Wicked Game

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Summary

Two years have passed since the bells had rung. The kingdoms are united, and Damen and Laurent are prospering as the kings of Akielos and Vere. Everything is perfect.

Until an accident occurs, and Laurent wakes up in bed next to who he knows as Damianos, prince-killer.

Notes

this is an idea i’ve been playing around with for a while and decided to write it. i’m gonna aim for weekly updates and hopefully if i get really ahead i can get to twice a week like i did with my previous fic.
the chapters (apart from this one) will start out with memories, some long and some short. those will be italicized. the rest of the chapters won’t be this short.
title is the song wicked game by ursine vulpine because i’m uncreative so i just use song titles. enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

It was dark. Night had fallen, the dim lights of the candles being the only source of illumination in the room. The flames flickered, glowing off of the white marble, the colors of the tapestries coming and going. Damen saw the way the gold glistened, the way it shone back to him in deep blue eyes.

“Promise me you’re okay,” Damen said.

They were lying down on their sides, the sheet tangled on their lower bodies. Laurent had long ago discarded his bed robe and wore just his white sleeping shirt, the ties loose. He had one arm under his head, his cheek resting on his palm, the other trailing Damen’s chest.

“I’m fine.”

“I can get Paschal again-“


Damen covered Laurent’s hand with his, holding it against his skin. Laurent was looking better now, the swelling in his face having gone down some, but Damen was just beginning to see the slight blue forming on the left side of his face, marking where Laurent had hit his head the hardest.

“It was a nasty fall,” Damen said, wincing as it played over in his mind. Laurent knew better than that, he knew how to land properly on the very rare occasion that he was jolted off his horse.

“And yet, here I am,” Laurent said. He removed his hand from Damen’s and brought it to his face, Damen’s heart swaying as he brushed a stray curl out of his eye. Laurent smiled as it fell back into place, cupping his cheek instead. “My dear king. You worry too much.”

Damen let out a breath that would be laughter if he didn’t still feel so wracked with concern. He couldn’t get the sound of Laurent’s body impacting the ground out of his mind.

“What kind of king would I be if I didn’t worry?”

Laurent’s smile grew, holding onto Damen as he moved in closer to him. The bed shifted with him. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Damen was playing with the laces on Laurent’s shirt, tugging at one aimlessly. “And who would we be, if we didn’t worry about each other?”

Laurent shook his head, but he was still smiling. It seemed like he was always smiling these days. Damen couldn’t tell which one of them more.

Laurent’s hand drifted from Damen’s cheek to the back of his neck, his fingers tangling in the shorter hairs there as he pulled Damen close to him.

His lips were soft against Damen’s, pressing against his slowly and determinedly. Damen’s hands were drifting before he even realized it, wrapping themselves around Laurent and pulling his body into Damen’s, their chests touching with every light kiss. Laurent still had a certain nature to his kissing, as if it were the most important thing he could be doing at that moment, though he had become much more at ease with such things. He allowed his hands to wander, allowed himself to take Damen’s lip between his own and to slide his tongue against Damen’s, no longer as bashful about his wants.
Damen pulled back slightly, just enough to check that Laurent felt well enough for this. Laurent must have known what was coming because he pressed a finger to Damen’s lips briefly, only leaving it there for a moment before bringing their lips back together, using his other hand to pull the sheet over them.

Damen woke the next morning slowly, languidly, the sun streaming in through the large window that stretched above their bed and let out an unparalleled view of the sea. He stretched his limbs slowly, enjoying the feeling of his muscles popping as blood flowed. He stayed where he was, his position not much different from how he had fallen asleep.

Laurent’s body was a warm, lingering presence beside him. He was still asleep, his face curled into his shoulder, his hand tight on his pillow. Damen knew they had things to attend to that morning, but he saw no reason to rush anything. Time was on their side now.

Damen shifted enough so he was on his side, properly facing Laurent. He fought to keep his hands to himself and allow Laurent a few more moments of rest before they started their day. He didn’t brush his knuckles against his cheek or sweep the hair out of his eyes as he tended to. He didn’t press light kisses to his forehead or pull him closer. He just remained where he was and luxuriated in the feeling of Laurent comfortably beside him.

Damen stretched out his limbs and thought of the other times he watched Laurent sleep, something he knew Laurent would tease him endlessly about had he known. Ravenel, the bittersweet feeling of waking up to Laurent in his arms and believing it would be the only time. Karthas, after a night of losing themselves to each other and waking up feeling more at peace than Damen could remember feeling in months. Countless mornings of boyish indulgence, too many for Damen to count.

He felt Laurent shift then, stirring beside Damen, the sweet sound of his sleepy murmurs filling Damen’s ears. Damen placed his hand on Laurent’s waist and watched as Laurent’s eyelids fluttered open.

Some days Laurent was quick to wake, only stopping to press a brief kiss to Damen’s lips before getting out of bed immediately and calling for a servant to help dress him when Damen was not yet coherent enough to deal with all the laces. On other days he lingered, kissing Damen softly until they had no choice but to begin their day.

Now, Laurent’s eyes opened slowly, the bright blue on Damen’s face. His eyes were squinty from tiredness, and Damen smiled as he blinked multiple times, trying to get the sleep out of his eyes and back into focus.

“Good morning,” Damen whispered.

Damen waited for him to speak, but instead Laurent blinked again, his eyes flicking around the room before snapping back to Damen. Damen raised and eyebrow as he waited for Laurent to wake up properly. He wasn’t sure if to be amused at how out of sorts Laurent seemed. Maybe he had dreamt and his mind was still elsewhere.

Damen opened his mouth to ask, but instead clamped it shut in bewilderment when Laurent pushed himself up rapidly, the sheets clenched in his hands.

Concern washed over Damen in waves, and he felt the way his face contorted in shock as he pushed himself up, reaching out.
“Laurent-”

Laurent scrambled then, and Damen’s heart stuttered to a stop when Laurent shoved the sheet away, tearing himself out of bed. He took a few steps back, his eyes widening as Damen got up himself.

“Laurent,” Damen repeated, some combination of nerves and panic swarming in his stomach as he stepped around the bed and towards Laurent’s retreating figure. “What are you-“

“Get away from me,” Laurent snapped, and his tone was so unexpectedly harsh that it stopped Damen in his tracks. His entire body froze, nothing else registering in his brain but the way Laurent was looking at him right now. His hands were in fists, his eyes narrowed in a way that he rarely ever looked at Damen.

Damen took a tentative step forward, and it was like Laurent’s eyes darkened when he noticed. Damen felt like he had been slapped. He tried to ignore the dread he was beginning to feel as he reached out for him, and Laurent’s nostrils flared as he glared down at Damen’s hand. “Do not touch me,” he snarled.

Damen’s heart all but stopped. He looked around the room helplessly, not understanding what had happened, or what he had done to warrant this reaction.

“I don’t understand,” Damen said quietly, not wanting to jar Laurent more than he already seemed to be. “Are you- did you have a nightmare?”

Although it was not so frequent, Laurent did have nightmares on occasion, though he had never reacted like this, so violently and dethatched. He would sometimes need a few moments to himself, but he never pushed Damen away like this.

The question seemed to irritate Laurent farther, if the narrowing of his eyes was any indication.

“Damianos,” Laurent said, his voice roughened. Damen paused again, his confusion altering slightly. Laurent hardly ever referred to him by his given name, generally opting to call him by his small name, something very few people were allowed. If Laurent ever referred to Damen as Damianos, it was when foreign ambassadors were present, or occasionally in a council meeting.

Damen felt desperate, grasping at straws. “Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked. He didn’t know why he felt like he was approaching a wild animal, one you had to tread very carefully around.

“Help?” Laurent said manically, and Damen barely recognized his voice.

“What’s going on?” Damen asked, not having the slightest clue how to go about this. It had been years since-

Since Laurent had looked at him like this.

“Laurent, it’s me.”

Laurent’s expression shifted then, and unlike his previous reactions, he took a step forward. Damen held himself carefully, not sure what was the right or wrong thing to do in this situation.

Damen wasn’t sure what he expected, but it certainly wasn’t Laurent turning his head towards the door, or calling out loudly, “guards!”

“Laurent,” Damen said, shocked, and the frantic sound of his voice caused Laurent to whip his head back towards Damen.
“You,” Laurent said, taking another step towards Damen, just as the doors flew open. “Prince-killer.”
Chapter 2

Damen was on his back, the sheets tangled beneath him, his arms crossed behind his head. It was morning, early, but not early enough that it was appropriate to still be in bed. Despite this, he could not get up. Partly because he didn’t want to, largely because Laurent wasn’t letting him.

Laurent was lying beside him, but he was mostly on top of Damen, his own body holding Damen down. He was propped up on one elbow, gazing down at Damen as he trailed his fingers along his shoulder, down his bicep. His eyes were bright in the early morning.

“We need to go,” Damen said, not feeling in any particular rush.

“Do we?” Laurent muttered absently, his nails grazing Damen’s chest. His eyes were following his fingers, the weight of his body a welcome warmth against Damen’s.

Damen reached one hand out, pushing a strand of Laurent’s hair to the side. “If we keep walking into council meetings late,” Damen said, trailing a knuckle down his cheek. “They are going to think we’re irresponsible.”

“Will they?”

Laughter left Damen in a huff. He knew they had things to do, and that they were most definitely going to be late, but he was helpless when Laurent was playful like this.

“So I need to call the guards in to drag you off me?” Damen asked.

Laurent laughed shortly, his body moving slightly against his with it. He gazed up at Damen through his lashes, raising a brow effortlessly. “Is that your greatest threat?” he asked. “I expect better from you.”

“Why be creative when I can be effective?” Damen asked.

Laurent lowered his arms to Damen’s chest, resting his chin on his hands and smiling at Damen. “Go ahead,” he said. “Guards walking in on us has hardly bothered me in the past.”

Damen flushed despite himself, his cheeks warm under Laurent’s gaze. The reaction was something that didn’t happen often but if it did, Laurent was likely the cause of it. Laurent noticed the slight change in color and his smile grew as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Damen’s cheek, delighted.

“Well?” Laurent said. “I’m looking forward to seeing who it would be this time.”

“I’m sure you are,” Damen said. “Most people would think I’m the one who keeps us in bed longer.” His palm was smoothing up and down Laurent’s back slowly.

“Good,” Laurent replied. “I can’t have them thinking I’m the irresponsible one.” He reached a hand out, playing with one of Damen’s larger, more tousled curls. “So if you’re not going to call the guards in, and if I’m not going to get up for at least five more minutes, shouldn’t we at least make use of our time?”

Damen smiled at him, feeling like his grin could split his cheeks. He could do nothing else when Laurent looked at him like that.
A fool would think he was dreaming.

A fool would think this was a dream, or more appropriately a nightmare. To go to sleep alone and to wake up next to someone else. Someone you’ve never met before, or spoken with. Only thought of, every waking moment, with nothing else but vengeance on your mind. To think you are alone, only to wake up to your sworn enemy, inches away from you.

But Laurent was not a fool. Not anymore. He knew who he was, and he knew what his purpose in life was. One, to outlive his uncle and to ascend his throne. Two, to kill Damianos of Akielos.

Damianos, who was now standing in front of Laurent in his chambers, his eyes wide as if he didn’t know what was going on. As if he didn’t know why he was with Laurent.

Fear. It was not an emotion that Laurent was unaccustomed to, though it was one that he had spent years learning to conceal. He was no stranger to fear, but he knew better than to let it show on your face, in your body, in your reactions. Laurent would not allow the boyish, instinctive reaction of panic to take him down now. He had survived far too much to make it this far, just to let hysteria overrun him.

Laurent had no idea what was happening, or why he couldn’t remember how these events had started, but he couldn’t let that matter right now. All that mattered were that the guards were entering, and that they could drag Damianos away so that Laurent could properly gather himself, and then deal with this accordingly.

Two guards ran in, the doors slamming against the wall from the harsh impact of their entrance. Their hands were braced on their swords, at the ready for Laurent’s command. Laurent didn’t recognize either of them, something he would attend to later. For now, all that mattered was that they would bring order.

However, their steps faltered. They had made it into the main chamber, just passing through the alcove into the bedchambers when they each stopped, their hold on the hilt of their swords loosened, and instead they looked oddly between Laurent and-

*Damianos.*

The man on the right stepped forward. “What can we do, Your Highness?” he asked.

Laurent felt his own eyes widen in outrage, and he suppressed the impulse to throttle the guard. Who had chosen such an incompetent imbecile to guard his rooms?

Laurent raised his hand, motioning to Damianos carelessly. He reminded himself that this was Vere, enemy nation to Akielos. No one here knew who Prince Damianos was, and that it was likely that he and Damianos were the only ones. He would deal with him later, at his own leisure. Now, all that was important was getting him out of his sight.

“Remove him,” Laurent said coldly.

“Laurent,” Damianos said again, and hearing his name leave his mouth was almost enough to make Laurent retch. His stomach felt tight, nausea creeping its way up his throat and threatening to remove whatever it was he had eaten the night before.

Now that the initial shock and confusion had reduced some, the reality of what was happening began to slowly settle itself around Laurent. He felt again the first moments of consciousness, of opening his eyes expecting to see an empty room, instead seeing large brown eyes that he did not recognize. That he was seeing any eyes other than his own in his private quarters was enough to shake him, and
then his sleep muddled vision cleared, and Laurent saw who it was, in his own bed, inches away from him.

Laurent would recognize that face anywhere. He saw it before he slept each night and in the face of every man he ever fought, every day for the past six years, hours of practice and exertion weighing down on him and reminding him why he must live on.

He saw it every time he faced his uncle, reminding him why they were the only two players left on the chessboard.

“Have I given you permission to call me by my given name?” Laurent snapped.

Damianos’ lips parted, and Laurent tore his gaze away and back towards the guards, who were gazing at Laurent like he had grown a second head.

“Your Highness?” One of them said, the man who was standing farther behind.

“Have I spoken unclearly?” Laurent asked, feeling irritation spike inside him. Irritation and something else. Never has his Prince’s Guard neglected him like this, or ignored his word. No matter how outlandish or questionable Laurent’s demands were, his guards respected them and obeyed. It was why he had chosen them, hand picking the men remaining from Auguste’s retinue, yet here they were, acting against Laurent’s very clear orders. Laurent felt the unease he felt from the moment he opened his eyes that morning grow into something larger.

“Enough of this,” Damianos said, and the elevated tone of his voice caused Laurent to look back at him. Damianos had stepped closer to him, daringly, Laurent might add. He was looking at Laurent with an expression that Laurent could not place, and Laurent had to clench his hands into fists so as not to remove it himself.

“Excuse me?” Laurent said.

“What has gotten into you?” Damianos asked him. He no longer looked caught off guard, or unsettled. He looked angry, as if he had a right. “Why are you acting like this?”

“Excuse me?” Laurent snarled.

“It’s me,” Damianos said again, causing Laurent to flinch. He felt it in his entire body.

“I’m aware,” Laurent replied icily. His hands were still clenched. “I know exactly who you are.”

Damianos blinked at him like a moron, looking at a Laurent for a few moments before speaking. “Why did you call me that?” he asked quietly.

When Laurent said nothing, Damianos spoke again, louder this time. “Why,” Damianos said, “Did you call me prince-killer?” the last words came out oddly, choked off, and Laurent felt his eyes narrow. His vision narrowed.

“What,” Laurent asked. “Have you killed so many that you’ve lost track? Have you forgotten just who you cut down? It’s only been six years.”

“Six-“ Damen started, but he cut himself off, looking at the guards who were looking at them like they had been frozen in place. Damianos looked at Laurent differently now, the anger gone, replaced by something Laurent didn’t understand.

“Are you sleepwalking?” Damianos asked. He took a step towards Laurent, reaching his hand out.
It was with sheer power of will and years of schooling his features that Laurent managed to hold himself where he was, unaffected and unintimidated, but that did nothing to soothe the acceleration of his heart or his quickening pulse, each feeling as if they would leave bruises on his skin.

“How many years did you just say?”

Laurent looked at the guards in bewilderment, ignoring the way they were looking at him similarly. “Do you wish to be turned off?” he asked. “Do as I said.”

“Laurent,” Damianos insisted. “How many years did you just say?”

“Six,” Laurent seethed. “How foolish do you think I am to forget how many years ago you gut my brother like a pig.” Though for all of Laurent’s outward bravado, the uncertainty he felt was beginning to take shape into something else. Something concrete.

Laurent had woken up with a stranger in his bed. An enemy, something Laurent could not even begin to fathom, and regardless of how absurd this entire conversation seemed to be, it did nothing to change the fact that Laurent had no recollection of anything prior to this morning that would suggest how he had landed himself in this situation. Whether Laurent had been taken prisoner or this was somehow a ploy of his uncle’s, something Laurent did not doubt, the point still stood: Laurent could not remember it.

Laurent looked around then, really looked around for the first time. He had expected to see patterned tiles and intricately carved walls. The familiar loggia of semicircle arches that hung above gardens. The things he had gone to sleep to and woken up to for majority of his life. Instead, he saw marble. Not exclusively, but more than what was typical with Veretian architecture. Tapestries hung, but not as many that adorned the walls to his chambers. The ceilings were higher. The antechamber was more narrow.

These were not his rooms. The fact, unnerving, was simple.

Damianos exchanged a final look with the guards, and this time, he didn’t look at Laurent as he spoke.

“Get Paschal,” he said. “Now.”

One of the guards nodded hastily, turning for the door and running off. Laurent felt like his blood was boiling, though confusion was a larger part of his anger. He was somewhere else. These guards responded to Damianos’ command as if he had hold, though they still entered when Laurent had called, and had looked to him expectantly.

They had looked at both of them expectantly.

“I did not ask for the physician,” Laurent said, speaking over the feeling inside him that expanded with each passing second. “I asked for you to get him out of my sight. Are you looking to be demoted?”

But Damianos stepped right up in front of Laurent before the guard could respond, and Laurent might have struck him for that, had he not been so caught off guard by his gall.
“Laurent,” Damianos said. “The battle at Marlas was eight years ago.”

Laurent froze, just for a second. “I don’t know if they teach math in your barbarian country,” he said, “or if you were too busy taking lives and fucking slaves to learn your numbers, but I am well aware of how long has passed. And you should be on your knees when you speak to me.” But the conviction of his point did not feel as strong as before.

Damianos closed his eyes, doing nothing before he opened them, slowly.

“Don’t worry,” Damianos said, sounding pained. “Paschal comes.”

Paschal was the first familiar face Laurent recognized since he woke up that morning, and he managed to stifle the relief he felt at that from showing on his face. He was wearing his usual cloak and loaf-like hat, another familiarity.

“Your Highness,” Paschal said, walking in brusquely. “Exalted. I came as soon as I could.”

“How many times must I say that I did not ask for a physician?” Laurent said. He turned to look at Paschal. “You may go.”

Paschal set his warm brown eyes on Laurent for an unblinking moment before turning them to Damianos. They seemed to have an unspoken conversation because Paschal nodded, stepping towards Laurent.

“Your Highness,” he said. “How do you feel?”

“Displeased.”

“Displeased?” Damianos spat. He looked around the room rapidly before his eyes landed on the two guards. “Leave, now,” he said. “Speak of this to no one.”

“Exalted,” they both nodded, their hands back on their swords before they exited the room.

Damianos was on Paschal the moment the door shut, but Paschal did not seem intimidated by his large figure.

“He thinks Marlas happened six years ago,” Damianos said. “He won’t go near me. He called me-”

“The only time I will go near you,” Laurent said calmly, “Is to run my sword through you.”

Damianos’ mouth gaped, and he took another intrusive step towards Paschal. “Do something,” he said, his voice low. “Figure out what happened to him and help him before I have you thrown from the palace.”

“Exalted,” Paschal started. “I don’t-“

“You told me he would be unharmed!” Damianos said, the increase in his voice so sudden that it startled even Laurent. He was practically yelling. “He said he was fine. He’s speaking like he doesn’t know me!”

“I know you,” Laurent assured. “Believe me when I say that. Did you think I wouldn’t know the man who killed my brother?” He asked. “The only thing I don’t know is what you’re doing in Vere, how you got past my guards, and if I’m going to have you beaten or flogged first.”
Laurent took pleasure in the way Damianos’ face crumbled, though he had no idea why his words brought on such an expression to the brute’s face. He looked like he wanted to speak, but Paschal managed to beat him to it.

