved roses looked remarkably like the crown of winter roses Damen had given him back in Highgarden.

As he touched the smooth petals and felt the heat coming off of them, Laurent realized what the ‘roses’ were made of. “These are—.”

“Dragon scales. I cannot offer you an actual beast but…the scales are still—”

“Wonderful.” Laurent assured him.

Despite being deep in his cups, Damen made a moving speech as he laid the crown on Laurent’s brow. “I will see no other as beautiful with you by my side; I gave you a crown of flowers and in my eyes they will never be removed. Even when we have passed to the next life, I will order you lay beside me as the Lord of Love and Beauty. This crown will never lay on another’s head, as my oath to you.” He kissed either side of Laurent’s neck.

“We must go back to the banquet,” Laurent gasped, his heart breaking for love of his husband, “or I will not let you leave this room clothed.”

Damen laughed, leaning forward to pepper kisses onto Laurent’s face. “I doubt those locusts would have noticed our absence. But my head is clear and my urges are under control. Let’s return.”

Most seemed too drunk to have noticed their extended bathroom trip, but at the sight of Laurent in his familiar crown, a cheer rose from the torch-lit banquet pavilion. With most of dinner cleared away, livelier musicians had been produced and people had begun to dance. Lazar was dancing with Pallas in a way that looked more like making love while standing and Aimeric was trying very hard to copy their fluid motions against Jord. Lady Vannes was a better dancer and had somehow convinced Ser Nikandros to dance with her.

As Damen led Laurent to the dancing throng, Laurent looked for his babies in the crowd. The four of them were with Theomedes, Aleron, Lord Torveld, and Auguste who were conversing animatedly at the table closest to the balcony. Laurent’s father had the sleeping twins in his arms, gently patting their hair as he spoke, while Theomedes cradled his only, precious granddaughter, Nym also asleep from all the excitement. Theo was the only one awake, but it didn’t look like it would stay that way for long, as he was leaning very hard against Auguste’s torso.

Adding to the very long list of things that made Damen Martell a better human than most Laurent had ever met, he proved to be an excellent dancer and Laurent was torn between being thrilled and scandalized over how close and grinding Dornish dances were. The music dripped with sex and
wine was used to quench the thirst of exercise; it was all quite indecent.

At some point, Nicaise had a clapping circle form around him and he spun so gracefully that even Laurent forgot he was a little scorpion and cheered. Several young lords were looking at him with unabashed want and Auguste was quick to shield his little bird from view not long after.

Jokaste and Aktis Vidre took center stage after, doing a more traditional Westerosi dance, but made erotic by the way the Dornish never looked away from their partner’s gaze and slapped their hands together like the sound of hips slapping against ass.

Laurent could understand with this wild dancing how the Dothraki could have so much lovemaking in their wedding ceremonies.

It was not until the moon was high in the sky that people began to remember that weddings needed more thrusting than what was on display on the dance floor. Laurent had his suspicions that it was Lazar who first shouted forth the suggestion, but soon the entire wedding party was shouting drunkenly: “To the bed! To the bed!”

Laurent squeaked as someone began to lift him into the air, but a small, firm hand wrapped around his wrist and he found himself being yanked back to Lady Jokaste’s side.

Her smile was sweet and stubborn. “A change of plans, my lords. Lord Tyrell will be attended by the ladies this evening.” And Laurent was immediately pleased for her intervention when a chorus of groans erupted from amongst the lords in the crowds.

“Thank you, my lady.” He whispered as a throng of maidens escorted him out.

Jokaste snorted. “*Please.* The idea was not mine and you know it. Dornishmen are so hot-blooded they cannot stand to see their lover carted off by another man even on the night of their own wedding. Prince Damen alerted me the moment you two returned from your very long journey to the privy.” She said this as though she did not believe they had ever made it to the privy.

Led by Jokaste, Laurent and his companions were taken to a room stacked with fine robes and oils and toiletries, whereupon the women turned on him. He was stripped of his gauzy jacket and vest and boots before he even realized what was happening.