“Your Highness,” he said tentatively. “Where did you say we were?”

Laurent felt irritation simmer and he carefully stifled it. Now was not the time for him to lose his head. He had waited years to face this man, and he would have all his wits about him as he did. “Have I somehow woken up in Patras?” Laurent asked. “What is your point with these fruitless questions? I’m not an idiot, I’m the Prince of Vere.”

“The Prince of—” Damianos said loudly.

“Exalted,” Paschal admonished. “Please try and level your voice.”

This conversation was getting ridiculous, and there was only so much more Laurent was willing to tolerate, especially without an explanation as to the way he had woken up.

“Enough of this,” Laurent said sharply. “I’ll have no more of this interrogation. Tell me now what you are doing in Vere, and perhaps I’ll let you keep all your fingers.”

“No,” Damianos whispered, and then he was coming towards Laurent with both arms out. Laurent stiffened, and he was just deciding on his smartest course of action when Paschal grabbed onto Damianos’ shoulder. Damianos stopped and looked down at Paschal’s hand, raising his gaze so their eyes met. “Release me,” he said. “Now.”

“For me, Exalted, but I have to advise against this.”

“You are not here to advise,” Damianos snapped, yanking his arm away. “You are here to help him, which you don’t seem capable of doing. Should I summon someone else?”

The single word finally seemed to settle in Laurent’s mind, its significance unfolding as he realized what it meant. Exalted. He was not the only person who knew who Damianos was. The guards, Paschal. They had referred to Damianos with an honorific. They knew who he was. Paschal knew who he was.

Laurent digested this, the familiar way the two of them were interacting, and he felt anger, burning hot in his veins. “Would you care to explain to me,” he said, “why you appear to be on such friendly terms with Akielos?”

Neither of them responded to Laurent. Paschal looked at him like he was seeing something that was not there, and Damianos had his hands on his face.

A multitude of realizations hit Laurent at once. He was in a room he did not recognize. He woke up next to the man who killed his brother, the man he had sworn to kill. The guards may have been senseless, but Paschal knew Laurent. Had known Auguste. He had been on the field the day Damianos of Akielos had taken Auguste down. He had now walked into a room that held both Laurent and Damianos, and he had not batted an eye.

“This cannot be happening,” Damianos said from behind his hands.

“Exalted,” Paschal said. “Perhaps you should step out.”

“No,” Damianos said, dropping his hands. He looked at Paschal like he had suggested he eat insects.
“No one is asking you.” Laurent said, rage and something else altering his voice. “You’re lucky I haven’t had you tossed from the battlements yet, though I must admit the prospect is appealing.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Damianos said, and Laurent felt his stomach churn.

“Do you think I want you here?” Laurent asked through clenched teeth. He would not be surprised if he ground them to dust.

“Yes,” Damianos said. “Even if you don’t remember that.”

“Get out,” Laurent snapped.

“Your Highness,” Paschal interrupted. “Please. You can decide where you want Damianos for this, but I need to check you. I need to see what you can remember, and what you cannot. These things are crucial.”

“He cannot decide where I am,” Damianos said. “I’m staying right here.”

Paschal let out a wary sigh, nodding his head before walking up to Damianos. He spoke in hushed tones to him, which only seemed to enrage Damianos further, as his animal like growl and rapid hand gestures indicated. Paschal rose his voice slightly but still not enough for Laurent to hear, and Damianos looked over Paschal’s shoulder towards Laurent. Laurent looked at him blankly, coolly, and Damianos’ shoulders slumped before he walked to a chair on the far side of the room.

Paschal then returned his attention to Laurent. “Would you prefer to sit?” he asked.

“I prefer to not be coddled like a child, and to be told what everyone else seems to understand.” Laurent took a step forward, getting away from Damianos and closer to Paschal. “Paschal,” he said. “You have been a part of my household since the days of my father, and my brother. You have served me well, but if I do not receive an explanation as to why this animal is here, in my presence, I will have you removed immediately.”

Paschal nodded, bringing his hands together. “I am here to serve my king in any way I am able, Your Highness.”

“There is no king,” Laurent responded. “My father is dead, and I have not yet reached the age of ascension.”

“There is a king,” Paschal said.

Laurent’s teeth clenched immediately, unintentionally. He drew in a slow breath, letting it out before speaking.

“My uncle is Regent,” he said. “Not king.”

Laurent heard a gutted noise on the side of the room, and he turned his head minutely to see Damianos clutching the edge of his chair, his fingers tight around the edge. They looked at each other for a moment, wordlessly, the moment stretching out.

Damianos broke their gaze first, swinging his face towards Paschal.

“He thinks-“ Damianos said, as calmly as his native instincts seemed to allow. He cut himself off, turning his face away. His hand was covering his mouth, squeezing at the skin hard.

It was silent in the room, nobody speaking a word. Paschal seemed to be waiting to see if Damianos
spoke again, but Damianos showed no signs of continuing the thought.

“There is a king,” Paschal repeated. He waited for Laurent to look at him before continuing to speak. “There has been a king, a new king, for two years now.”

Laurent crossed his arms, stepping forward until he was within touching distance of Paschal. Paschal did not cower away from Laurent’s proximity, nor did he flinch from the scathing look Laurent sent him. He simply tilted his head back slightly, holding Laurent’s gaze.

“Tell me,” Laurent said sarcastically. “How exactly I don’t seem to remember who the king is?”

“I would like nothing more than to help you understand that, Your Highness. I simply need your cooperation.”

Laurent smiled humorlessly. “Alright,” he said. “I’ll humor this. Tell me, please. Who is the king?”

Paschal opened his mouth to respond, but Laurent couldn’t hear him over the sound of a wooden chair scarping across the floor, echoing in the large room. Laurent turned his head to see Damianos pushing himself up, taking a step towards Laurent. And another.

“You are,” Damianos said. He continued to walk, coming towards Laurent, stopping only when he was inches away. He looked down at Laurent, standing there with an air of indignation that Laurent planned to dispense of.

Laurent looked back at him, reminding himself that it was not always wise to play your entire hand at once. To strike at the first chance. Some of the best things were those that you took your time working to.

“I am, what,” Laurent asked, as calmly as he could force himself.

“King,” Damianos replied, and before Laurent could respond, he took one last step towards him.

“You, and I,” Damianos said. “We are the kings of Akielos and Vere.”
“It suits you,” Damen said.

Laurent smiled softly, lifting his hand absently to the top of his head “Does it?”

Laurent was a vision of beauty, so bright that it overwhelmed Damen just to look at him. He was dressed from head to toe in ivory and gold, from the fine silks of his clothes to the gilded crown that sat on his head. Coupled with his blonde hair, the two framed Laurent’s face and only accentuated the gleaming look in his eyes.

Damen stepped forward, tracing his finger along Laurent’s cheek. “It does,” he said softly. He ran his fingers up Laurent’s neck, against his hair that now swept his shoulders. “You look regal.” He followed the line of his fingers with his lips, letting them linger by the shell of his ear. “You look like a king.” He kissed the spot just below.

Laurent hummed, raising his hand so it was braced on Damen’s arm. He spanned his fingers along Damen’s bicep, holding him gently. “I am a king,” he replied.

Damen smiled against Laurent’s neck, kissed him again before drawing his face back, looking into Laurent’s eyes. “My king,” he said.

Laurent lifted his hand to Damen’s head, pulling him down so their foreheads were touching. It was warm in their room, the flickering flames of the fire dancing across the stone walls and reflecting in each other’s eyes. Brown against blue, looking at each other like nothing else mattered.

“Only yours?” Laurent murmured.

Damen kissed him on the mouth, lifting both hands so he was holding Laurent’s face, his thumbs brushing his cheeks. The kiss was soft, brief, but enough to make anticipation swell in Damen’s stomach.

“You are mine,” Damen said against Laurent’s mouth, their lips brushing. “As I am yours. But we cannot just belong to each other. We have two kingdoms to rule now.” Damen kissed Laurent once. “Together.”

Laurent pushed his hands into Damen’s hair, curling his fingers tightly and pulling Damen back into him. His mouth was hot and open against Damen’s, his chest tight on his. Damen felt the outline of Laurent’s body against his, every surface and curve touching. Damen’s hands moved down, slowly, until his arms were winding around Laurent’s waist.

“Not tonight,” Laurent said in Damen’s ear, pressing kisses to the soft skin behind it. “Tonight it is just us.”

Damen pressed his lips to Laurent’s roughly, enthusiastically, feeling Laurent grab onto him as he
did. Damen wanted everything, and he forced himself to slow down because of it. They could have everything now, and he would treat every moment with Laurent with the same lavished attention, as if it were their last. He was rewarded with Laurent panting into his mouth as Damen’s kisses turned slow, long, deep.

Laurent took Damen’s lip between his own, and Damen nipped at Laurent’s in return. Laurent pulled back after a few minutes and breathed against Damen’s mouth, his fingers grasping at his chiton in eager fists.

“I want you,” Damen said, running his tongue along Laurent’s bottom lip.

Laurent kissed Damen one last time, punctuating it with a forward shift of his body, sighing as Damen lowered his hands further so he could properly lift Laurent.

“Show your king,” Laurent whispered back.

Damen could never remember feeling so helpless.

He thought of being chained in Arles, stuck in a cage while slaves suffered around him. He thought of being alone with Laurent on the road, hearing the sound of Akielon horns and knowing he couldn’t return to his people, so close but so far. He thought of how he felt, how infuriated he felt when a herald had accused him of killing his own father.

Damen thought of all that he had endured over the years, over the course of his life, and never could he recall feeling as he did now, as if everything was slowly slipping from his grasp, his world crumbling around him.

For all that he had faced, for all the pain that he bore, nothing seemed to compare to the way it felt to see how coolly Laurent looked at him. The way he flinched when Damen approached. The way his face blanked, and then soured as Damen told him that they ruled an empire together.

Laurent looked at Damen, his eyes narrowed so sharply that a V shaped formed between his brows. His eyes were daggers like shards of ice, his mouth a pinched line. He said nothing, just looked at Damen, silently, wordlessly. Damen waited for him to speak, to acknowledge what he said, but the only response he received was the slow turn of his head so he was no longer looking at Damen.

“Speak,” Laurent said to Paschal, his voice too flat. “Now.”

Paschal seemed at odds, unsure what to say or what would overwhelm Laurent. Damen himself was at a complete loss at what to do, because through all of the questions and confusion, one thing was unmistakably clear. Laurent did not remember him.

He did not remember them.

It was hindering. Paralyzing. It was like having an entire army behind your back, capable and ready for battle but being unable to use them. Damen and Laurent had so much. They had a past. They had moments and memories, promises and secrets. They had an empire, a future, but none of that mattered, because Laurent could not remember any of it.

“Am I to wait the entire day until it is convenient for you to speak?” Laurent asked Paschal.

Paschal exhaled slowly, nodding his head. “My apologies, Your Highness. I have never encountered a situation like this, I’m not entirely sure how to proceed. I- you seem to remember who I am?”
Laurent nodded, one. Yes.

Damen could not stay silent any longer, feeling like his arms were being held behind his back. He stepped forward mindlessly, words leaving him before he could stop himself.

“And me?” he said. “You truly remember nothing of me, other than…”

Damen saw Laurent make the decision to turn his head so he was facing Damen, as if that alone was an effort, and that was its own arrow in Damen’s chest.

“Would you like to know what I remember?” Laurent asked, but he did not wait for Damen’s response. “I remember hours spent learning Akielon fighting techniques, so I could properly counteract them. I remember calling my Prince’s Guard in and relishing in their shock each time I landed them on their backs, knowing I was one step closer.” His voice rose with his words, but he was nowhere near shouting. Even without a better part of his memory, Laurent held control over himself.

“I remember the first time I held a sword because I wanted to. Because I planned to-“

“Stop,” Damen said. He could not recognize his voice in his own ears.

“Do not speak,” Laurent said back. “Unless I speak to you first.” And with that his eyes were back on Paschal.

Paschal was looking at Laurent quietly, solemnly. His eyes briefly closed before speaking.

“Your Highness,” he began. “I cannot begin to fathom the confusion you’re feeling, and I understand your anger-“

“You understand nothing,” Laurent interrupted.

Paschal raised a hand in agreement. “But there is so much you don’t recall. So much has happened. You need to know these things. Will you let us tell you them?”

Laurent only had eyes for Paschal. If he looked at Damen, it was to send him a scathing glance. The reality of that ached.

“Why is he here,” Laurent said slowly. “And why does it not phase you.”

The effort to not speak nearly overtook Damen, but he had made a promise to Laurent in the past to be by his side and to be all that he wanted and needed. And now, despite how painful it was, Laurent needed this small distance.

“Perhaps,” Paschal tried, “We can start with something smaller?”

“No.” Laurent said. “Perhaps we can do as I say.”

Damen’s resolve dissolved with that, with the way Laurent spoke of Damen like it inconvenienced him. This would be fixed soon, and when the time came that Laurent remembered everything, Damen would not have him remembering that Damen had stood by idly, silently, while Paschal spoke for him. While anyone spoke for him.

“I am here,” Damen said. “Because you are here, which is where I belong.”

Laurent flinched. Damen saw it, just as he saw his face begin to scrunch, and Damen summoned all of his soldier’s strength to go on as if he did not notice the way Laurent reacted to him.
“I am here because we rule a kingdom. A new empire that we have created together, over the span of
two fruitful years. I am here because you are mine, as I am yours, and when you remember that, you
will remember that I stood with you through this challenge as I swore to you that I always would.”

Damen could feel his chest moving beneath the thin cotton of his chiton. The moment was still, like
the pause in a song before the melody picked up or before the first clashing of swords in a duel. He
looked at Laurent’s face, at the emptiness on his face, and he willed with his entire heart and soul to
Anything.

But Damen saw nothing.

Nothing but distaste. Contempt. And what worried Damen the most was that that was not the first
time he had seen that look on Laurent’s face. He had seen it chained on his knees, in a small harem
in a foreign palace. He knew that look better than anyone, and he knew what that look meant.

Laurent dragged his gaze back to Paschal’s, and though he did not speak the question was clear in
his eyes, because Paschal nodded.

Damen was not sure what reaction he expected. The confirmation was clear in Laurent’s eyes, he
could understand that, just as he could understand the shock and blow that came with Damen’s
words being confirmed in Laurent’s disbelieving ears. What he did not expect was the slow curving
of Laurent’s lips, though it did not reach the rest of his face.

“I see,” Laurent said. He was looking at no one now. “I have spread for my brother’s killer.”

It took a moment for the words to catch up with Damen. He felt them take shape in his mind, and
Damen’s heart seized in his chest as he understood the implications of what Laurent must have been
feeling.

“It was not like that-“

“Do not speak,” Laurent said, the words sounding like he was pushing them out. He spun around to
face Damen, his eyes wide and his mouth twisted. He took a step towards Damen, lifting his hand. “I
do not want to hear you. I do not want to see you. And the moment I have this entire story and I am
caught up with this calamity, I want you gone.”

“No,” Damen said, stepping forward himself. “No. That is not what you would want.”

“Do not presume to know what I would or would not want,” Laurent retorted harshly.

“Laurent-“

Laurent turned his attention to Paschal, the sudden change stopping Damen in his tracks, causing his
heart to pang against his chest.

“What happened?” Laurent asked Paschal.

Paschal’s eyes drifted to Damen’s for a moment, waiting until Damen nodded somberly before
bringing them back to Laurent.

“I was not there,” Paschal said. “But you were out riding. Racing, I believe.”

“Racing who?”
A pause. “Damianos.”

Laurent stilled, his mouth twitching before he spoke, quietly. “Go on.”

“I’m not exactly sure what happened, I can only recount what I’ve been told.” Paschal paused for a moment, exhaling before speaking softly. “Perhaps it is better if Damianos—”

“I am speaking to you,” Laurent said.

“You were thrown off your horse,” Paschal conceded. “Something must have distracted you, as I’m sure you recall what a skilled rider you are. You had to have hit your head quite hard for it to have caused such a large lapse in your memory, though as I have said, I have never quite encountered something to this magnitude, so I cannot confidently say.”

Something had distracted Laurent. He was laughing at something Damen had said, his head turned to the side as he called back to him sarcastically, not seeing the low hanging branch that had caused his horse to pivot violently.

Laurent looked at Paschal carefully, nodding his head as he absorbed this information. His eyes flicked to the side before he spoke. “This is not Veretian architecture.”

“No,” Paschal agreed. “We are not in Vere.”

Laurent scoffed like he did not quite believe him, which Damen understood. He knew enough from the conversations that he and Laurent had had that before he had been taken to Vere, it had been years since Laurent had left Arles. The fact that he was now living in an entirely different province would not sit easily with him.

“Look around yourself Your Highness,” Paschal replied, gesturing around the room. “Do you recognize where you are?”

Damen watched as Laurent’s eyes lingered on Paschal for a moment, unamused before slowly leaving him and circling around the room. These rooms were quite different from Laurent’s chambers in Arles, and Damen’s chambers in Ios. A combination of them both. They had both seen to that.

“So I am being held somewhere against my own volition,” Laurent said eventually, though Damen knew Laurent well enough to know that despite how in the dark he was, he had gathered enough to know that that was not the case. This was cynicism speaking. “You are truly building a strong case.”

“No one is holding you here,” Damen said to him. “This is your home.”

Laurent’s eyes darkened on Damen, but he would not stand down. He would never stand down from Laurent.

“Where are we,” Laurent asked simply, though it came out like an empty statement.

“Delpha.”

“Delpha,” Laurent repeated.

“The idea was to be on the border,” Paschal explained. “To signify the unification of the kingdoms.”

Damen tried to ignore the way Laurent’s expression soured at that. He failed.

“I see,” Laurent replied. “And who’s idea was that?”
“Yours,” Damen said, his heart swelling. He remembered that conversation so vividly. The excited anticipation they both felt as they spoke of their new palace on the border.

Laurent balked, but he recovered quickly, drawing in a breath. Damen watched as the features in his face darkened, something shifting in his mind.

“And then of course,” Laurent said, turning to face Damen. “There’s you.”

It was too quiet in the room. Damen looked to Paschal, too afraid to look at Laurent. To see the dispassionate, disconnected way he may have been looking at Damen. Laurent must have noticed the way no one was quite looking at him because Damen’s eyes inevitably flicked back to Laurent, just in time to see him raise an eyebrow. “Well, this must be something.”

“Perhaps this is when I should step out,” Paschal said.

“Nonsense,” Laurent said, walking towards one of the chairs by the long, wooden table. He sat down, crossing a leg over his thigh, his arm resting on the table so his wrist was on the edge, his fingers dangling. His pants and sleep shirt were loose on his body, something Damen knew Laurent wished to fasten but would not with others around, a keen breach into the way he held himself in simple ways, such as clothing.

“This must be quite a story,” Laurent continued. “Let’s hear it.”

Paschal sighed, looking to Damen for what might have bee guidance, but Damen was just at a loss as he was. This was not a conversation he wanted to entertain. This was not a situation he wanted to relive, or think about, ever. But this was not about his wants. It was about Laurent’s.

“What do you remember of the Akielon monarchy?” Damen asked.

Laurent fitted him with an uninterested look, but he responded, a single word, “Theomedes.”

Damen lowered his face, the name twisting inside his gut. The last thing he wanted to do was get into this extensively, so he would not. He doubted Laurent cared to regardless.

“My brother had my father killed,” Damen said. “And he rid of me, wishing to usurp my throne.”

Laurent raised both eyebrows at this, his face holding no recollection of this story that he knew very well. “Perhaps my ancestor had the right idea when she had all the bastards in the capital executed,” he mused. “But nonetheless, I did not ask for a history lesson on the royal family of Akielos. I asked why everyone seems so unperturbed at the sight of us in the same chambers.” His fingers were tapping on the surface of the table. “And if I’ve not been lied to about these past two years—“

“I have not lied to you,” Damen said. “I would never lie to you.”

Laurent did not seem pleased by the interruption, nor the sentiment. He looked at Damen blankly. His face was so void of emotion, so different than the way he had looked at Damen the previous night before they had fallen asleep, as he carded his fingers through Damen’s hair and pressed sleepy kisses to his face.

“If you actually know anything about me,” Laurent said, “Then you’d know I don’t like to wait when I’ve asked a question.”

There was no need to drag this out further than it already was. It was in the past. “I was sent to you as a pleasure slave,” Damen pushed out. “I eventually left the palace with you when you set out for border duty. Events occurred. Circumstance changed.” Everything changed.
Though there was no point to the end of that sentence, because Damen saw the moment Laurent stopped listening, his already pale face whitening further, his eyes widening. The look lasted for a moment before he blinked, the impassivity returning once again.

“However exciting this insight has been for me,” he said, “I’m still eagerly awaiting the part that had me bend over for Akielos.”

Damen’s throat felt tight. His skin felt too tight, squeezing so hard that he felt his heart might burst. How did he even begin to explain? What had happened between him and Laurent was not so cut and dry. It was complicated, something you could not really describe, only experience. He had experienced it, in moments so bittersweet and illicit, and it was because he had personally lived those moments that he knew a simple retelling would do nothing.

“There is no part,” Damen tried. Parts, maybe. “What happened between us developed slowly, blossomed when it had no place to, and by the time either of us was aware of it, it was already out of our hands.”

Laurent’s expression did not change. “So they teach poetry in your barbarian country,” he said. “Not just killing.”

Damen said nothing. What was there to say to that?

“And myself?” Laurent asked, when Damen was silent. “Did I give you a warm welcome when you were brought to me?”

A part of Damen wanted to lie, but that would get them nowhere. He could not change the past. “No.”

The side of Laurent’s lip curled, and he seemed to settle into his chair more comfortably. “Well,” he said. “At least I did something right.”

Something inside Damen snapped. He wanted to allow Laurent to steer this conversation, but panic mixed with fear fueled something inside him, and before he realized it he was halfway across the room to Laurent. To shake him and say it’s me, to hold him, to plead with him to remember, he didn’t know. He just needed to get to Laurent.

But then Paschal’s hand was on Damen’s arm again, holding him tightly. “Exalted,” he said, when Damen yanked his arm away and glared. “I ask that you step out for a few minutes.”

Damen felt himself fill with rage, which he did not quite manage to tamp down. “You think it’s your place to dictate where I go?”

“Exalted,” Paschal repeated. “I need to check his body for his wounds, to see if they had worsened. I think it better if we have a moment alone.”

Damen almost argued that the notion was preposterous, as if he had never seen Laurent’s bare body before, but realization hit him like a stampede of horses weighing down on him. He took a step back, and then another, before turning for the door.

“A few minutes,” he muttered, walking in quick strides.

The guards must have heard his heavy footsteps approaching, because the doors opened before he could reach for them himself. Instead of thanking them as he tended to after exiting, he turned for the handles and slammed the doors shut himself.
“If one word of what you have heard is spoken to anyone outside of these rooms,” Damen said to each of them, “I will have your heads.” He then turned around abruptly and stalked towards the opposite hall, placing his arms on the stone wall and leaning his forehead against his forearms.

Time passed. Damen was not sure how much, but eventually he heard the doors creaking open, the soft sound of Paschal’s shoes approaching him. Damen turned immediately, holding himself back from charging towards him.

“What did you say to him?” Damen demanded.

“Nothing of importance,” Paschal replied. “I simply checked his wounds to see how they were healing, as I told you.”

“Everything regarding Laurent is of importance!” Damen bellowed, enraged. When Paschal said nothing, Damen drew in a steadying breath. “What will you do for him?”

Paschal looked over his shoulder to the closed doors before looking back to Damen. “I will tell you as I told him. There is nothing for me to do but wait and see how he develops. In the meantime I suggest rest, fluids and the avoidance of added stress.”

“What,” Damen snapped. “No salve this time?” His pulse was pounding, his veins hot with misplaced rage. This was not Paschal’s fault, Damen knew that. It was nobody’s fault but a cruel twist of fate. That did nothing to dispense of the anger he felt boiling over inside him.

“You’re upset,” Paschal said. “I understand. I have spent these past years with you both and I’ve seen the way you look at each other, but I feel the need to clarify—”

“Careful,” Damen said.

Paschal looked down at the ground as he thought, gazing up at Damen slowly. He had to crane his neck back to look into Damen’s eyes.

“I have been with him since he was a boy. I have seen him go through all the changes brought on from both puberty and life, and I have seen the changes in him that were brought on from you. It is undeniable.” He stopped for a moment before pushing the rest out. “But that is not where his mind is right now.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Damen said, fighting the growing urge to lash out. “You think I don’t remember the way it feels to have him look at me like this? I lived those moments you’re thinking of now.”

Paschal looked at Damen, nodding his head like one would at a rowdy nephew who would not listen. “Added distress can worsen his condition. Please keep that in mind, Exalted.” With that he bowed briefly, then turned passed the guards and down the winding hall.

Damen took in a deep breath, gazing at the doors for a few minutes before schooling his features. He stepped forward, ignoring the guards, and contemplated if he should knock. The idea itself that he now had to request entry into their shared chambers dawned on him painfully as he rapped his knuckles on the door three times. As expected he received no response, so he pushed the doors open himself and entered.

Laurent was standing now, his hands braced on the table, palms flat, looking down at nothing. He had changed clothes.

Damen took a few steps in and just stood there, waiting until Laurent lifted his head, turning around
slowly. He looked at the closed doors, his gaze focusing there for a few moments before swinging his eyes to Damen. “It’s just you and I, lover.”

Damen closed his eyes. The past felt close. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t—” Damen started, but what could he say? Do this to me a second time?

“I’m sorry,” Laurent said, pushing away from the table. “I seem to be having trouble remembering. Do we not talk? Should we just fuck?”

Damen recoiled, his body nearly jerking back from it. He knew what Laurent wanted was a reaction, and he was helpless in giving it.

He tried to put himself in Laurent’s shoes. He remembered how Laurent had felt about him when they had first met, when he did not yet know him. He remembered how he had felt about Laurent when they had first met, and he tried to remind himself that as far as Laurent knew, that was where they were now. Laurent was not acting this way because he truly hated Damen. He simply thought he did.

“You don’t want to be around me,” Damen said. “You think horrible things of me right now, I understand. But whether you remember it or not, we have been together for two years. Ask any person you wish, or the Veretians you grew up around. You were happy.”

Laurent’s eyes were glaciers on him, the look so distant in Damen’s mind, but at the same time so familiar. His mouth was a flat line, looking straight ahead at Damen before his gaze started to wander slowly. Damen tried to follow his gaze, unsure, and it was with a skipped heartbeat that he realized what he was seeing.

“Beneath the mattress,” Damen said softly.

Laurent’s head was still turned to the side, but his eyes returned to Damen. “What,” he said flatly.

“You’re trying to think of where you hide a dagger,” Damen said, just as quietly. He wished he was wrong, but he knew Laurent, and he knew he wasn’t. “Beneath the mattress, on the left side.”

Laurent’s eyes narrowed, his attention now on their mattress, visible from their vantage in the main chamber. He stared there for a long moment as if he could see through the bed, then looked at Damen, blinking as if he wanted to say something, then looking back at the bed.

“Are you so stupid,” he said. “That you would tell me where to get a weapon? You must really underestimate how badly I want to use it right now.”

“No,” Damen said back. “I’m just not your enemy. I swore to you that I would never hurt you. You’ll remember that eventually.”

Laurent’s nostrils flared, but he otherwise said nothing. Damen rubbed at his face, breathing in through his nose. Laurent had thought Marlas happened six years ago, which meant his memory stopped around the time Damen had been taken to Arles, a terrible coincidence. That in mind, he deduced that Laurent likely remembered all Veretians, just none of the Akielon’s that he had encountered, or anyone starting from their ride for the border.

“The kingdom will react badly to this,” Damen said through his hands.
“The kingdom will not know.”

Damen looked up, seeing that Laurent was looking at him seriously. “What?”

“Did you really think we would tell them?” Laurent asked, his face twisting on the word we. “Surely your inconsiderable sized brain is capable enough to register this. Have you any idea how vulnerable a king with no memories would make a country?”

“You’re saying—”

“That I will tolerate your presence in public and bite down my distaste,” Laurent finished. “Yes. I can do as much for my kingdom.”

“Our kingdom,” Damen corrected him.

Laurent said nothing, but the look on his face was enough to make Damen reconsider his next words.

“You don’t trust me,” Damen said, “Now. I understand that—”

“I don’t trust you, period,” Laurent interrupted.

“That’s not true,” Damen whispered.

“You are walking a very fine line with what I will tolerate right now,” Laurent said sharply, stepping forward. “If I’ve made myself unclear, let me explain now that I have no interest in being around you, outside of what is required of me. You will tell me what I need to know in terms of joint laws and developments, and not a single thing other than that.”

Damen knew now was not the time to try and convince Laurent of anything, it would serve completely pointless, and the last thing he wanted was to worsen Laurent’s situation, so he nodded reluctantly.

“Some people must know,” Damen said. “We cannot be the only ones. We will need counsel. Help.”

“Who do you suggest,” Laurent said, slowly, like asking for Damen’s opinion was difficult for him.

Damen did not need to think long. “Herode,” he said. Herode was wise, and informed, and he knew Laurent long before Damen did. “Jord.” Jord was in the King’s Guard, and despite past struggles, he was loyal and capable and Damen knew that Laurent admired him. “Nikandros,” he added, a bit selfishly. Damen would need someone as well.

“Nikandros,” Laurent said.

Damen felt foolish. Of course he didn’t remember Nikandros. “He is our kyros,” he explained. ”My confidant. My greatest friend.” Apart from Laurent.

“Wonderful,” Laurent replied. “Will he also tell me of our undying love?”

Damen made a face. “That is unlikely.”

“Oh,” Laurent said. “Perhaps I do want to meet him, then.”

“Also unlikely.”

“Very well,” Laurent said. “If that is all, you can get out now.”
Damen’s mouth opened, but he quickly clamped it shut. Time.

“We dine every night in the Great Hall,” Damen said. “The rest of the palace eats with us.”

Laurent was already walking away, into one of the antechambers, wordlessly dismissing Damen with his back to him.

Damen turned, his heart feeling heavy. He remembered what he had told Charls, when he and Laurent were on the rode with him, weeks before Laurent’s ascension. He would stand by Laurent, as long as he wanted him. Laurent may not remember him now, but Damen knew in his heart that they would get passed this, together. No matter what Laurent said or did Damen would remain by his side, waiting for him, for when Laurent would come back to him.

They had endured worse. Far worse. Damen was a warrior, and he had encountered people with strength that most would think unmatched, but Damen knew that Laurent fought harder than anyone. He would fight his way through this, and Damen would be at his side for it, no matter how hard things got. No matter how long it took. Damen told himself this as he left, hoping the repeating thought would drown out the dread he felt.
They were sitting in the great hall, the large room filled with noise and song. There were courtiers, ambassadors, councilors and soldiers around, each seated in their own spots, the tables spanning across the room. Damen and Laurent were seated at the high table, beside each other at the head in large, twinned chairs. Along the table were the usual occupants.

It was a good evening. Delegates from Patras had come to the palace to discuss new trade routes, something that they had been in talks with through King Torgier for some time now, and albeit a few concessions, matters had tipped in Akielos and Vere’s favor. The mood was jovial, and wine was flowing. Had been flowing for some time now.

Laurent was a light presence beside him, his eyes slightly gazed and his cheeks colored beautifully. He still did not drink often though he indulged himself occasionally, tonight being one of those nights. Damen had lost track of how many times they had each refilled their goblets. He had one arm swung comfortably around their chairs, comfortably reclined as his goblet dangled from loose fingers. Laurent showed his laxity in other ways, such as how he was a bit more animated in conversations, occasionally making friendly plans that he likely had no interest in following up on. Damen always enjoyed reminding him of all the trips he was technically a part of later on.

The boisterous atmosphere was tangible, and though it was clear that no one could possibly still be hungry the kitchens were still rallying, servants continuously bringing out platters upon platters of stuffed duck, fresh cuts of spiced meats and glazed chickens. Men were lapping up the oil from their plates with bread, licking their fingers off and reaching for more.

The men were currently comparing Akielon and Veretian clothing, weighing the pros and cons of each. It had been over a year since the unification of the kingdoms, a year of living with the cultures mixed, and the topic still arose quite often.

“Chitons make no sense,” Enguerran said. “Your entire body is visible, any bruise or weak spot on display for an opponent.”

“Those are the words of a virgin,” Rochert said, pointing messily with the fingers that were clutching his drink. “How do you manage to fuck when your mind only revolves around battle tactics?”

The men were not often so uninhibited around their kings, speaking so crassly and wanton. It took a long while for them just to be comfortable enough to dine with them at their table, per his and Laurent’s request. The wine helped.

“I must agree,” Pallas said, far too loud. “A man is a fool if he does not take advantage of the access a chiton provides.” That alone spoke for how much drink Pallas had inside him.

Damen heard a muffled sound beside him, and he turned his head to see Laurent leaning back a bit in his chair. “So it’s Pallas who gets a leg over, Lazar?”

Damen turned his attention back to the table to see Lazar grinning, his arms crossed loosely. “You’ve fought in battle with me before, Your Highness,” he said. “I am an adventurous man.”

Damen laughed himself, feeling warm and at ease, just as the servants began to enter the hall with fruits, nuts and cakes. The men moved aside slightly so they could lean in and arrange them on the table, their attention now diverted by the melodies of the kithara that one of the servants had begun
Laurent was standing in the bedchambers, his fingers clenching and unclenching as he took in everything. His head swarmed. His mind was a mess of fractured thoughts. It was despicable. It was disgraceful. It was impossible.

And yet, it was not impossible. For all Laurent believed, for all he wanted to believe, he could not deny what was fact. Memories or no, the fact still stood.

He was Damianos of Akielos’ lover.

Shame hit Laurent so hard it nearly took him off his feet. It was inconceivable, even to simply entertain. He thought of the person, the one person in Laurent’s life that mattered, and the promises that he had made to his grave, to himself, and of how he had failed him. How utterly he had failed him. Laurent could never remember feeling such confusion and helplessness, even when-

The only thing he could ever count on, growing up in such a deceiving court was himself and his own mind, so how could he have done such an unspeakable thing? How could he have wanted to?

A large part of Laurent wanted to deflect the entire situation, and to believe as if he had no role to play in it, but he had seen the way others had acted around Damianos. They had regarded him… kindly.

Laurent looked down at his hands, willing them to stop shaking, and it was then that his eyes caught on what he had seen when Paschal was checking him, but did not allow himself to focus on.

A flash of gold. One Laurent had never seen before, but he was not an idiot. He knew exactly what this was. His insides felt like they were turning over as he pushed his sleeve back with unsteady fingers, his breath stuttering as he saw the golden cuff that was adorning his wrist.

The submission. The ownership. The slavery adorning his wrist.

Laurent stepped forward blindly, not thinking but simply moving until he banged into the small table by the bed, knocking into it and causing things to topple. He heard a clinking, the impact of glass on wood, and the soft sounds of liquid swishing. Laurent looked down to see the mess that he had made. A book, one he did not recognize opened to somewhere in the middle, and a small phial overturned, its contents spilling onto the table and leaking onto the pages, muddling the ink.

It took a few moments for the sight to register in Laurent’s eyes. He reached out for the phial, bringing it close to his face and lifting it to his nose. There was a second, a horrible second where everything stopped, everything turning into blurry shapes around Laurent as the silence became deafening.

And then Laurent’s surroundings snapped back into focus, and the phial of oil was slipping from his fingers, smashing on the ground.

Laurent wasn’t thinking. He was just barely aware of his rapid movements, his arm sweeping across the table and tossing the book, inkwell and multiple other phials onto the floor, ink and oil spilling around him, splashing onto his shoes.

Laurent’s chest was moving, his hands on his face, pulling at his skin. He went to sit on the mattress and regain his breath but he jerked back at the last second, his breathing turning ragged as he saw the strewn pillows and tangled sheets.
It was too much. It was all too much. Laurent stalked out of the bedchambers and into the open airiness of the main chamber, windows open and air coming in. He drew in a long breath, releasing it slowly before inhaling again. His heart rate slowly began to return to normal, the heat from his skin wearing off, and he ran his hands through his hair once before making for the door.

Laurent pulled the heavy doors open, standing tall as the guards turned swiftly, waiting for his command. Their faces showed no reaction of anything they had witnessed or heard.

“Call in a servant to clean the rooms,” Laurent said. “And summon Jord.”

Jord entered the room briskly, looking around minutely as he approached Laurent at the table he was sitting at. He bowed briefly, dipping his head low before looking at Laurent.

“Your Highness,” he said.

Laurent didn’t know if it was typical for Jord to be summoned to his chambers, but he remembered Jord quite well, and knew enough of him that he likely still felt the difference of rank between them. He motioned to the chair opposite him. “Sit.”

Jord paused, just for a moment before sitting. It took a few seconds before he released the hilt of his sword and placed his hands in front of him. Jord said nothing, he simply sat there and waited until he was spoken to.

Laurent did not want to do this. His loss of memory was a weakness, a vulnerability, and that was the last thing he wanted or needed. However, Damianos was right, unfortunately. At least in this. Laurent may not trust anyone, but this needed to start somewhere. The fact stood that he remembered nothing, and especially considering the kingdoms had, unbelievably, united, there were too many possible things that he could not figure out on his own. He would need help. Something he was not comfortable with, and would seek out as little as he possibly could.

Laurent considered him, and considered the situation. The best course of action. Ultimately, there was no point in dragging this out, so he spoke.

“I’m going to cut out the pleasantries and get straight to it,” Laurent said blankly. “There has been an accident. Apparently I’ve taken a hit to the head, and I’m having trouble remembering certain things.”

Jord blinked at Laurent, his lips parting slightly before he closed them. This went on for a few seconds before Laurent raised an impatient brow, causing Jord to sputter.

“Your Highness,” he said. “What… things?”

Laurent tilted his head. “About two years worth of things, I would say.”

Jord blinked at Laurent, his lips parting slightly before he closed them. This went on for a few seconds before Laurent raised an impatient brow, causing Jord to sputter.

“Your Highness,” he said. “What… things?”

Laurent tilted his head. “About two years worth of things, I would say.”

Jord’s mouth did fall open now, but Laurent raised a hand before he spoke. “I did not call you here, nor did I tell you that for condolences or pity. Do not confuse things.”

Jord recovered quickly, smartly. “Of course, Your Highness, I would never presume as such.” He looked around them for a moment as if there was something to see before speaking again. “What exactly can I do for you?”

“I need you to report to me all there is to know about the Prince’s Guard.”
“It is the King’s Guard, Your Highness,” Jord said quietly.

Laurent froze. King’s Guard.

“Yes.”

Jord nodded. “What would you like to know?”

“Who my captain is, for starters.”

“Enguerran is your captain.”

Laurent let out an impatient breath, fighting the urge to rub his temples. “Let us assume that I know no one you are speaking of.”

Jord flushed, nodding his head quickly. “I’m sorry Your Highness, I didn’t-“

“It’s fine.”

“Govart was your captain, initially,” Jord said, his eyes slightly glazed like he was reflecting. “Though he was quickly removed by you, at king Damianos’ advisement.”

Laurent ignored the last part. “Where is Govart now?” it vexed him to know that that man had ever captained Laurent’s men, though Laurent had a good idea where that came from.

A pause. “Dead, Your Highness. I know that you killed him, though I don’t know the story. I would assume King Damianos does.”

Of course he does. “Who else?”

“Most of who was in the Prince’s Guard,” Jord said. “Can you…”

“I remember them, yes,” Laurent said. He had formed the Prince’s Guard when he was fifteen years old. An age he remembered far too vividly.

“Huet,” Jord said. “Rochert.”

“Orlant?”

Another pause, longer than the last. Jord looked down at the table as he spoke, “Orlant is dead.”

Laurent’s mouth closed. Orlant had been a good fighter, he remembered as such. He let the moment stretch out quietly before nodding for Jord to go on.

“Lazar,” he said. “You wouldn’t remember him, Your Highness. He joined your men on the ride to the border. He’s a good man. A good fighter. He was with us when we took Ravenel.”

Ravenel. The impregnable fort. Laurent knew the pride that came with it, the accomplishment it was to claim it as your own. He allowed that revelation to soak in before looking back at Jord.

“Who was my captain after Govart?” he asked.

Jord looked as if he was unsure how to respond, but Laurent knew he would not ignore a direct question.

“I was,” Jord eventually said.
Laurent leaned back in his chair, extending a leg comfortably. "‘Was’?"