Jokaste bustled through the throng, a long length of silk in her arms.

“What is all this?” Laurent asked inspecting the comically large robe he was being offered.

Jokaste was light-fingered as she roped a thin chain of gold around his neck, torso, and waist. “We were supposed to prepare Prince Damen, despite my constant warnings he would never allow any man to strip you down,” as she said so she yanked Laurent’s pants down to his ankles and he yelped, “but no one listens to me. Move your hands please! I am pregnant, I do know what a cock looks like, Tyrell, and I have my suspicions that you do as well.”

Some of the maidens tittered nervously at Jokaste’s lewd mouth and Laurent’s nakedness; he was relieved these foolish ones would not be seeing what Damen had been endowed with.

Kashel dabbed him with perfume on his neck, wrists and hips and others unpinned his hair, leaving it long as Damen liked, before placing the crown back on his head; in the meantime, Jokaste’s words truly sunk in and he began to laugh.

“My Lady, do you mean to tell me that I am wearing Damen’s bedding garments?” The question seemed to answer itself as he donned the white silk robe and the hem fell several inches past his feet.
An even more ludicrous idea occurred to him. “Does that mean Damen is wearing my bedding garments?”

The ladies assisting him did not confirm or deny but there were some very unladylike snorts that were ill covered by slim hands.

When they were finished, Laurent was nude under his robe, save for the thin golden chain that had been meant for Damen and the women paraded behind him tossing ever more petals as they accompanied him through the halls.

His inebriated guests lined the halls and shouted lewd suggestions as Laurent passed. “Caution, Lord Tyrell! ‘Tis easier to mount a wild stallion than a Martell!” “Use your mouth to bring him to his knees!” “I have hard coin on when you will first emerge, my lord! Give us something to sing about!”

Laurent smiled at them, trying to assume the role of a blushing bride. Some bannermen from the Reach began singing ‘The Tyrell Peach’ with drunken gusto and Laurent struggled not to begin singing along.

When they reached the bedchamber, Damen and the men were already there waiting and Laurent burst into hysterical laughter at the sight of his husband.

The robe he was wearing had obviously been cut for a shorter, leaner man because it would not close across the chest and the seams of the sleeves looked as they would burst if he attempted to raise his arms. The hips also looked to be too small as he was desperately covering that part with his hand. Auguste and Kastor were cackling, Ser Nikandros simply looking relieved—probably because he did not have to strip Laurent. Nicaise was looking with a cunning eye at the seams of Damen’s robes as though he was considering slicing them, while Pallas and Lazar were throwing ever more petals about the room.

When he caught sight of Laurent, Lazar’s eyes lit up. “Lord Tyrell! At first I was disappointed that I could not see your fabled peach firsthand but now I can only pity you. I have never had to impale myself on a tree trunk before.” The women screamed and covered their ears.

“Gods help me, Lazar, I will cut out your tongue!” Damen shouted, unable to turn for fear of ripping the robe intended for Laurent. Pallas slapped Lazar upside the head.

“You had better cut out Laurent’s tongue,” Lazar shrugged, not contrite in the least, “make more room for that pole of yours.”

It was the women and Pallas who chased Lazar from the room, screaming about his filthy mouth.

The men followed them out, Auguste clapping Laurent on the shoulder as he left and Laurent made sure Nicaise had actually exited and was not going to attempt to stay and watch. They would all return to the banquet hall and become uproariously drunk in their honor. As soon as the door closed, Laurent collapsed into helpless laughter.

“Stop, stop!” Damen pleaded, “Laurent if I laugh, I will burst out of this! Stop!”

“You brought this on yourself!” Laurent accused, looking up at his husband. “You insisted I be dressed by the ladies! Without informing anyone!”

Damen attempted to shuffle over to the bed without ripping anything but stopped when Laurent dissolved into giggles on the sheets. “Stop! Gods above!”

“Just take it off.” Laurent suggested casually. Damen looked at him and Laurent felt his face get hot.
He wondered what accessories meant for him were now adorning Damen’s body. “Take it off.”

Damen smiled, flexed his shoulders and Laurent heard the smooth rip of fine silk. The remainders of the robe fluttered to the floor like petals and Laurent got a good look at what was given to someone marrying into Dornish royalty.

Damen’s body chain was silver and it was clearly meant for Laurent because it was tight across his muscles. Like the bondage with ropes he heard was common in the Free Cities, the silver wrapped in twisting diamond shapes from his neck to his half-erect cock and the diamonds still in place on his chest and navel; Laurent wanted to yank him forward by the jewelry.

He must have looked truly hungry because Damen took a step forward and Laurent moved back in perfect tandem. His fingers traced the silk edges of his own jacket and he let it slip from his shoulders revealing his body.

He gave Damen only a split second to drink him in before he leapt over their petal-covered bed and gripped Damen by the chains on his body.

He too smelled heady with perfume and Laurent ran his lips over Damen’s chest, his tongue wrapping around the cool metal of his diamond studs. Damen moaned deep in his throat and Laurent gripped the chains around his chest.

He twisted Damen around and pushed him hard so that fell back onto the bed.

Laurent straddled him, feeling the aforementioned cock Lazar was so amazed by pressing against his bare bum. The crown tilted low on his head as Damen stroked the long strands of his hair. The Prince of Dorne was his, all his…

He twisted his hips like he imagined a whore might and Damen stared transfixed.

“I should warn you, my Prince: I am no maid and I am expert in breaking in wild beasts.” He rolled his hips and Damen thrust his up. “Welcome to your marriage bed.”

Damen’s eyes lit up and his next words sent a tingle through every inch of Laurent’s skin. Pulling Laurent down so he could whisper in his ear, Damen asked, “You welcome me, Laurent Tyrell?” And Laurent remembered the heat of Damen, that inexorable passion that had rolled off of him the day they first met in Highgarden. Laurent was a fool not to realize earlier that he would be helpless against it.

He grinned in spite of his defeat. “Yes, I welcome you.” And he slid himself down, hearing Damen cry out.

In was warm in the room, Laurent was vaguely aware as he came awake. But it was warmer than usual even by Dornish standards as his and Damen’s quarters were facing the sea and had a cool breeze most mornings and nights. He was aware of Damen stroking his hair with gentle, deliberate hands.

“Shhhh…” He heard Damen whisper to someone and the person returned the noise only quieter and with a giggle underneath.

Still Laurent opened his eyes just a crack to see what was going on to cause the increase in temperature.
Of course the first thing he saw was his beloved husband, beautiful Damen seemingly glowing gold from the early morning light behind him. Of course he was completely awake; Damen was an early riser no matter how late he went to sleep. His smile was wide as he saw Laurent was semi-awake and Laurent’s hazy world went dark as Damen kissed him once on the forehead and once on the neck. He was still too exhausted to reciprocate.

As he glanced down, Laurent saw the source of the unusual heat.

Of course his pillow was Damen’s sunny hot arm, but to his right Theo and Nym were sleeping crushed up against his side, their angelic little faces slack with sleep. Leon and Malon were sitting next to Damen, quiet as usual but Laurent knew the little twins saved their words until they were ready to speak.

Laurent had been with them so often for so many months that he could tell them apart even while half-asleep. He smiled at them as well.

“Shhh…” They parroted back at him at exactly the same time, each raising a finger to their mouths. Laurent thought it a good idea to take their advice and sleep a little longer.

When he inclined his head to the left, both Leon and Malon hugged him gently around the neck. “Papá,” they murmured in their clear babyish voices, “Papá Laurent. Hi. Hi.” The name still made him nearly weep with joy; Nym had been the first to call him ‘Papá’, Leon and Malon quick to follow their sister’s lead, but when Theo had finally followed suit, Laurent had actually shed tears.

Laurent was too tired to even respond so he simply rested his chin on their tiny heads.

“Papá… Papá…”

Laurent felt himself slipping back into dreams when Damen kissed him again. His words of greeting were the same as every morning. “Welcome home my oasis, my Laurent.”
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