Jord let out a breath, looking at his hands again. "‘There were- complications, Your Highness. I’ve made mistakes. But ultimately, it amounted to more than that. You were faced with a difficult situation, and you passed the captaincy to Damianos. It was the better choice. He was the better choice.’"

Laurent closed his eyes briefly, suppressing down the need to push away from the table. Captain. Damianos had been his slave. In the perfect position for Laurent to get vengeance, and instead he made him his captain.

"‘Who is Enguerran?’" Laurent asked eventually.

"He was Lord Touars’ captain,” Jord explain. “The border lord at Ravenel. He showed resistance at first, but he’s a good captain. Capable. Loyal.”

Laurent would see about that himself. "‘You’re telling me my guard is made up of five men?’"

"‘No,’ Jord said quickly. ‘Of course not, Your Highness. The rest are- Akielon.’"

Acidity settled in Laurent’s stomach, putting a sour taste in his mouth. Of course. Half of his guard was made up of barbarians.

"‘Names,’ he said.

"‘Nikandros,’ Jord replied. ‘Pallas. Aktis. Lydos.’"

Laurent nodded. "‘What do you think of them?’"

Jord’s eyes widened slightly. "‘Your Highness, I- I am not your captain. I don’t-’"

"‘And yet, I am asking you,” Laurent said.

Jord was quiet, seeming to consider his next words before speaking. "‘They are a good choice,” he said. ‘A good group of men. Your guard is something you should be confident about.’"

Laurent nodding, bringing his hands down to the table and rising. Jord took the dismissal for what it was, rising quickly as well.

Jord started to walk for the door, only stopping when Laurent said his name. He paused with his hand on the handle, turning at once.

"‘I don’t know what complications we faced when you were my captain, but think of this as your second chance. If you betray my trust,’ Laurent said, not liking the word in his mouth, ‘you will not like the consequences.’"

Jord nodded, opening the door after. "‘Your Highness.’"

Laurent entered the great hall alone, the two large doors pulled open for him. The palace was large, elaborate and lavish, though not as ostentatious or complex as the palace in Arles. It had taken him a bit longer than it would have had he known his way, but he both could not and would not ask anyone for direction.

The doors opened and Laurent walked in, looking around the room slowly. It was dimly lit, lanterns
and flames lining the walls and tables. Marble floors and stone carved walls, intricately curved, pillars and arches throughout the room. The ceiling was high, the farthest wall with an opening that extended into the courtyard, letting a breeze into the warm room.

There was a swarm of people inside, noblemen, councilors and soldiers seated or walking around, speaking, eating or laughing loudly. It was not what Laurent remembered from all the intensive dinners in Arles, with its overripe atmosphere and extensive courses. The ambiance was lighter.

Laurent’s eyes roamed the room, falling on the largest table at the side. He recognized only Vannes, finding it odd to see her at the table in which Damianos sat at the head. There was a seat beside him, unoccupied that Laurent knew was his own. Laurent ignored his own displeasure as he walked for it. Damianos’ eyes seemed to light up when he noticed Laurent, but whatever look was on Laurent’s face was enough to defuse it.

“Your Highness,” Vannes said as Laurent sat down. “How odd to see you walk in without the king glued to your side,” she added, gesturing to Damianos with her goblet. Her outspoken nature would irritate Laurent, as would her comment, but another familiar face was almost a comfort.

“I had things to attend to,” Laurent replied. “I’m sure he managed to find his way without me,” Laurent said with a glance to his side, plastering a smile on.

Damianos was pouring himself wine as they spoke, and instead of pouring into Laurent’s goblet as well, he reached for a pitcher of water.

“And if I’d like wine?” Laurent asked, the same smile on his face. He had no interest in it, but that was hardly anyone else’s place to assume.

“You don’t drink,” Damianos answered, filling his cup to the brink and setting the pitcher down. “Generally.”

A man Laurent did not recognize poured water for himself from the same pitcher, and Laurent waited before he drank from his goblet to take a mouthful of his own. He held it loosely between his fingers as he looked around the room, recognizing a handful of people here and there. He saw Jord again, sitting at a smaller table with Huet and Rochert, although he recognized no one else at the table and assumed it was the rest of the soldiers. Another table included the council, all accounted for aside from Guion, though that was not at all an unpleasant sight, only something he needed to inquire about later.

Laurent did not want to lean in closer to Damianos, nor did he want to speak to him in any tone that resembled intimacy, but there were too many people at the table and none of them could hear his questions.

“Why is Vannes at this table?” Laurent asked quietly. Damianos froze for a second, an odd look on his face before leaning towards Laurent minutely.

“She is the first chair on your council,” he replied.

Laurent looked at Vannes briefly, seeing that she was speaking to a women he did not recognize. Vannes was a bit of a pest, but she was not useless. She was informative, diligent, and as ambassador to Vask, Laurent knew she was capable of such a position.

Servants were moving around them, filling the table with platters and bowls, refilling glasses and loading people’s plates. There was a small, shallow dish filled with water beside Laurent’s plate, one that he knew was meant to wash one’s fingers off between each course.
It was loud, rowdy. People were speaking around him. Laurent was aware of as much, but none of it seemed to be of any importance, so for the moment he put his focus into cutting into his meat and observing the surroundings, retaining as many faces as he could so he could learn of their importance later.

“Your Highness?”

Laurent blinked once, turning his head to the sound of the voice which was on his right, a man who was on Damianos’ side of the table, the first seat by the corner. He had Akielon coloring, and was the one who had drank from the water pitcher.

“Nikandros asked about your wrestling,” Damianos said, skewering a vegetable on his knife.

Nikandros. This was the man Damianos deemed his confidant, one of the people who would know of the situation. He was large. Not as large as Damianos, but large enough that it caught the eye. It didn’t surprise Laurent that the two brutes were friends.

Laurent had never wrestled before, and he knew close to nothing about it. He had no interest in rolling around like pigs in the sty. He didn’t know why this was a conversation that would involve him.

“What about it?” Laurent asked, setting his fork down. He had to make conversation with the Akielons at some point. “I wasn’t listening.”

“I asked if the new move worked, Your Highness.”

Laurent hesitated, only for a second. “It did.”

Nikandros raised his eyebrows, turning towards Damianos and clapping him on the back. Laurent narrowed his eyes slightly at the sight, at the way someone acted towards their own king. Whatever he had agreed to seemed to please Nikandros enough that he did not notice Laurent’s shocked reaction. Laurent took the moment of reprieve to take another bite from his food.

“I told you, Your Highness,” Nikandros continued, reluctantly pulling Laurent’s attention back to him. “Damianos is the most sensitive beneath the arms, that is the best way to get him on his back.”

They were just words at first, what could have been meaningless words, but eventually they caught up to Laurent, the insinuation behind them becoming clear.

Laurent wrestled. With Akielons. He took wrestling advice from Akielons. He wrestled with Damianos of Akielos.

If there was one thing Laurent was capable of doing, it was hiding what he was really feeling and putting on the face that other people expected of him. He clutched the fork in his hand tighter.

“He is sensitive in other places as well,” Laurent said, thinking of all the areas he could stick the fork in.

Nikandros flushed, averting his eyes and reaching for his wine, the conversation coming to an end, which Laurent took as a minor victory. He raised his own water and let his eyes settle back around the room, time slipping away as the servants continued to hustle, the conversations becoming louder and the flickering of the flames becoming hypnotic.

Laurent was leaning forward slightly, just setting his goblet down on the table when he felt something brush his cheek.
Laurent bristled, his insides turning over slowly. He twisted his head slightly, reluctantly, to see Damianos with his hand extended, his fingers on the side of Laurent’s face. Damianos himself was frozen now, looking as if he just realized he had made a grievous mistake, which he had.

Laurent covered Damianos’ hand with his, though it took him a few seconds to do so. He smiled, thinking of anything other than the person that was in front of him so it would reach his eyes, and lowered their hands slowly so they were on his lap. Damianos’ eyes flicked down to Laurent’s upturned lips, then back up to the lightness in his eyes. His eyes widened slightly at the change, and when he opened his mouth to speak, Laurent squeezed his fingers until his nails were biting into Damianos’ palm.

Laurent leaned forward himself, close enough so his hair grazed Damianos’ cheek, his lips close to the shell of his ear. Laurent could feel the heat from Damianos’ body radiating against him, the way he held himself still as Laurent spoke, low, in his ear.

“The instant this dinner is over,” Laurent said quietly, his voice a murmur, “I am waking the nearest blacksmith and having this shackle removed from my wrist.”

Damianos jolted, moving roughly out of Laurent’s grasp and pulling away. Laurent smiled at this, but it immediately faltered when Damianos clasped his own wrist, conforming what Laurent had assumed when he saw that he only had one cuff on.

“No,” Damianos said.

Laurent reached forward for an olive, lifting it to his mouth. “I was not asking you a question.”

“No,” Damianos repeated. “You can’t take it off.”

Laurent paused with his hand halfway to his mouth, the olive nearly at his lip. He thought to put it back down in the shock he was feeling but they were around others. As far as they all knew, they were having simple conversation.

“I will not keep something that represents slavery, or the disgrace that I have brought on myself by wearing this,” Laurent said, hardly chewing the olive before swallowing. “If you choose to, that is your own stupidity, though I’m not surprised, what with your own immoral practice of slavery.”

“Slavery is abolished,” Damianos said. “And that is not what these are about.” He looked away from Laurent and towards the table, his gaze spanning the length of it, all of the people sitting around them, though no one was paying them any mind.

“You asked for it,” Damen said, his voice jagged. “You told me to give you the other one when I had it removed. You told me to put it on you. You said-“

Damianos was still speaking, in quick and hushed tones, but Laurent was not listening. He was speaking himself, his voice nearly too low for him to hear.

“This was your cuff,” he said, realization and disgust settling over him slowly.

Damianos looked at Laurent intently, and if Laurent was unsure if the loathing he felt was showing on his face, Damianos’ final attempt showed that it did.

“The kingdom, then,” Damianos said. “The kingdom knows what our cuffs are about. Unity. Equality. Its what they represent between us. If you take yours off, everyone will know something has happened.”
The weight of the metal was very heavy against Laurent’s skin. He felt like it was getting smaller, slowly squeezing him, a minute away from crashing bones. He felt trapped.

Laurent didn’t know what he was about to say, but it didn’t matter because at that moment, two little children ran up to their table. A boy and a girl, with large eyes, light brown hair and twinned smiles. Laurent found himself smiling back.

He recognized them, vaguely. They were councilor Jeurre’s grandchildren, he had seen them around Arles once or twice, though he had no idea what they were doing here now. He had never spoken with them.

“Hello,” they each said, their voices high, not yet broken from puberty.

“Hello,” Laurent heard, and he turned his head to see Damianos leaning forward slightly, his voice soft. He was smiling a small smile at the children. Laurent looked at him before turning to the children.

“Our mother told us not to bother you both again,” the girl said, her hands swinging at her sides. She took her lip between her teeth.

“We’ve told you,” Damianos said, “You’re never a bother.”

The boy stepped closer, more towards Laurent’s chair. “Will you tell us the story again, Your Highness?” he asked, clasping his hands. “The one about the boy who gets lost in the forest—“

“And finds the dragon?” The girl asked. “We tried to tell our little sister last night but we can’t remember the end.”

“Will you use the special voice for the dragon?” the boy asked, looking at Damianos now with a hopeful expression. Laurent could not stop looking between all of them.

Damianos was still smiling as he turned to look at Laurent, but it vanished the second he made eye contact. He did nothing for a moment before turning back to the children. “Perhaps another time,” he said. “King Laurent is not feeling well tonight.”

Their faces whipped to Laurent’s direction, their eyes widening. Laurent blinked at Damianos wordlessly before turning to them.

“I’m well,” Laurent said, smiling again at the look on their faces. “Damianos is being dramatic.”

They smiled largely, nodding their heads, their hair falling into their eyes. “Will you tell us soon?”

“Soon,” Laurent said.

The boy looked over his shoulder, and he must have seen his mother motioning to them because he tugged at his sister’s sleeve, nudging to the side with his head. They both waved their hands, laughing softly before running back off without another word.

Laurent’s eyes followed them as he went, not moving an inch or looking at anyone else.

Eventually, Damianos spoke.

“You call me Damen.”

Laurent twisted his head, looking at him blandly. “What.”
“Damen,” he repeated. “It is my small name, reserved for intimates.”

Laurent’s took in a shallow breath, digging his fingers into his knee. “No.”

Damianos passed a hand down his face, dropping it to the table after. His eyes shut for a second before looking at Laurent.

“I wasn’t asking a question,” he said. “You said yourself the kingdom will not know. Most of the people know you’ve been calling me Damen for over two years.”

Laurent dropped his own hand to the table, loudly. “A slave cuff,” he gritted out. “A lover’s name. Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” Damianos said. “You can at least try to listen to me when I tell you things are not the way you think they are between us.”

Laurent turned himself away. He wanted to leave, but the servants were only now bringing out the desserts. His elbow was on the table, his fist in front of his mouth as he looked at the room, waiting for the moment it was appropriate for a king to leave. The proximity between them was more than Laurent was willing to bear for a night.

A sliver of cake was placed in front of him then, light cream coating its sides with orange zest sprinkled over the top. Laurent’s eyes rose from the table to see Damianos pulling his hand away.

“This is your favorite,” he said.

Laurent pushed the plate away, smiling tightly. “Thank you. I’m full.”

Damianos looked like he wanted to say something, but Laurent had long lost his interest, and it must have appeared that that much was apparent because Damianos turned away with a sigh and engaged someone else in conversation. Laurent let his mind drift back to the two children. To what he had been referred to as.

Of everything that had happened, of all that he had learned, it was one of the biggest things for Laurent to swallow. He couldn’t quite believe it, just as he couldn’t believe that he had no memory of it.

King.

Laurent never thought he would make it to this point. There was so much he had been up against, so many obstacles and small battles that no one knew about. For years he was on his own, entirely alone, working to bring an end to fighting. For the chance to be half the king his brother would have been. He had used everything in his arsenal, had spent years on constant alert, secretly working to cultivate all that he needed for when the time would inevitably come, but in the back of Laurent’s mind there was always the nagging sensation that he would not survive, because of everything. Because of-

Laurent looked up with a jolt. He felt ridiculous, mindless. Of everything that had happened that day, of all the thoughts that passed through his head, how could this not have occurred to him? How had he not yet questioned this?

He turned his head to the right, seeing that Damianos was deep in conversation with someone else. He wasn’t even thinking as he placed a hand on his shoulder, hardly feeling the bare skin under his fingers as Damianos stopped speaking immediately and tuned to Laurent expectantly.

“Yes?” he said quietly.
Laurent kept his head turned to Damianos but looked to the side with just his eyes to see if anyone was looking, and Damianos must have realized because he leaned in closer, shifting slightly so his ear was close.

Laurent breathed in. breathed out. Spoke.

“Where is my uncle?”
the memory in this chapter is from a one shot i already have written called sapphires, you can read the fic if you want the bigger picture.

Both of Laurent’s hands were clasped together between his knees. Although Damen could not see what he was holding between them. His fingers were clutched around it tight, his knuckles almost white. His eyes did not leave his tight grip.

Damen sat down beside him, feeling the mattress dip beneath him as it took his weight. Laurent remained where he was, not speaking or changing the direction of his gaze, but he eventually leaned his body to the side, allowing his head to rest on Damen’s shoulder. Damen felt his heart swell as he turned his head slightly, just enough to press a kiss to Laurent’s hair before leaning his own head on Laurent’s.

They sat like this in silence for a few moments, simply taking comfort in each other. This was not uncommon for them. They could speak for hours about endless things, and there were things that they only told each other, would only ever tell each other. However, they each would occasionally have their own moments where something took them, a memory or a feeling, and all they could do was sit and stew in their thoughts. When that happened the other was there for them every time, offering nothing but a touch and a presence, and the silent reassurance that they would always be there.

Like all those other times, Damen simply sat with Laurent and let him soak up the heat from Damen’s body, Laurent’s own warmth an equal comfort to him, in all ways. He said nothing as he lightly covered Laurent’s hands with his own, his much larger one covering both of Laurent’s. He didn’t probe, or pry. Just left his hand there, not in expectance, but in offering.

Laurent did nothing for a while, his grip almost tightening on it’s contents before Damen felt a slight twitch, and then his hands were opening beneath Damen’s, revealing it’s contents to him. Damen saw a glisten in the dark room, a cluster of deep blue, darker than that of Laurent’s eyes, and it only took him a moment before he understood.

Sapphires.

Damen felt his chest clench as he inhaled slowly, his fingers linking with Laurent’s instinctively. Laurent was silent as his own fingers tightened, his face turning slowly, his eyes now on Damen’s.

Damen remembered a time similar to this one, where he had entered a room to find Laurent alone, too deep in his mind in that moment to properly acknowledge external factors, this same bundle of sapphires clutched tight in his hand. Unlike then, Laurent was not lashing out or trying to goad Damen into anger. Now he was silent, locked up, looking up at Damen with a sort of hopeless innocence that made Damen ache.

There was nothing Damen wouldn’t do for Laurent. He had given him himself, his trust, his entire kingdom. Damen would stop at nothing to give Laurent the entire world, but in this situation Damen was helpless, for he could not give him Nicaise.
Words being inadequate in that moment and not wanting to pretend otherwise, Damen raised his hands to the collar of Laurent’s jacket, his fingers skimming the laces. “May I?” he asked.

Laurent eyed Damen questioningly, but he nodded his head nonetheless. Damen set to work immediately, unlooping the laces through their eyelets quickly, an ease that only came from the wonderful practice of undressing Laurent every night. He reached the bottom and pushed the jacket off, setting it on the chair by the bed before crouching down on the ground, pulling off each of Laurent’s boots.

He rose from the floor when he was done, only to lower himself back on the bed. Laurent raised his hands slowly, unsurely, but Damen took them and returned them to the mattress between them. He had no implications with his actions. He only wanted Laurent to be comfortable.

They sat like that, their fingers brushing, their eyes on each other. Damen was unsure what to say. He knew there was no logic in apologizing for something he could not reverse, especially if it was something he had not played a hand in. He simply pushed a lock of hair behind his ear and allowed the moment to be what Laurent made it.

Laurent reached for Damen’s hand before he managed to pull away, holding it by his face, his palm now cupping Laurent’s cheek. Damen watched as he exhaled slowly, his eyes falling shut as he lowered Damen’s hand to his lap.

“I miss him.”

It was said quietly, only a murmur that would have been carried away by a breeze, had they been outside. Damen felt it wrap around his heart and clench tightly nonetheless.

“I know,” he whispered.

Laurent’s eyes were cast down, his gaze following his thumb that was tracing Damen’s skin, around his knuckles, the veins running along the back of his hand. “I can’t,” he started, shaking his head as his thumb stopped moving, just bellow Damen’s ring finger. “I can’t shake this feeling that I-“ He stopped again.

Damen knew it best that he not directly comment on what Laurent was implying. He knew that Laurent placed some blame from Nicaise’s death on his shoulders, as untrue as that was. Laurent loved Nicaise. Damen had not spend much time with the boy, but it was very likely that Laurent was the only person who loved Nicaise, and Nicaise had loved him back. There was an odd, almost layered relationship between the two, one that Damen could never even begin to grasp. However, despite the incongruity of their relationship, every one of their interactions that Damen had witnessed during his time in Arles only solidified the notion in his mind that there was some connection between those two that most people were not seeing.

Laurent had been fighting for Nicaise, in a way that no one else had. In a way that no one else had fought for him, when he had needed it. Damen understood that now more than ever. Now that he knew Laurent, knew who he really was, and the depth of love and compassion that was innate in him. Unfortunately, it had not been enough, because Nicaise was simply up against things that were too big for him, and not even Laurent could save him.

Damen turned his hand over, watching as Laurent began to trace the lines on his pam. It was something he often did when he was working through the muddled thoughts in his mind.

“Did something happen to spur this on?” Damen asked softly.
Laurent’s hand stilled, and he let out a slow breath as he looked back at Damen. “Not exactly,” he said, and he sounded almost reluctant. “It’s- silly. The servants were laying out the platters of desserts, and I saw something that reminded me of him.” He looked down at his hands, playing with his fingers as he spoke. “I had walked into the banquet hall one morning and saw him eating a chocolate pastry, almost self consciously. He kept looking around and licking his fingers off like he didn’t want anyone to notice the cream on his skin.”

“I sat down across from him and told him the chocolate one was my favorite as well,” Laurent continued. “He said nothing at first, then spit it out in front of me and walked away, still holding the rest of the pastry.” Laurent smiled at the memory, and Damen couldn’t help but smile back at the friendship that he would never understand.

Damen let the moment stretch out, let Laurent revel in his memories before he took Laurent’s hand back in his. “He cared for you as well.” This one pleaded for you. “Until the end.”

Laurent’s brows drew together, causing a series of soft lines to appear on his forehead. He looked at Damen skeptically. “You didn’t really know him.”

“No,” Damen agreed. “But I saw the way he interacted with you. The ease with which he spoke with you, in a way that he didn’t with others. I don’t think he would have felt comfortable doing so, had he not felt connected to you.”

Laurent lifted his shoulders once. “That was simply him.”

“Maybe,” Damen said. “But he played your games, and played them back. He joked with you. He trusted you, in his own secretive way.”

“Yes,” Laurent agreed. “And that trust resulted with his head in a sack.”

“That wasn’t you,” Damen said. “You know that, and Nicaise knew that. You said it yourself, he was smarter than the others.”

Laurent held Damen’s eyes as he blinked, pressing his lips together. Damen ran his thumb along Laurent’s wrist, and Laurent’s shoulders lowered.

“He deserved better.”

So did you, Damen almost said, but didn’t. It was true that Laurent had lost more in his life than he deserved, but he had so much now. A legacy. A kingdom. Damen’s heart.

“He did,” Damen said instead, because it was true. Nicaise deserved far better than the hand he had been dealt.

Laurent eyed Damen, an almost amused glint in his eyes now as he spoke. “You were not particularly close.”

Damen’s lip curved. That was an understatement.

“Close enough for him to stab me with his fork.”

Laurent laughed at that, a small, unselfconscious sound that made Damen feel light. “That was funny.”

Despite the context of the conversation, Damen could feel his own growing smile. “I’m glad you think so.”
Laurent smiled up at him, but it turned sad after a moment as his eyes drifted aimlessly across the room. He looked down at the earring in his hand, toying with the gems, rubbing them between his fingers reverently. He held it up by the needle, watching as the sapphires swung rhythmically.

“I went to his rooms,” Laurent mumbled. “When I returned to Arles. I looked through everything, but I couldn’t find the match to this earring. I don’t know what he did with it.” He sighed.

“He had nothing. No books, or toys, or anything in which he could express himself.” He closed his hand back around the earring, speaking in a harder tone. “Nothing.”

Damen closed his eyes briefly, clearing the turmoil in his mind before forcing them open. He laid a hand on Laurent’s shoulder, waiting for him to turn.

“You told me,” Damen started. “At Karthas, that Nicaise didn’t have a choice. He was rendered powerless, and nothing could have changed that. Not his doing, and not yours.” Damen tightened his hold, the bone in Laurent’s shoulder feeling more fragile in his thin white shirt. “You are not to blame.”

It took a few seconds of drawn out silence before Laurent’s eyes met Damen’s. Before his hand covered Damen’s.

“I want to do something for him,” Laurent said, his tone irrefutable. There was a new fire in his voice. “I don’t want Nicaise to be forgotten.”

Damen smiled, once again awed by the man before him.

“Then we will.”

Damen was speaking with a Lady from Kesus, something about the weather they were having and the way the palace gardens were benefitting from it. It was mindless chatter, something Damen had little interest in, though at that moment it was better than any of his other options because he did not know how much he could take of Laurent looking at him with lifeless eyes.

The conversation veered into hunting and the boar that he had taken down the previous week when Damen felt a hand touch his skin. He knew that touch better than anyone else’s, and though it had only been a day, it felt like it had been far longer than that. Though it was unlike Damen to interrupt someone mid sentence so abruptly, the shock of skin on skin was enough to pull Damen from his conversation and direct his full attention on Laurent.

“Yes?” Damen said.

Laurent was turned to Damen, his entire body facing his direction but his eyes were elsewhere, scanning the room to see if anyone was listening in. Whatever Laurent had to ask him was clearly heavy enough that anyone hearing would be a problem, so Damen shifted in closer, ignoring the way Laurent flinched.

“Where is my uncle?” Laurent muttered.

All the noise in the room seem to dull out, everything becoming murmurs around them. Damen felt stuck, caught off guard and foolish for feeling so. In all of the commotion and confusion of the day, he could not believe this hadn’t even occurred to him. Laurent had no idea.

Laurent was looking at Damen, waiting.

“Not here,” Damen whispered back.
Laurent gazed at him flatly. “I’m aware of that,” he said. “Where is he?”

Damen had meant they could not discuss that here. He had no idea how Laurent was going to react to such news. He had no idea how he was going to react. He could likely count the amount of times he had thought of that vile man on one hand in the past two years, and there was a reason for that.

“Come,” Damen said, pushing back from the table.

He thought Laurent was going to argue, but instead he dropped his linen napkin on the table and pushed back himself.

“Leaving?” Vannes said to both of them with a wolfish smile.

Damen ignored her, as did Laurent, unsurprisingly. Damen started for the open area at the end of the room, nodding politely at every murmur of his honorific and slight bow as they passed. They walked below the loggia, its arches high with designs carved into the stone. Damen led him through the pathway and out into the open air, the gardens before them, the scent of jasmine and the sound of trickling water around them.

Damen walked up to a stone bench, bushes surrounding it in growing sprouts. It was still too soon this time of year for the flowers to be in full blossom, but this was where the white roses would be, what Damen knew to be Laurent’s favorite. This place itself was where Damen often found Laurent reading.

Laurent stopped walking and looked around them, frowning at the bench. “Do you think this is a courtship?” he said sharply.

“No,” Damen said, sitting. “It’s a secluded area for a private conversation.” He waited for Laurent to sit, huffing when he only crossed his arms.

“Laurent,” he said. “We are going to have many conversations together, and a distance of three feet between us will not always be possible.” He waited again, and then added in a painfully quiet voice, “I swear to you, you have no reason to be afraid of me.”

Laurent sat, lifting an arrogant brow. “Do I seem afraid?”

Damen exhaled slowly. “There is so much you don’t know. So much that has happened between then and now.” He looked at Laurent. “Do you even question it?” he asked. “Do you even wonder how we came to be?”

“No,” Laurent said. “Whatever lapse of judgment I went through is over now. That is what matters. That and learning all that I can so I can rule properly.”

“You are an excellent ruler,” Damen insisted. “And you are intelligent enough that I don’t need to tell you that no one unites two enemy kingdoms because of a lapse of judgment.”

Laurent looked out to the garden, his eyes on everything but Damen as he spoke. “Where is my uncle?” And Damen saw the unspoken question there. _How did I beat him?_

Laurent was not a child who needed babying. He never had, and Damen knew that he would not appreciate it now. The best way to go about this was to simply speak.

“Your uncle is dead.”

Laurent froze. Shock seized his body, Damen saw it in the stiffening of his back, the tensing in his
shoulders. He also saw the way Laurent forced himself to react. To pull his eyes away from the tree he had been looking at and to place them on Damen.

“Dead.”

“Yes,” Damen said. His voice was strong. He had no lost love for that man, his only regret was that he did not put him into the ground himself. He knew Laurent, and he saw the way his mind was racing, working through the impossibilities of it all. To have the person who always seemed to be a step ahead, the only person able to keep up with him, his twisted mind and razor sharp tongue, gone.

“Laurent-“

“How?” Laurent said simply. His face held no inflection. His thoughts were something else, of that Damen was sure.

“There was a trial,” Damen said. He closed his eyes, his mind going back. He never thought about those terrible few days. The uncertain journey, but the immediate decision. The choice Damen had made when he stepped into Ios was painful, because he knew what he was giving up. Who he was giving up. Beyond that, trading himself for Laurent was one of the most instinctive things he had ever done.

Damen’s thoughts began to wander towards the Kingsmeet, and rage simmered low in his veins. He opened his eyes and looked back at Laurent, knowing that that was the only thing that would tamper down the anger and bring him back to himself.

“It was your trial,” Damen continued. “You were-“ Damen stopped, shook his head. It was all so complicated. “This is not something that can be explained in clipped sentences. This is a whole story in itself.”

“I am not asking for a story,” Laurent said. “I am asking to know how my uncle died.”

“You were going to be killed,” Damen forced out. “You were being falsely accused of treason against Vere.” Laughter left Laurent in a bitter breath. “Guion was meant to testify-“

“Why would Guion-“ Laurent started, cutting himself off and starting over. “Who trusted Guion?”

“It was a joint decision,” Damen muttered. “He was colluding with your uncle, who was in contact with my brother.”

“Guion was the ambassador to Akielos,” Laurent said.

“Yes,” Damen agreed. He rubbed his face with his hands. He had not thought about this for a long time. He had not needed to.

“I’m sure you remember what your uncle wanted,” Damen said, meaning Vere. “He wanted Akielos as well, and he was fooling my brother to get it.” Damen paused. Kastor was never clever enough to go up against either of them.

“Your uncle promised Kastor men to take Ios and to rid of me in exchange for…” This was going to come up every now and then, at least until everything with Laurent was sorted. He had to get used to this. “In exchange for myself, being sent to you.”

Damen had mentioned this to Laurent before. He looked at him now, waiting for some form of reaction but received nothing. Nothing but a flat mouth and an impatient stare.
“Guion knew of this,” Damen continued. “And when he had you captured,” there was so much he had to explain to Laurent, “he had you put in the cells of Fortaine with Govart.”

Laurent raised his chin, something new in his eyes. “I killed him.”

Damen’s heart began to pound, he felt each thump inside his chest as his back straightened, his mind racing. He had not told Laurent that.

“You remember?” Damen asked.

But Laurent’s face pinched. “Jord told me this.”

Damen felt his heart rate slow down, his body nearly sagging. No. Laurent didn’t remember.

“You did,” Damen said, ignoring the gnawing feeling in his chest. Now was not the time to focus on that. “Miraculously. You have a scar to show for it,” he said, motioning to Laurent’s shoulder. Laurent touched the spot absently, but he said nothing. “Somehow you ended up with Guion inside your cell, and you only agreed to let him out in exchanged for his testimony against your uncle.”

“I’m sure he remained loyal,” Laurent said dryly.

Damen smiled softly. “When that failed, his wife Loyse who you brought testified, though her testimony did not do much either. It was Paschal who brought your uncle’s demise.”

Laurent looked at Damen silently. “Paschal.”

Damen nodded. He knew it was odd to imagine. Paschal was as loyal as they came, but he had been around for all of Laurent’s life, silently watching, observing. He was the quiet bystander, the one no one assumed would be what brought everything to a head.

“He had a letter,” Damen said. “It was stolen from Govart and brought to him, he had been holding on to it for safekeeping. Essentially, it incriminated your uncle for- your father’s death.”

Laurent reacted at that, in minute ways that you wouldn’t notice if you were not Damen, and were not so in tune with Laurent. In the widening of his eyes, the slight parting of his lips. Damen remembered seeing Laurent react a similar way, in his trial when this exact news was revealed, and sadness ached inside Damen because memories or not, Laurent reacted the same way: for all of his uncle’s horrors, Laurent did not believe he would actually murder his own brother.

After a stretch of silence, “who killed him?”

“A soldier,” Damen replied. “At your command. He was beheaded, and his body was splayed on the city gates.”

Laurent said nothing. He was still looking at Damen, but Damen looked away. This was a private moment for Laurent, one he knew Laurent would generally allow Damen to be a part of, but not now, and Damen would respect that.

“The letter,” Laurent eventually said, the unspoken question behind it.

“Paschal has it,” Damen replied. “It was his brother’s, we allowed him to have it. You can ask him for it.”

Another period of silence, where Damen and Laurent both looked out to the sky, a stretch of stars above them, blanketing them. Damen listened to the soothing sound of crickets, focusing only on that
until Laurent spoke.

“You said slavery was abolished.”

Damen looked back at him. “It is. You helped in that.” It was one of the greatest things they had done together. “For a little over a year now. There are still people trading in slavery, but we always find out about it in the end, and put a stop to it.”

Laurent’s eyes scrolled down Damen, settling on his cuff, a sour expression on his face. He did not acknowledge his own. “You are a slave culture. I find it very hard to believe you willingly gave up your barbaric practices.”

“Slavery is wrong,” Damen said simply. “In every sense of the word. I know that now.”

“Now,” Laurent repeated. “What, didn’t enjoy it yourself?”

Damen looked at the spot between them on the bench. Laurent had said something similar to him once, at an inn in Nesson. He was just as right now as he was then.

“You told me it’s not a subject for discussion,” Damen said. “You’re right.”

Laurent just looked at him, long enough that Damen felt himself squirm.

“The pet system is still intact,” Damen offered. “Though it is not like it once was.”

Laurent lifted a brow. “And how was it once?”

“Debaucheries,” Damen said. “Lecherous. Under contract or not, no one in our kingdom will be demoralized like that again. What they choose to do in private is up to them.”

Laurent was squinting at Damen, and though he looked like something was weighing on his mind, Damen saw the moment something else took his thoughts, his eyes flickering before he could stifle the reaction.

“What?” Damen asked. When Laurent ignored him, Damen spoke again. “Laurent, what? If you never ask questions you will get nowhere.”

Laurent looked at Damen like he was something he could not manage to scrape off the bottom of his boot. When Damen continued to look at him insistently, Laurent spoke, reluctantly.

“I was wondering about someone,” he said. “Which is not your business. I can find him on my own.”

It only took a second for Damen to comprehend, and he felt as sadness welled inside him. In that moment Damen was a coward, because he knew he had to face this, but he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to face the things he didn’t want to face.

But he would be there for Laurent, even if Laurent did not want him to.

“I’m sorry,” Damen said quietly, wishing it was all he would have to say and knowing it was not. Laurent looked at him skeptically, and Damen continued, his voice softer. “Nicaise is dead.”

Damen would have not caught his reaction, but Laurent’s hands had been on his lap, which was why he heard the sound they made as they fell to the stone bench. He did nothing after that, showed nothing after that, very carefully repressing any and all reactions. His face was white.
“Laurent-“

“Did I ask for your sympathy?” Laurent snapped, still looking only ahead. His shoulders were still. 

“No,” Damen said. “But I know what Nicaise was to you. He-“

“You are the last person I will discuss this with,” Laurent said, his voice far too loud. Damen looked down and saw his fingers gripping the edge. “Get out of my face.”

Damen knew when to try, and knew when to concede. Now was not the time to fight Laurent on anything.

“Where would you like me to sleep?” he asked. He was under no illusion that they would share a room, he was mainly asking so Laurent would know where he would be.

“A crypt,” Laurent replied.

Damen exhaled, speaking tentatively, one last thing before he left. “I will inform you of everything you need to know, and give you the distance you require while doing it, but eventually we are going to have to talk. Seriously talk, about all the things you cannot remember.” In truth, Damen had no idea if that would make any difference. Speaking of things were not the same as living them, but he would try anything. Anything to put other thoughts into Laurent’s head about him, other than the ones that were there when Laurent opened his eyes that morning.

He stood up from the bench, looking at Laurent. “When you are ready,” he said, “I’ll be here waiting for you,” and with that he turned and left Laurent alone.

The first thing Damen did the next morning was seek out Nikandros. He needed someone he could speak to, someone to confide in over this, and he knew Nikandros would offer objective opinions and thoughts.

He made his way to the room he knew well and waited as the guards knocked, the doors opening immediately to Nikandros, a look of surprise followed by a smile.

“Exalted,” he said, moving aside so Damen could walk in.

“There’s no need for that right now,” Damen said tiredly, walking up to one of the reclining couches and sitting down. His elbows were on his knees, his ha face in his hands. He heard the door close, and Nikandros stepping towards him.

“Wine?” Nikandros asked.

“It’s early,” Damen replied, though it didn’t feel too early for that. Maybe what he needed was to lose himself in wine.

Nikandros sat across from him. He waited for Damen to speak first as he always did, and when Damen said nothing, he did.

“Damen?”

Damen remembered when he and Nikandros were boys. Skipping out on lessons so they could run around the palace in mischief. Staying in the training arena longer than they had to, throwing spears and working themselves to exhaustion with wooden practice swords. Nikandros was the first person
Damen had wrestled, all the times they had tumbled around together as boys. They had tried the pleasure drug *chalis* together for the first time at sixteen.

Damen pushed his hands into his hair. “It’s bad.”

Nikandros was looking at him carefully. “What?”

When Damen was silent, Nikandros tried again. “I’m sure whatever is troubling you,” Nikandros said, with the private smile that only close friends could use. “Is nothing that Laurent can’t take care of.”

Each breath hurt inside Damen’s chest. He looked up at Nikandros, still slumped over in his spot, and all traces of amusement left Nikandros’ face as their eyes met.

“He doesn’t remember me,” Damen heard himself say, his voice hollow. “There was an accident. He hit his head. He was fine, and then he was not, and he-” Damen’s eyes squeezed shut. “*He doesn’t remember me.*”

Nikandros’ mouth gaped. It was silent. Damen heard him breath out slowly. He didn’t open his eyes.

“Last night?” he asked, referring to dinner. To his brief conversation with Laurent.

“No.”

“He responded accordingly—”

“He’s not an idiot, Nikandros,” Damen said. “He knows how to lie and to say what he needs to. You know better than many.”

Nikandros was hunched forward as well, his own wrists dangling between his knees. They were not sitting as king and kyros.

“Perhaps I *should* get the wine,” Nikandros muttered. Damen tried to smile.

“What does he remember?” Nikandros asked.

“That I killed his brother,” Damen replied. He knew that wasn’t what Nikandros meant. He knew he was asking of politics, the kingdom, the previous years. All the important things. But none of that was important if Laurent didn’t remember the one thing that really mattered.

“It’s not like it was when you fist met him,” Damen said. “He hated me then, but we had history.” Strategizing over maps for long hours into the night. Moments in the Vaskian mountains. Ravenel. Damen’s body ached with their history. “In his mind now, we have nothing.”

“What does Paschal say?” Nikandros asked.

“He doesn’t,” Damen answered. “We wait.”

Nikandros nodded. “What can I do?”

“Be the friend that you have been all these years,” Damen said.

Nikandros nodded again, placing his hands on the couch and pushing himself up. “Come,” he said. “Let’s train.”

So Damen went with him, because Nikandros knew what Damen needed. It was typical for Damen
to channel his anger into physicality. Perhaps going a few rounds with someone who could keep up with him would help.

It did not help. Exerting himself may have taken Damen’s mind off things for the time being, all of his focus on the swing of his sword and the quick movements of his body, but when he was handing his sword off to a servant and wiping his face down, the unsteadiness of his limbs was not the only pressure he felt.

Damen was walking out of the baths, a fresh chiton on, his hair still slightly damp. He was making his way to the council room where he was meant to go over certain documents that required his signature when he saw Laurent, stepping out of a doorway. Damen’s heart soared as soon as he saw him, and he ignored his trepidation as he walked up to him.

“Hello,” Damen said, some vulnerable part of him hoping a new day would bring on change, but the indifference in Laurent’s face was enough to extinguish it. He watched as Damen approach wordlessly, his reluctance to stand there and wait for him visible.

There was no one around them. Damen looked to see where Laurent had come out of and saw that it was the library.

“Do you like it?” Damen asked. To Laurent, this would be the first time he was seeing it. It had three levels, winding steps, and large windows, letting sunlight in. It was well stocked in both Veretian and Akielon books, there was even a small section with Patran and Vaskian tales. Laurent spent much of his time there, it didn’t surprise Damen that it was one of the first places he sought out.

“Why do you ask?” Laurent said stiffly.

“Because I know how much you love to read,” Damen said. Before he could say anything more, he heard a commotion from around the hall. The sounds of mumbled threats and curses, feet loudly stepping and stopping. They looked at each other inquisitively before stepping around the corner.

Damen saw a group of soldiers, both in chitons and Laurent’s livery. Two men were dragging forward a young boy, somewhere around the age of fifteen Damen would guess, the others walking behind them. The boy was dirty, both from what was visibly a lack of bathing and from the smudges on his clothing. He was struggling, putting up a fight, yanking on the guard’s hold which only became stronger.

“What is this?” Laurent said. His voice rang out clear and strong throughout the large hall.

They all stopped, turning swiftly and freezing when they saw Damen and Laurent, a chorused murmur of, “Your Highness” and, “Exalted” rang out. The boy stopped struggling.

No one spoke for a few moments, prompting Laurent to step forward. “Should I repeat myself?”

“Apologies, Your Highness,” one of the Akielon soldiers said. “We found this one,” he said, nudging the boy in the shoulder, “behind the palace, rummaging through the food supply. He would not speak.”

“And what were you doing with him?” Damen asked.

“We were taking him to the cells,” another guard said. “We intended to take him to the throne room,
but the guard manning the doors said neither king was there—"

“We are here now,” Laurent said. And then, “release the boy.”

Both guards let go, causing the boy to stumble forward. He regained his footing quickly but proceeded to prostrate himself before them, his face downward.

“Rise.”

The boy stayed as he was for a moment, and it was after a few breaths that he rose from the ground slowly.

“What were you doing?” Damen asked. He kept his voice deliberately calm. “Speak freely.”

“Exalted,” the boy said. “There is no explanation—“

“There is always an explanation,” Laurent said.

“Your Highness,” The boy dipped his head. He was silent again. Damen waited for him to speak when he was ready, but they were only faced with silence. Just as Damen thought to order the guards away to calm the boy, Laurent took a step forward.

“What is your name?” Laurent asked. His voice had pitched lower, resembling the tone he used when his horse would become rowdy. Damen hadn’t heard him speak so softly since before the previous morning.

“Amis, Your Highness.”

“What does your father do, Amis?”

Amis’ eyes were averted as he spoke. “He worked as a blacksmith for all of my life, for as long as I can remember. He no longer does. I don’t know why, my parents don’t speak around my sisters and I.”

Damen looked at Laurent, who was looking at the boy. He had a distant look on his face. He looked at no one but Amis.

“How old are you and your sisters?” Damen asked.

“I am fourteen, Exalted,” he said. “My sisters are three, seven and ten.”

Damen felt something soften inside him. He looked away, focusing on a tapestry hanging on the opposite wall, its colors and designs a strong standout. He exhaled slowly, his mind working fast. He knew what his father would do. Stealing was something Theomedes would never tolerate under any circumstance, but Damen had long ago decided that he did not want to be his father’s kind of king. He looked at the person who, unwittingly, had taught him that.

“You will work in the kitchens for two weeks,” Damen said. “To aid the palace and compensate for what you took. You will take enough at the end of each day to put food on your family’s table. When the two weeks are over, we will meet with your father and see what he can offer the palace.”

Damen looked at the guards after he spoke, but they were too well trained to show any personal reaction to his decree. Amis sputtered, raising his hands before lowering them back, looking down between his feet.

“Exalted,” he said, his voice unsteady. “I was wrong. My mother and father raised me better than
that. I do not deserve-

“Our verdict is clear.”

“Have him taken to the baths,” Laurent said to the guard standing closest to Amis. His voice was irrefutable. “And then the kitchen. He will begin today.”

“Your Highness.”

Damen watched as the guards took the boy down the left hall which he knew led to the baths, their grip looser now. He waited until they were out of sight before turning back to Laurent, who was looking at him.

Damen waited for Laurent to say what was on his mind, but he remained silent.

“Did you wish to do something else?” Damen asked.

Laurent was silent for another beat before crossing his arms. “He was Veretian.”

“And?” Damen said uncertainly.

Laurent shook his head, though it was clearly not nothing. “Did you want something before they came?”

“No,” Damen said. “I was just-“ What could he say? I was just coming to be with you?

“I have to go to the council room,” Damen said instead. “There is a matter than needs my attention. Would you like to come with me? You can speak with Herode.”

“I have elsewhere I need to be,” Laurent replied ambiguously. “You have my permission to speak to him about my situation.” And then he was walking the opposite direction, leaving Damen alone in the hall.
Damen’s brows were pinched as he worked the laces through the eyelets on Laurent’s sleeve, making his way slowly down to Laurent’s wrist. This jacket was far more complicatedly laced than most of his clothing.

The side of his mouth twisted as he looped one of the laces, his fingers feeling too large and clumsy for the intricacy. Just as he made a small sound of protest, he felt Laurent’s thumb brush the furrowed spot between his eyebrows. Damen glanced up, his fingers immediately rendering useless when he saw the fond way Laurent was looking at him.

“You would think after two years,” Laurent said, “that you would get better at this.”

Damen’s lips curved upwards, his thumb playfully digging into Laurent’s palm. “I have gotten better,” he replied. “This however,” he said, looping the last of the laces in. “Is just as needlessly complicated as it was two years ago.”

Damen stood up from the couch and offered Laurent his hand, pulling up him with him. Laurent righted his jacket as Damen walked to the mirror at the side of their room, the edges curving along the wall. He picked his long red cape up from the chair it was draped across and looked around himself for his golden lion pin, and saw Laurent approaching him with pin in hand.

“Let me,” Laurent said, turning Damen around so he was looking at their reflection. He took the red cape from Damen’s hands and brought it around Damen’s shoulders, adjusting its angles and fastening the pin on his right side. It was comical how quick it took Laurent to dress Damen in comparison to the near hour its had taken Damen to do for him. Laurent pulled his hands away, ghosting a kiss on the curve of muscle by the pin before reaching for the laurels Damen typically wore, placing it on Damen’s curls.

They were looking in the mirror, each of them taking the other it, the vision that they created.

“This is one of your fancier jackets,” Damen said, running his hand along the front.

Laurent smiled, taking Damen’s hand and turning to him. “This is our first portrait together,” he said. “Should I have worn a chiton instead?”

Whatever look spread on Damen’s face was enough to widen Laurent’s grin. “Absolutely not,” he laughed, reaching for his circlet. Damen took it from his hands and place it on his hair, gold amongst gold, kissing his forehead after.

“Come,” Damen said, tugging on Laurent’s arm and making for the door. “The artist waits.”

The days continued to pass, each one proving uneventful. Laurent and Damianos continued to attend the dinners together with the entirety of the palace, and Laurent spent much of his time brushing up on Akielon affairs, history and any and all facts he could gather. He would occasionally hit a wall, both on his own or in conversation, and would reluctantly have to turn to Damianos for answers.

Laurent sparred with Jord every day. It felt good to fight again, to work his muscles that often felt so locked up. These days he felt like there was so much inside him that he needed to release, and Jord was capable, efficient, and did not ask questions.

Laurent had yet to speak with anyone about his situation extensively. He felt no need, and saw no benefit, until now. Laurent had gone to see Herode, primarily to receive an update on matters of
state, and to have a run-through on the things that he needed to be informed of. Herode remained silent the entire conversation in regards to Laurent’s memory, but Laurent knew the man well, and he knew that he was holding his tongue.

Eventually Laurent set his papers down, sighing as he placed one hand on top of the other. “If you have something you would like to tell me,” Laurent said, with as much patience as he could muster. “I would prefer you simply spoke. You are not on my council so you can hide your opinions and stare at me blankly.”

“Your Highness,” Herode said. “I do not mean to impose with my thoughts.”

Laurent blew out another breath, though he tampered down his irritation. “It is no imposition,” Laurent said. “You are on my council for a purpose. I appreciate your input.”

Herode nodded, clearing his throat. He looked older, warier than Laurent remembered, but that of course would be expected.

“I was simply wondering how you were coping,” Herode said, in his gentle voice.

“Coping,” Laurent repeated.

“Yes,” Herode said. “With…” He did not finish his sentence, just motioned around with his hands.

Coping. That was an interesting word choice. Laurent settled himself into his chair and rubbed his chin, looking at Herode.

“It has been a lot,” Laurent admitted. “I’m still trying to learn all that I’ve missed, and everything there is to know about the country I have combined mine with.”

Herode nodded understandingly. “I am here for any questions, of course.” He hesitated for a moment, visibly struggling with if he should speak of not, and was prompted by the rise of Laurent’s brows.

“If I may,” Herode said. “How are you faring with King Damianos?”

Laurent pursed his lips, tapping his fingers on the table. He was slow to respond, more so because he did not know how to respond. Herode waited patiently.

“I am doing my duty,” Laurent said, eventually.

“And doing it well,” Herode replied. “However, I more so meant-“

“I know what you meant.”

Laurent lifted a fist to his mouth, tapping his thumb against his fingers.

“What response are you expecting?” Laurent asked. “To hear that I have invited him back into my bed?”

Herode blanched, his frail face twisting. He spoke quickly. “That is hardly anyone else’s business, Your Highness, and not at all what I was insinuating. I was only wondering if you have spoken with him on matters outside of Vere and Akielos. If you have attempted to perhaps reconcile.”

Laurent felt his eyes narrow into slits, the tapping of his fingers ceasing immediately. “He murdered my family,” Laurent said, as calmly as he could manage, which was not that calm at all. “I don’t care how many people I see him play nice with. There is nothing to reconcile.”
Herode lowered his head, averting his eyes as he spoke. “I know that, Your Highness,” he said softly. “And I remember those years, all too well.”

“I also remember when he was brought to Arles,” he continued. “I remember the way you spoke of him, the way you acted around him, much like now.” He stopped speaking then, whether it was to balk at his own daring as Laurent was or to weigh his next words, Laurent was not sure. He looked off into the distance for a beat before going on.

“I did not see you for a while after you left the palace. Either of you. But when I did, things were different. Undoubtedly different.” He had a look on his face that Laurent could not decipher. “And then of course, the things you each said at your trial...”

“I know of my trial,” Laurent cut off. Guion, Paschal, his uncle. Laurent had heard it all already, though he didn’t see how any of that had to do with him and Damianos.

“Oh,” Herode said, after a surprised pause. “Damianos told you about-“

“Was there a point to this?” Laurent asked.

“Your Highness,” Herode began. Laurent could hear the trepidation in his voice. “I could not imagine the reservations you must be feeling, and though it is likely nothing I say will have effect, please allow me to say this: I have sworn my life to the crown, to advise as best as I can. You have known me for years, since the days of your father, mother and brother. Damianos has surprised you in in the past-“

Laurent looked away, taking it upon himself to deem this conversation over. Herode was good, honest and loyal. He always had been, and for that, Laurent would be willing to listen to his inquiries, but there was only so much he would tolerate.

“If you’re finished,” Laurent said, standing from the table. He waited for Herode to respond or to add further comment, and when all he received was a perfunctory, “Your Highness,” Laurent took his leave.

The soldiers were training in the northern courtyard. The sun had just begun to dip beyond the horizon, making the air a bit cooler and a bit better for vigorous bodywork. Laurent had taken to watching them over the week, observing his guard and deciding with a fresh mind if they were worthy of the position. He was slowly retaining all the new names.

Enguerran captained the men well, giving out suitable drills and maneuvers, receiving proper actions in return. If the men fell short, he knew where to tweak, and never hesitated to do so. Laurent spoke with him multiple times, and Enguerran was none the wiser.

Huet and Lazar excelled at archery, each of them hitting the mark effortlessly with a bow, time and time again. Rochert was creative with knives. Aktis and Lydos had impeccable aim and often practiced with spear throwing. Pallas shone in most areas, and Jord was nearly superior at sword fighting. Nikandros was best in hand to hand combat.

Laurent had formed an exemplary Prince’s Guard at the age of fifteen, alone, with the Regent’s Guard as his enemy and little to no military experience of his own. Laurent knew he could trust his instincts when it came to his men, and he knew early on that he was confident with his King’s Guard. A group of men with a vast array of capabilities, ones they were not limited to, they each simply excelled at something in particular.
Laurent felt a heavy presence near him, a large shadow falling beside him. Laurent did not need to look to know who it was, the instinctual aversion was enough.

“What do you think of them?” Damianos asked.

Laurent watched as Pallas and Lazar sparred easily, nothing competitive about it, but each of their abilities showing through in the effervescent movement of their bodies. “They are adequate.”

Laurent heard a soft breath at that, and he turned his head to see the side of Damianos’ lips quirked. Laurent looked at him skeptically, but Damianos simply shook his head.

“Would you like to spar?” Damianos asked.

Whatever ease Laurent may have felt from the synchronies sounds of swords clashing, and the view of his men becoming a stronger force by the second, it was gone, dispensed, as anger filled him slowly. Laurent could feel his good mood slip away form him, something stronger taking form.

He turned to Damianos slowly, who was shaking his head the moment Laurent raised his head to look him in the eyes.

“I didn’t mean with me,” he said, his hands raised before him. “Simply with one of our men so you can immerse yourself back into their style.”

Irritation was still flowing through Laurent’s veins, and he forced himself to face the field again before he lashed out uncontrollably. There were people around. They were simply two kings in conversation.

“Where were you coming from?” Laurent asked in an attempt to divert his mind. He was pleased with himself at how he managed to keep his voice calm and controlled.

“The chamberlain,” Damianos said. “And the palace coordinator.”

It was not what Laurent had been expecting, and the shock of it caused him to turn to Damianos in confusion. Damianos was already looking at him.

“Are you arranging something?” Laurent asked, his irritation slightly returning at the fact of Damianos making such decisions without him, though that was not surprising.

“No,” Damianos replied. “Cancelling. We were meant to hold a celebration next week. A Harvest Festival for the new season.” Laurent’s brows pinched, causing Damianos to smile. “It’s an Akielon tradition.”

“I see,” Laurent said. “And why are you cancelling it?” Traditions were important, he knew this. They bound the common folk, gave them something to talk about. To look forward to.

Damianos looked away from Laurent and onto the training yard. “Vaskian delegates may be coming to the palace,” he said. “The timing is not right.”

Laurent looked at him oddly. “And they cannot partake in a feast?”

“The timing is not right,” Damianos repeated. Laurent didn’t push it. It was not like he cared much for Akielon traditions regardless. He looked out onto the yard as well, watching as a nameless soldier offered another one his hand, pulling him up from where he had fallen. It was odd to see his men display such comradery, with Akielons no less. Laurent let his eyes wander, watching as he saw similar displays of benevolence around him.
As peculiar as the sight of it was, it was not the first time Laurent had taken notice of such things. Since the morning he had woken up to this new reality, he had seen interactions he had never expected to see. Akielon and Veretian children, sharing toys and playing together. Akielons wearing tightly laced Veretian clothing, while Veretians sported loose fitting, revealing chitons. He had even seen foods he did not recognize at dinners, served from the same platters that held Veretian delicacies that he could remember eating since he was a child.

It was unexplainable, jarring, to feel as if Laurent had entered a universe in which all he knew had been turned on its head. For all of Laurent’s life, he had known Akielos as the enemy, a simple fact which had crested when Laurent was thirteen and the nations had gone to war. Things had been as tense as ever after the years following, whispers of the words prince-killer being heard all around the palace, only hushed when Laurent approached. Now, said people were living under a kingdom with the same man who had killed their prince, taken their lands, and yet they smiled when they saw him as if he had hung the moon. The worst of it all was that they acted as if Laurent should as well.

“What are you thinking?” Laurent heard.

Laurent glanced at Damianos from the corner of his eye, sizing him up. “Is that your business?”

Damianos sighed, turning to he was looking at Laurent, not just glancing at him. “It used to be. You used to share all of your thoughts with me.”

This. This was what was hardest for Laurent to fathom. This was what Laurent was absolutely sick of hearing. He knew it was not something he could ignore forever, the very specific fact that he had quite literally united himself with his enemy, but he was not ready.

He didn’t know when he would be ready.

“Let me ask you,” Laurent said, restraining his voice from rising. “In this other world which you so love to remind me of, how long exactly did it take before I made a fool of myself?”

Damianos’ eyes widened, but he turned his face quickly after, hiding his expression from Laurent.

“I’m serious,” Laurent said. “How long was it before I disgraced my entire family?”

“Stop,” Damianos said.

“Answer me.” Because for all of Laurent’s barbed tones and remarks, it was an answer he genuinely wanted.

Damianos was silent for a minutes, which turned into two. Laurent felt his patience begin to lessen, crossing his arms until Damianos looked at him.

“You hated me at first,” he said. “I hated you at first. You treated me with cruelty and I did not treat you with the respect you deserve, but things changed. I told you, things changed between us.”

Laurent raised a hand to his face, rubbing his forehead, blowing out a breath. “That is not an answer to my question.”

“I don’t know,” Damianos said back. He sounded exasperated. “We didn’t—” He reconsidered his words. “We learned things about each other when we left for the border. We were forced to spend time together, to work together, and we…” he shrugged, seemingly at a loss for words.

Laurent didn’t respond, and Damianos seemed to take that as something else, because he continued on.
“We are the same people now that we were then,” he said. “That doesn’t have to be something you don’t understand. We can-“

“Your Highness.”

Damianos stopped mid sentence, and the both of them jolted, turning towards the source of the voice. Jord was standing before them. He had an unplaceable look on his face, his eyes darting back and fourth between them.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It can wait.”

“It’s fine, Jord,” Laurent said, looking to Damianos. “We’re done here.”

Laurent was in his chambers, just preparing for dinner when there was a knock on the door. It was relatively early, too soon for the servants to come light the candles.

He stepped up to the door, reaching out and pulling it open. A man was standing there, one Laurent didn’t recognize, his dark hair long and held back by leather straps. He had something large in his hands, something Laurent could not place because it was wrapped in a white sheet.

“Your Highness,” the man said pleasantly, kneeling, and Laurent plastered a smile on his face to hide his skepticism. “It is finished.”

Laurent looked down at the item in the man’s hands, keeping his expression neutral. “So soon?” he said daringly.

“I have set aside all other projects,” he responded. “There is no higher honor than creating work for my kings.”

Kings, plural. Laurent looked back at the sheet, his mind racing with what this could be. The man seemed pleased enough with himself.

“Let’s see it, then.”

It was angled oddly in his hands, in a way that he would be able to carry it through the palace from wherever he had come from. He straightened it now, propping the bottom of it on the ground and in one swoop, drew the sheet off.

Laurent looked. And looked.

A portrait. A large painting, possibly five feet long and three feet wide. It was enclosed in a deep mahogany frame, designs and carvings etched in along the border. The base was sturdy and well made, Laurent could tell just from looking at it. He had seen similarly made frames hanging throughout the long, winding halls of Arles. The craftsmanship however, was not the problem. The beautiful, intricate frame was not what caused Laurent to start, and then mindfully control himself. It was its contents.

Damianos.

Laurent and Damianos to be exact, standing side by side. Laurent was wearing his standard high necked, tightly laced jacket, though the coloring of his outfit was far lighter than the tones he generally wore. Laurent couldn’t remember the last time he has seen himself in something that did not look so harsh against his fair skin.
Damianos wore his usual white chiton, but this one was trimmed in gold, a deep, blood red cape pooling down his back. There was a gold lion’s pin fastened to one shoulder, something Lauren had seen him wear before. Their outfits were not what caught Laurent’s eye either.

They each had an arm around each other, tight enough that you could see the way the fabric of their clothes was strained from their fingers. They stood so close, not a centimeter of space between their bodies. Laurent looked small beside him, the curves of Damianos’ bicep visible as his arm wound around Laurent’s waist.

Unlike most portraits, royal or not, they were not looking forward, towards the artist, or the person who would be viewing the painting. Laurent had seen multiple paintings of his father Aleron and his mother Hennike, and his grandparents before them. Each of them sporting a similar look on their face, distant, regal, though he recalled a certain painting where his mother had a ghost of a smile on her face, something mischievous in her blue eyes.

This portrait was different. Noticeably different. Laurent and Damianos were not looking forward, nor were their gazes impassive. They were looking at each other, their eyes locked, a soft look, so foreign to Laurent, twinned on their faces. Each of their lips were slightly lifted as if they were sharing some joke that only they were privy to.

The background was dark, the brush strokes having muddled the paint so it was a blur of darkness, making the two people in the painting the focal point when someone looked. Laurent raised his eyes slowly, looking at the artist who was looking at him expectantly.

“Have you,” Laurent said, considering his next words. “Taken certain liberties?”

He said the words without bite, keeping any and all emotions he was feeling below the surface. The artist blinked at Laurent, looking down at the painting and then back up at him.

“Certainly not, Your Highness. I followed your specific instruction: to keep the recreation authentic. To create what I saw.”

Laurent clamped his mouth shut, looking back down at the two figures in front of him, some desperate attempt to hide his face from this stranger.

“Yes,” Laurent said eventually, smiling at the artist. “Of course. Damianos and I were thinking of commissioning another portrait, I must have gotten our vision for the two confused.”

The man smiled back, the relief of not making a mistake clear on his face. “I am thrilled to hear that, Your Highness. I would love nothing more than to do more for you and King Damianos in the future.” He dipped his head once. “Please do notify me when the two of you would like my services again.”

Laurent kept the smile on his face, nodding his head as the artist left, his guards shutting the door behind him.
Chapter 7

The sound of swords, clashing, clanging. Metal scraping and echoing off the walls, reverberating inside Damen’s chest. The sound was just as much of a thrill as the action, something Damen had always enjoyed, almost as much as the sweet feeling of victory as Damen would press the tip of his sword to his opponent’s chest, waiting for them to yield.

Damen made a quick move to the left, just missing the rapid strike of Laurent’s sword, coming straight for his midsection. Laurent barely gave him time to recover before striking again, smiling wickedly as Damen intercepted the swipe and made a move of his own, aiming for Laurent’s neck now.

They moved like this, fluidly, easily, dancing around each other in circles as they wielded their swords effortlessly like they were extensions of their arms. Laurent still fought as graciously and viciously as ever, using his secret Veretian tricks but smothering each blow with his own graceful style.

“We have places to be,” Laurent said breathlessly, speaking over the heavy sound of his sword impacting Damen’s. He ducked his head, dodging Damen’s blow and coming back stronger. “How long do you plan on carrying this out?”

“You could always yield, if I’m tiring you out,” Damen replied, returning with three quick strikes.

Laurent grinned, his eyes as wild and alive as his smile as he pivoted his body, throwing all of his weight into the hit.

“I don’t think so, lover,” Laurent said, just as he swung his leg out, sweeping it against Damen’s and throwing him off balance enough to give him a solid push on the chest.

Damen was already breathless before he hit the ground from the exertion of the fight, and the sight of Laurent lowering himself down and throwing a leg over Damen did nothing to stop it.

“You still fight like a snake,” Damen said, his sword long forgotten beside him as he brought his hands to Laurent’s hips.

Laurent’s sword was pointed at Damen’s pectoral muscle, the tip lightly pressed into his body as he twisted it in small circles, not nearly hard enough to puncture skin. “You used to fight better.”

Damen’s chest was rising and falling, he could see it in the way Laurent’s sword was moving against him. He felt the press of Laurent’s weight against him, his chest equally moving. His cheeks were flushed, his hair in slight disarray.

“I’ve grown distracted,” Damen said. Laurent quirked a brow as Damen’s fingers tightened around his sides, and Damen distantly heard the clang of Laurent’s sword hitting the ground by his head before Laurent’s hands were balanced on either side of him, taking Damen’s lips in his.

Dinner than night was stiff, uncomfortable, as it had been each night. Unlike the others however, Damen and Laurent had walked in together. Damen had gone to Laurent’s rooms—what was really their rooms—and knocked hesitantly, preparing himself for Laurent’s disdain and sharp tongue.

The door had opened eventually, Laurent standing there with his arm outstretched, gripping the handle. The top of his jacket was still unlaced by the throat, his collarbone bare and on display. Damen’s eyes lingered on the skin for a moment too long before dragging them up to Laurent’s eyes,
which were on Damen, displeased.

“What,” Laurent said flatly. He was still holding the handle, like he was ready to shut the door in Damen’s face.

Damen inhaled slowly, trying to remind himself that it wouldn’t always be like this. That this was temporary. Probably.

“Dinner,” Damen said.

Laurent’s eyes went flat as well. “Are we not fasting today?”

Damen took a small step forward, trying to pretend like he didn’t notice the step back Laurent took. “We cannot keep going separately,” Damen said. “It looks bad.”

“Looks bad for who?”

“For us,” Damen said. “The kingdom.” Kingdom, singular, because that was what Akielos are Vere were now. Something Laurent needed to be reminded of.

Laurent let go of the door and turned around, walking into the room and leaving Damen in the doorway. “I’m perfectly capable of keeping appearances stable,” Laurent said, lacing the rest of his jacket quickly. “I have been doing so just fine.”

“Then you should have no problem going in with me,” Damen replied.

Damen saw Laurent’s shoulders tense, then relax as he exhaled audibly. A second passed, and then he turned, a smile far too big to be authentic on his face.

“Come.”

They sat now, side by side at the head as they always did. Nikandros was at his usual seat adjacent to Damen, Vannes across from him. She occasionally contributed to the conversation, tossing a sly comment or grin in here and there.

Laurent was handling himself as perfectly as ever, smiling at the right people and holding discussions effortlessly. He had caught himself up on all political affairs, though Damen played to part in that. Laurent had never come to him for anything, so Damen could only assume that Herode had been instrumental.

Damen could not stop looking at him. He kept trying to pull his eyes away, especially since Laurent was very purposefully avoiding looking back at Damen, but he was helpless. It felt unnatural to be so close to Laurent and to not feel absorbed by his beauty.

Laurent was deep in conversation with a man of the court, though Damen didn’t have the slightest clue as to what they were discussing, which was unwise considering he could be pulled into the conversation at any moment. Damen was too distracted by the strand of hair pushed behind Laurent’s ear, the line of his jaw.

“Damen.”

It was said in hushed tones, the voice low and slightly gruff. Damen allowed himself a few more seconds to look before turning reluctantly to Nikandros.

“This cannot go on,” Nikandros said, quietly.
Damen looked at him oddly. “What?”

Nikandros nudged his chin, subtly, so subtly that you would miss it if you weren’t looking for it. Damen didn’t have to turn his head to see who he was referring to.

Damen spoke as low as he could. “I have no control over this situation.”

“That is beside the point,” Nikandros said. His eyes flicked upward again, a wave of emotions passing over his face that made Damen sigh. Laurent and Nikandros had had their differences, each of them justified in their own way, but over the years they had formed this bond that Damen didn’t entirely understand, but appreciated nonetheless.

He remembered the first time he and Laurent had wrestled, when Laurent had let it slip that it was Nikandros who had been teaching him. All the times Damen had stood in the doorway to the training arena and watched them roll around, knowing he would have felt something akin to jealousy had he not trusted them each so explicitly. Laurent always fought with determinacy, a determinacy he would recreate when he practiced his new moves and defenses on Damen later on. Laurent and Nikandros had even developed private jokes, Damen saying or doing something that would cause them to look at each other, smiling privately. It never bothered Damen. It meant something to him that the two people dearest to him were making an effort to get along.

“This is hard for you,” Nikandros said. “I know that. Just as it is hard for him, but it cannot continue this way, with him nearly ignoring you and you cowering away. The people notice more than you think.”

Damen passed a hand over his face, and Nikandros continued. “It does not help matters that you used to gaze at each other lovingly at all times and now hardly spare a glance.”

“What do you advise me to do?” Damen said sourly. He chanced a glance at Laurent, seeing that he was talking to the same person. “He will hardly speak to me.”

Damen looked at Nikandros, at the way he was looking at Laurent contemplatively, and something came to him. Nikandros was Akielon, but technically speaking, Laurent had no problems with him, other than general dislike. He had no personal hatred for him. No vendetta.

“You speak with him,” Damen said, still conscious of his voice level.

Nikandros’ eyes widened slightly. “Excuse me?”

“He has no reason to ignore you, other than pettiness,” Damen said. “Nikandros, please. He needs to engage with the Akielons more, and he would not ignore the Kyros. He’s too smart for that.”

“And he would ignore the king?” Nikandros said exasperatedly. “Damianos, it is more important for him to socialize with you than it is me.”

Damen lowered his eyes, looking at the tablecloth between them. “He would not ignore me,” Damen said softly. “Not around others. But he doesn’t want to speak to me, Nikandros. It hurts him, and I can’t hurt him again.”

He heard Nikandros let out a long sigh, and he glanced up to see him rubbing his face with both palms. He did nothing for a little while, visibly gathering himself before dropping his hands, a new, calm look on his face.

“Your Highness.”
Laurent’s conversation had just happened to hit a lull, and he set his fork down and looked at Nikandros expectantly, only after a momentary pause.

“I’ve just heard that Chelaut’s niece is to be married to a nobleman from Patras.”

Laurent leaned back in his chair slightly, reaching for his drink. “I was informed. It is very exciting.”

“It is,” Nikandros agreed. “It will be another effective way to secure bonds with Patras, to have someone so high up in court marry a Patran.”

“Considering there will be no Patran princess,” Laurent said, a joking edge to his voice that took Damen by surprise. It was both painful and surreal to see Laurent like this again, and it was reminiscent of the times Damen had watched him interact with others the first time he had been in Arles. Cold and barbed in private, elegant and charming in public.

Nikandros turned to Damen then. “Is there any talk of a date?” He asked, and Damen saw it for what it was: an attempt to pull him into the conversation.

“Not that I have heard,” Damen replied, looking at Laurent questioningly, and it surprised him to see the way Laurent looked back at him as if nothing was amiss, though Laurent had always been the better actor.

“I met with the council today,” Laurent said in response to Damen’s inquiring look. “I heard no mention of it.”

A servant approached them to take Damen’s smaller plate which had held the first course, and Damen moved his body aside to make room for him. He waited impatiently, wanting him to finish his job of clearing the table and leave so he could return to their conversation. He knew nothing had changed, not remotely, and that Laurent would turn a shoulder on him the moment they left, but it felt so good to be speaking with Laurent again, something like a normal conversation.

The servant finally moved, dipping his head with a murmured, “Exalted.” Damen nodded at him in thanks before turning back, only to see Laurent already in a new, separate conversation with Vannes.

Damen’s shoulders sagged, and he looked back to Nikandros, who shook his head uselessly, reaching for the wine and topping off Damen’s goblet.

Damen was in the training arena, nobody else around him. He had been here for over an hour, exerting himself through punches, kicks and extensive sword work, taking out everything he was feeling on any practice prop he could find. Damen remembered another time like this, so long ago, where daily ventures out into the trees with nothing but his sword and his anger as his company. It seemed so far away, yet they so closely aligned now.

Damen had long ago discarded his shirt, tossing it aside and swinging a towel around his shoulders instead, which he would occasionally use to wipe his face off as sweat poured down him. Damen thought of empty blue eyes, of cold shoulders, of half bitten responses, and it was with that in mind that he drove his sword into the wooden post one, twice. And again.

Damen’s arms ached, his muscles burning in the way that they usually did after hours of training. His skin felt tight, and although he normally relished the feeling of an exhausted body after hours of good training, he only felt misery. The harder he fought, the farther away he felt.

Damen shifted his weight and changed his grip on his sword, and just as he made to strike out, he
heard a sound in the room. His arm froze midair as he turned around, breathless.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Laurent said, his shoulders leisurely relaxed on the wall. He was not dressed for a fight, all tight laces and high boots. “Far be it from me to stop your practice towards more killing.”

Damen closed his eyes, and it took him a few long seconds and a strong amount of strength to open them again. “Would you like me to leave?” he asked softly.

“You know precisely what I want,” Laurent replied.

Damen let out a breath, nodding his head solemnly before sheathing his sword. He took a step on the dust filled ground, unsure if it was towards Laurent or the exit. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and then opened it again.

“I know,” Damen said, but he stopped the words from coming out. Laurent raised his eyebrows at that, lifting a hand, palm upturned.

“Go on,” Laurent said. “Speak. You’ve clearly done more than that in my presence, these past two years.”

Damen ran a hand down his face, looking around the room before walking towards the wooden bench, sitting down slowly. He leaned forward and balanced his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped tightly.

“We’ve been here before, you know,” Damen said. “In a training arena.”

Laurent’s eyes narrows slightly. “I would imagine.”

“We fought,” Damen said. “For a long time. It was a close fight. You gave everything you had.”

“I am not here to reminisce,” Laurent cut him off.

Damen looked up at him. “Why are you here?”

Laurent didn’t reply, not immediately. He was still leaning on the wall, his ankles and arms crossed. He swept his eyes down Damen before lifting them back to his eyes.

“Was there a point to this story?” Laurent asked.

“You didn’t win,” Damen continued. “You used dirty tricks. You used everything in your arsenal to beat me, but in the end you yielded.”

“I don’t need memory to know that we fought,” Laurent said sharply. “Do you think,” he said, pushing himself off the wall, “that I am under the impression that I’ve been around you for years and have never tried to kill you?”

“It was not like that,” Damen said insistently, ignoring the crack he felt inside. “You would not have killed me, even if you had been the better fighter.” Damen’s heart was beating wildly in his chest, sweat prickling his forehead and running down his face from his practice.

Damen thought of that day, of the parallels he felt now, pulling his mind back two years. He thought of the previous day, of the look on Laurent’s face when he had misunderstood Damen and thought Damen was asking Laurent to spar. He thought of the outrage, the horror on his face.

Damen had often thought about that day in the training arena at Marlas, at what must have been gong
through Laurent’s head. Before, during, after.

He knew what Laurent had thought of Damen’s fighting tactics before they had met. Even after they had come to know each other, he knew Laurent had certain ideas about Damen’s style of fighting. Tricky. Devious. Honorless. Things that had only changed, had only shifted when he had fought Damen himself. When he had seen the way Damen fought one on one, man on man. The way he had fought Auguste, so unlike the way Laurent had imagined it to have gone. The way Laurent had convinced himself it had been.

Fighting Damen himself, experiencing Damen’s clean, straightforward way firsthand was something Laurent had needed to do to come to terms with what had happened on the field at Marlas six years prior between two Crown Prince’s who had known what they were getting into when they picked up their swords and stepped out to fight.

“I gave you the dagger,” Damen said. He remembered how he had felt then. Everything was so fragile, but he had still been so sure, so certain that despite everything that had transpired between them, everything that Laurent felt for him, it was no longer enough for Laurent to drive the dagger in. “I gave you the dagger and pointed it at my chest, and you dropped it.” Damen pushed off the bench, stepping forward helplessly. “You dropped it.”

Laurent’s eyes were still narrowed, his golden brows pinched. He looked perturbed, though he was holding himself still, unflinching as Damen came forward, into his personal space. He tipped his head back, upward, unmoving.

“And?” he said pointedly.

Damen wanted to reach out for Laurent. He so desperately wanted to wrap his arms around Laurent and to pull him in, to run his hand down his back and kiss his forehead, to tell him that he would be okay. That they would find their way out of this soon.

“I know,” Damen said slowly, starting up the point that he had tried to make before. “That you do not want to be around me right now. That you do not believe the things I say, or the things we felt about each other. The things I feel about you. But you were alone for so many years, and all you had to trust was yourself.” Damen swallowed. “The past cannot be changed. It is the things we do and decide that lead us to where we are.”

“You know yourself,” Damen continued. “And right now, I know you are the only person you feel as if you can count on, so count on yourself. Trust yourself. Even if you cannot remember why you made the decisions that tethered us together, those decisions had still been made. You know better than I that you would never do anything you did not want to. Anything you did not believe in.”

It was silent in the large room. So silent that Damen could not only feel but hear his heart’s beat, his pulse pounding. Heavy breaths wracked his chest, echoing off the walls and between them. Laurent was looking at him, silently, considerably. His eyes showed no emotion. He blinked at Damen, his head slightly tilted, Damen’s heart feeling like it was off axis as he waited for Laurent to speak.

And then Laurent smiled. A small smile, curving the side of his lips.

“Empowering,” Laurent said, and before Damen could reply, he went on. “Did you deliver a similar speech before you bent me over the first time?”

It hurt. Damen fought to let oxygen into his lungs, his chest aching as he let out a breath, removing the towel from his shoulders and wiping his face. He ran his hands through his hair, looking down at Laurent for a moment before nodding. Understanding. “I’ll see you at dinner tonight.”
Damen turned to go, tossing the sweat damp towel aside as he made for the door, trying and failing to hold his head up high as he went. He heard the crunch of grovel beneath his shoes, tried to focus on the rhythmic sound, and it was only when he heard the sound of Laurent’s voice again that he stopped. Made himself stop.

“What happened to your back?”

Damen’s heart stilled for a moment, his chest burning before it started to pound, thumping against his ribcage. He knew. He knew this would come up, that this would be an inevitable part of reminding Laurent all that he had forgotten and bringing him back, but it did not make it any less painful.

They hadn’t spoken of it. They hadn’t acknowledged it. Not since the first time they had visited The Summer Palace, when everything felt so tenuous, the past closer than it had ever been. Damen remembered the physical sound of the sponge being wrung out, loud like a crack. He remembered the warm water and the gentle touch, linking flesh and self. He remembered the intimacy of it, the painful, tender intimacy.

That was not what this was. Gone was the silence, the hesitant words and movements. Damen turned, feeling like he was walking on a tightrope, like the smallest nudge would push him over the edge. It took everything in him not to close his eyes when he saw the look in Laurent’s.

Laurent knew. Damen could see it on his face, the way he hadn’t even flinched at the scars on Damen’s abdomen and shoulder, but there was a different look in his eyes now, once he had seen Damen’s bare back for the first time. Damen tried very hard not to analyze the look.

Damen said nothing, because there was nothing to say. He only looked at Laurent, knowing his pain was in his eyes, a part of him hoping Laurent would simply turn and leave on his own, because Damen didn’t know if he could do this.

Laurent’s face was primarily void of emotion, and Damen had never been so grateful for Laurent’s ability to hide his thoughts and feelings, because he couldn’t take knowing what was going on in his head at that moment. A large part of Damen was considering finding his shirt and pulling it back on. He felt too open like this, exposed, their history on display.

“Should I guess?” Laurent said.

Damen held his eyes. “No.”

Laurent lips twitched then, the sides lifting as his eyes scrolled Damen again.

“And here I was, thinking I did absolutely nothing but spread for you.” Laurent took a step forward, his hands at his hips. “It truly is a shame that I can’t remember it, I would have loved to see how long it took before you broke down.”

“Stop,” Damen said.

“I wonder,” Laurent said, stepping forward again. “If your face was how I imagined it would look, all those nights I fantasized about plunging my sword in.” He was speaking as if they were discussing the climate that day. “Did you make a sound?”

“Laurent,” Damen begged. His heart was in his throat. “Please.”

“Did you beg?” Laurent asked, his eyes widening. He looked more pleased that Damen had seen him in days, and Damen couldn’t take it.
“I know why you did it,” Damen said, taking a step forward of his own. He had to be close to Laurent, even if it hurt. “I know now what I didn’t know then, and I understand. You hated me so much, and you wanted vengeance, and I-“

“You understand nothing,” Laurent snapped. The light in his eyes was gone, and his teeth were clenched, his jaw taught and tense. “And do not fool yourself for a second into thinking that my hateful feelings for you are past tense.” He stepped closer. “As far as I am concerned, this was the greatest revelation I’ve had since the morning I woke up next to you. I have half a mind to strap you back to the post and make your front match your back.”

Damen had known pain in his life. He had watched his father, the most important man in Damen’s life slip away, bit by bit. He had lost his brother, his beloved older brother who Damen would have done anything for, and in return had been betrayed, sent away as a slave and stabbed. He had endured Laurent, his wrath, his revenge, and yet none of that seemed to compare to this moment, because nothing had ever felt this personal. Never before had Damen felt like someone had reached down his throat and tore out his heart.

There was nothing for Damen to do, both in this moment and in the unforeseeable future. Apologizing would be useless because Damen could not take away the past, and Laurent would not thank him for trying. Damen forced himself to take a step back, and then another, until he was at the door, turning, leaving.

He was hollow.

Damen walked through the garden that night alone. It was late, some hours having passed since that night’s dinner. Most of the palace was asleep. It was quiet out. The only thing Damen could hear was the occasional gust of wind, or the sound of his footsteps, soft on the grass.

Damen took the path which had now become so familiar, around the fountain, through the flowers, as far as one could go until they reached the end. It was a secluded area, one that hardly anyone was allowed near to begin with. There were stone benches lining the outskirts, but nothing else beside that. Nothing else to distract anyone from the tall, proud statue of Auguste.

Creating a commemorative statue for Auguste, one that better batched the person Laurent idolized in his mind was one of their first priorities when they began building their palace in Delpha. Damen had been here a handful of times, some alone, some not. He was wary at first, nervous, a bit uneasy, but it was important for him. For Laurent. Damen was stuck between wanting to pay his respects and not wanting to overstep, but Laurent had insisted.

Are you sure? Damen had asked, not quite being able to make the question sound effortless. I can understand if...

But Laurent had smiled softly, covering Damen’s hand with his. I want you to meet my brother.

The first time had been slightly nerve-racking, if Damen was being honest. Some part of him even felt as if he was truly meeting Auguste for the first time, asking him for permission to court his younger brother. Laurent could tell, as he always could with Damen, and he had held his hand the entire time.

They had visited Auguste multiple times together after that, and Damen had even gone alone. To speak about a multitude of things, most of them being Laurent. About how special he was, about how proud Auguste must be of him, for everything Laurent was doing. Mostly, to thank Auguste for
the massive role Damen knew he played in raising Laurent. In shaping him into the person he was today.

Damen wasn’t sure how long it had been since he’d come here. It felt as if things had become so busy, as if he and Laurent were so immersed in making something great together, but Auguste, this place, was never far from Damen’s mind. And somehow, almost as if by instinct, Damen’s legs had taken him here tonight, before his mind had even registered where he was going.

Damen wasn’t even sure what he wanted to say, his thoughts whirling as the statue slowly came into view. Whatever he did end up saying was obviously going to be a one sided conversation, so it was not as if he had advice awaiting him, but somehow, this felt important. Being as close to Auguste as possible felt like something Damen needed to do.

But then, Damen noticed something. The closer he got, the more in view the scenery became, something in the distance registered in Damen’s mind. Just in front of Auguste’s statue, a few feet away at best, someone was crouched on the ground, their legs pulled up to their chest in a young, boyish pose. Damen was not the only one who had come here tonight.

Damen’s heart pulsed, his steps halting immediately. He couldn’t see much from here, Damen couldn’t even see if he was speaking or simply sitting there, because his back was to Damen. Whatever the case was, Damen knew he had to go. This was not his night to be here, in this special place.

With a deep breath and a heavy heart, Damen cast them with one last lingering glance before turning around, leaving Laurent with his brother.
They were walking through the east garden, carefully down the shallow steps and through the flowerbed which held an array of white flowers, newly blossomed, the scent strong in the air along with the fresh smell of summer and the salty breeze from the sea. Damen’s hands were on Laurent’s eyes, something Laurent had reluctantly agreed to when Damen said he had a surprise for him.

Damen had gone through this in his head so many times, imagining all the different ways Laurent might react. The anticipation of Laurent’s reaction was a heady thing, but what mattered above all other things was that it would make Laurent happy.

“Are you simply taking me in circles?” Laurent asked, just as they walked below a low hanging tree, the leaves brushing Damen’s shoulders. “I’ve seen the entire palace, Damen. What is the point in covering my eyes?”

“Not the entire palace,” Damen replied, just as the stables came into view. “Stop trying to ruin the surprise,” he added, kissing Laurent’s shoulder, still wonderfully bare in his chiton. They were walking slowly, so Laurent stopping in his tracks didn’t jolt Damen or make them trip. Laurent turned a bit, craning his neck back, and Damen didn’t hesitate to lean in and kiss him softly on the lips, softer than he had on his skin.

“Stop distracting me,” Damen murmured against his lips, kissing him once more before pulling back and using one hand to turn Laurent back around, his other hand still covering his eyes. They walked the rest of the way, their steps becoming audible as they stepped off the grass and began to reach the gravel. Damen could smell the usual scent that came with the horse stables, something he knew Laurent was familiar with, and he felt Laurent’s nose scrunch up beneath his fingers as he smelled the air.

“The stables?” Laurent said. “We decided we would go riding yesterday, Damen. I don’t see why you had to cover my eyes for this.”

Damen didn’t answer him. He looked over Laurent’s shoulder towards the stable boy and looked at him pointedly, wordlessly asking if his gift was ready. The boy nodded his head, thankfully remaining silent, motioning with his hand towards the door. Damen nodded his thanks and the boy lowered his head once before turning, leaving Damen and Laurent with the horses.

“Stay here,” Damen said into Laurent’s ear. “Keep your eyes closed.”

He removed his hands, waiting a moment to ensure that Laurent wasn’t looking before walking backwards, smiling as Laurent crossed his arms with a smile on his own face.

Damen entered the stables, immediately spotting the five year old mare, as lovely as Damen remembered her to be when he picked her out. She lifted her head as Damen approached, and Damen reached a hand out and smoothed it down her curved neck as he often saw Laurent do, murmuring softly. Watching Laurent interact with animals was one of Damen’s favorite things. He never treated them as something utilitarian. He showed them tenderness and adoration, and Damen felt lucky that he would be able to contribute to that now.

“Come,” Damen whispered. His tendency to interact with horses was new as well, something he had gotten from Laurent, and Damen liked that as well. “There’s someone waiting for you.”

Damen took a hold of her bridle and led her out, into the sunlight where Laurent was still waiting.
He was standing alone, his short chiton flowing slightly in the breeze, his skin sun pinked. Damen saw the excitement on his face, and his heart swooped at how he wasn’t bothering to mask it.

Damen stopped a few feet away from Laurent, releasing her bridle and stepping up beside him. He placed a hand on his shoulder, kissing him once on the cheek.

“Alright,” Damen said. “Open.”

Laurent’s eyes came open immediately like he couldn’t wait, golden lashes sweeping up as blue came into view. He stared forward for a moment blankly, his face holding nothing but bits of confusion as he looked at the horse, then at Damen, then back at the horse.

“What’s this?” Laurent said. His voice held a bit of hesitancy, and tenderness swelled inside Damen because he understood where Laurent’s awkwardness in this type of situation came from. He had rejected all suitors his entire life. He had no experience in courting, or being courted. He didn’t know what it was when someone who adored you brought you gifts, and it was Damen’s absolute thrill and honor to be his first and only.

“Do you like her?” Damen said.

“She’s beautiful,” Laurent replied, stepping forward and reaching his hand out. He ran his fingers through her long mane, down her neck, across her flank. He looked peaceful.

“She’s yours,” Damen said, standing beside Laurent. He felt fidgety somehow, knowing Laurent would appreciate any gift from Damen, but still feeling nervous, shy, as if he had never had any experience in courting.

Laurent’s hand froze, stopping just by her ear where he had been rubbing softly. He stilled for a moment, his hand staying where it was before he turned, looking at Damen with wide eyes.

“Mine?”

Damen smiled, covering Laurent’s hand with his. “Yes.”

Laurent looked back at the horse, his expression like he had never seen one before. He looked to Damen, his lips parted, his eyes slightly wider. “Why?”

And then he was smiling, like the realization had just caught up with him. It was a smile Damen didn’t see often, so wide and unabashed, his entire face lighting up with it.

Damen’s own smile widened without even meaning to. He lifted his hand and ran a knuckle down Laurent’s cheek, by his lips.

“Because I would do anything for you to look at me like this,” Damen said softly. “I’ll spend my life working for this smile.”

Everything was still so new for them, every touch and word and gesture still held that exhilarating pump that came with a new lover. Laurent was still a bit reserved with initiating things, though Damen could see the changes in him, the small, incremental ways in which he was more forward with doing the things he wanted. The things he enjoyed.

There was none of that reservation now. Laurent didn’t hesitate to remove his hand from under Damen’s and off the horse, and Damen had barely blinked before Laurent was moving forward, pressing himself into Damen, his arms wrapping around Damen’s waist. Damen was sure Laurent could feel the way his heart was pounding against his chest as he wrapped his own arms around
Laurent, holding him as close to him as possible as Laurent pressed his face into Damn’s neck, whispering things that made Damen feel like he was the luckiest, happiest man in all four kingdoms.

Laurent didn’t know how long he had been there.

At some point he had come closer, rather than looking from afar. At some point he had sat down on the grass instead of simply standing there. At some point he had hugged his knees to his chest like when he was a boy, and it was just the two of them, being brothers instead of princes.

He didn’t know how long it had been since he had left his rooms and gone to the memorial statue he had inquired about earlier, but he was here now, and he had yet to speak. He didn’t know what to say, or if he had any right to say anything.

It was ridiculous, really. Auguste was the one person Laurent could ever really speak around. The only person Laurent could be his true self, the self that people like his father or the court didn’t understand. Auguste never judged him, or made him feel like any less of a prince for being interested in things like books rather swords. He had listened to all of Laurent’s ceaseless babbling, all of his stories and thoughts and opinions on things that Laurent shouldn’t have really had an opinion on at that age, but Auguste listened nonetheless.

Laurent didn’t know if Auguste was listening now. He didn’t know if he was listening all those years when Laurent had gone to his statue in Arles and told him about his practice, his studies, his formation of the Prince’s Guard. He hadn’t thought much about that, he simply did what felt natural to him, what felt right in all those terrible years: spoke openly and honestly to the one person that mattered.

It shouldn’t be different now. They were still brothers despite everything, but nothing felt the same, because nothing was the same.

Laurent had betrayed him, and he couldn’t even explain himself, or justify what he had done. Partly because there was no justification, partly because he had no idea how this could have happened.

Laurent let out a slow breath, touching the grass with his fingers. “I don’t know what to say,” he said. “I should have come to see you sooner.”

He tilted his head back, craning his neck so he could look up at the face. It looked more like him than his statue in Arles. More like the strong man Laurent remembered, who could inspire men with just a glance.

“I’m sorry,” Laurent said. It was one thing that needed to be said, as useless as it was. “I remember the promise I made you. I remember all the times I swore vengeance. I know,” Laurent said, “that I’ve failed you.”

Though in Laurent’s heart, he knew that was not entirely true. In all the times he had gone to see his brother, an ache in his heart that was somehow both worsened to be around his brother’s grave and soothed just by being in his proximity, he had known Auguste would have not wanted this for him. From the day Laurent was born until their last day together, Auguste had done all that he could to protect Laurent, to shield him from the darkness in the world. Darkness that Auguste, good, pure Auguste hadn’t even known, but still did everything he could to put up walls around Laurent so he would remain the youthful boy he had once been.

Auguste would have not wanted Laurent to put away his books of fiction and fairytales in favor of picking up a sword and learning how to wield it. He would have not wanted Laurent to lock himself up, to push everyone away. He would have not wanted Laurent to reinvent himself, to reshape
himself into a man with one driving goal in mind: to kill his enemy.

Laurent knew this. He knew it from the moment he had sworn to himself that he would take Damianos down, the moment he relayed this promise to Auguste’s grave, and every moment after where he was dedicating himself to this new objective. Nothing stopped him.

But evidently, it was all for naught, because Laurent had failed himself. His Kingdom. His brother. Laurent stood, stepping forward the rest of the distance, touching a hand to the chilled stone. It seemed wrong, unfitting, that something that was meant to represent this warm person was so cold now.

“I’m sorry, brother.”

Laurent had gone to see Paschal, as he had been every few days since his accident. Paschal had been sitting at his desk, flipping through a large book, much like the ones he had lining the shelves on his wall. Each book was a different color, though there was a similar scripture on the spine of each. He glanced up upon Laurent’s entrance, rising from his chair immediately.

“How have you been feeling?” he asked.

“Much the same,” Laurent replied.

Paschal nodded, sizing Laurent up, his eyes scrolling down his body impersonally. He lifted a hand, gesturing towards Laurent’s face.

“May I?”

Laurent nodded back at him, remaining still as Paschal touched Laurent’s face gently, pressing down in some spots, simply grazing in others. The bruises on Laurent’s face had faded, only the faintest traces of blue on certain parts of his skin, below his eye and down his cheekbone. It had jarred him when he had initially seen it, both because it was something unexpected to see, and because a bruised face was only more proof that he had fallen from his horse, and that something had indeed happened to affect his memories. That there were indeed memories to begin with.

“Does this hurt?” Paschal murmured, pressing down on a certain spot.

Laurent winced slightly, but it was nothing he would complain about, and it was far less than when he had initially touched it.

“No.”

Paschal removed his hands, moving back. He went to the side of the room where he had shelves of different phials, labels under each one. There was another book on this shelf, much like the one Paschal had been reading from, though it was much thinner. He touched his finger to the shelf and ran it along the wooden length slowly, his eyes on each of the labels as he did.

“If I may,” Paschal said, finally selecting a phial with a clear liquid inside. “How are the preparations
coming for next weeks festival?”

It took Laurent a few seconds to understand what Paschal was referring to, as he eventually recalled his conversation with Damianos in the training yard. The Harvest Festival. The Akielon tradition.

“Tell me,” Laurent said, in lieu of answering for that moment. “Have we celebrated this festival before?”

Paschal paused, and Laurent knew it was due to the momentary lapse of confusion he was feeling at Laurent asking something he should know. He had grown accustomed to these pauses from Jord and Herode.

“Yes, Your Highness,” he said. “For the past two years.”

Laurent quirked a brow. “And?”

Paschal removed the stopper from the glass phial, setting it down on the shelf. “It was very pleasant, Your Highness. Very different from Veretian customs, but the people were very pleased with it. It was talked about much after it ended.”

Paschal gestured towards the laces on Laurent’s jacket. “If you could please remove your shirt, Your Highness.”

Laurent lifted his fingers to his jacket front, starting at the throat and working quickly, something that came with years of practice from times he had not wanted to see anyone, servants included.

“And I approved of the festivities?” Laurent asked, pulling the jacket back and draping it on the chair. He reached behind his neck and took the top of his undershirt between his fingers, yanking it off. He placed it on top of the jacket.

Paschal touched his hand to Laurent’s side, just below the ribcage where Laurent was still a bit tender. He poured some of the salve onto his hand, rubbing it between his palms before he started to massage it into Laurent’s skin, over the tense area that had braced his fall.

“You very much enjoyed them, if memory serves correctly,” Paschal said. He was not looking at Laurent as he spoke. “You encouraged that they be continued, after the first year’s trial.”

Laurent was looking into the room, his arms at his sides as Paschal worked deftly. A few minutes passed before Laurent spoke.

“It will not be taking place this year,” he said, referring to Paschal’s original question. “Damianos has cancelled it.”

Paschal’s hand stopped moving, glancing up at Laurent. “Cancelled?”

“Yes.”

Paschal finished them, straightening himself out and cleaning the excess salve from his hand off with a cloth, picking a clean, fresh one up and dabbing it on Laurent’s skin as well.

“How can I inquire why, Your Highness?” he asked.

Laurent reached for his shirt, putting his arms through the sleeves first before pulling it over his head.

“Vaskian delegates are coming to the palace,” Laurent said. “Damianos claims the timing does not work this year.” Laurent would hardly ever take Damianos’ word on something, but he knew
nothing of most Akielon traditions, much less this one, so this was a case he could not necessarily argue.

Paschal looked at Laurent for a bit, his expression unclear before he turned, placing the phial back onto the shelf amongst the others.

“What,” Laurent said.

Paschal shook his head. ”It is nothing.”

“That’s good to hear,” Laurent said. “Then you can tell me what you are thinking, since it is nothing.”

“I was only confused, Your Highness,” Paschal said. “Vaskian delegates came to the palace not long before your accident, so I’m unsure why they would come again so soon, but I know nothing about these type of affairs.”

Laurent looked at him oddly, his mind slightly muddled as he laced the rest of his jacket, up to his collarbone. He was equally unsure.

“No,” Laurent muttered, just as he tied the last lace. “You wouldn’t know.”

Paschal set the dirtied cloths aside, turning to face Laurent after. “Come and see me again in a few days, Your Highness,” he said. “The swelling on your face should be entirely gone by then, and your side should be feeling better. If you feel any more aches, please let me know.”

Laurent nodded, still feeling distracted. “Thank you,” he said, before turning for the door.

Laurent was in his chambers, sitting at the desk that was by the window, a book in front of him. It was one of the first books he had sought out in the library, filled with Akielon customs, foods, traditions and the like. A candle was lit by his side, illuminating the surface of the table and the tattered, aged papers.

He opened the book to its index, his fingers moving down the long list of titles, his eyes scrolling with it. He passed the letter F where he saw Fire Festival, something he had already heard talks of and actually found rather interesting. He read G which listed the Games, what appeared to be a list of events that took place in Akielos, both as a simple yearly event and as something that would be done to pay homage to the fallen. It included Javelin, both in target practice and spear throwing. There was trident, long and short sword, and something called Okton which Laurent had never heard of and would read into at a later time. He briefly saw wrestling among the list, and he turned the page with a flick of his wrist, trying his best to forget that he had apparently taken part in something so barbaric.

Laurent eventually reached H, seeing the title Harvest Festival. It started at the top of a new side, making its way down to nearly fill a full page. Laurent skimmed through the list of fruits and vegetables that were set to grow at the start of the season, each one having its own representation and symbolism. His eyes flickered down the page, looking for anything that stood out of the norm, anything that would give Paschal pause when Laurent mentioned it had been cancelled by Damianos’ command.

As far as Laurent was concerned, the Harvest Festival appeared to be nothing more than a feast, not much unlike the ones he endured each night. He saw nothing of significance, and found himself reading the final citation with half a mind.
Five courses are to take place, each one representing its own merit that the year’s crops will bring to the kingdom. The king and his consort are to lead the day’s celebrations through dance, gift exchange and the customary kiss to symbolize unity, prosperity and a beneficial, fruitful harvest.

Laurent shut the book, flipping it closed with a hand, the sound of impact from the bulky cover heavy in the empty room. He stared down at the cover and the golden etching of words, not really reading anything anymore, his fingers tapping the table absently.

Laurent pushed the book away, snuffing out the candle before rising from his chair. He was going for a ride.

Laurent had yet to see the palace’s stables. It was something that he had been meaning to do since he knew it would be an excellent reprieve for him with everything that was happening, but he had simply not found the time.

He stepped inside now, everything about the place feeling familiar to Laurent, though he knew the association was with a different place entirely. The entirety of the setup was different that the stables in Arles, but the smell, the sound, the atmosphere. It was all something that Laurent knew well.

A stable boy had been in the back, brushing through the mane of a large grey stallion. His moves were methodical, but Laurent could see an expression on his face as he touched the horse that Laurent understood himself.

He did not have to wait long. The stable boy looked up to extend his arm farther, but he jolted slightly the moment he saw Laurent, setting the brush down and walking around the horse.

“Your Highness,” he said, standing a little taller. Laurent looked at him briefly before looking around, his eyes roaming all the different breeds around them. He found himself looking for his preferred horse, his personal favorite which he had had since she was a filly.

“I would like to ride,” Laurent said, and the stable boy nodded, walking off into one of the stalls. Laurent waited, his foot tapping on the dirt as he heard the low door unlocking, the heavy steps that Laurent was accustomed to nearing.

Laurent looked up, and paused. The stable boy was standing before Laurent with bridle in hand, looking at Laurent expectantly. He seemed a bit confused as to why Laurent was simply standing there. The horse was beautiful. Gracefully balanced, proportions perfect for a good ride, around five or six years old to Laurent’s estimation. She was well groomed and stood proudly. Above all, she was not Laurent’s horse.

Laurent looked at the stable boy again, who’s confusion had grown, looking at Laurent oddly now, a bit of panic on his face as well.

“Is there a problem, Your Highness?”

Laurent knew he could not stand there and gape any longer. For whatever reason, this was the horse that was immediately brought to Laurent. Although she was not the horse he was used to, and he would certainly find out where his childhood horse was, she was a beautiful mount, and Laurent looked forward to riding her, as well as finding out where she had come from.

“No problem,” Laurent replied, and he couldn’t help the way his hand instinctively reached out, running his hand along her soothingly.
She really was a wonderful ride. She moved smoothly, keeping up with the alternating pace Laurent set effortlessly, and Laurent felt calmer than he had felt in over a week. He had lost track of how long he had spent but it had grown dark, far darker than he had realized, and it was only when he trotted back towards the stables where he saw servants lighting the lanterns that he realized it may have been hours.

Laurent dismounted with ease, wrapping the bridle around his hand and walking her towards the doors. Just as he approached, he heard a commotion, a voice loud in the narrow stables.

“How do you not know where-“ but the voice cut off just as Laurent entered, pushing the door open with his free hand.

Damianos turned around, his gaze immediately stopping on Laurent and the horse. His face was set in tense lines, a fist clenched. His shoulders were tightly drawn back, and Laurent could visibly see them lower as Laurent entered. His face softened.

“Your Highness,” the stable boy said. “Exalted.” He bowed his head once before stepping around, leaving the two of them alone.

“You’re alright?” Damianos said, taking a small step forward. Laurent stepped around him easily, leading the horse into the empty stall.

“Do I appear harmed?” Laurent asked, running a hand up and down her snout.

“You weren’t in your rooms,” Damianos said. “Or the library. I came here next, and the stable boy said you have been gone for hours.”

Laurent tensed up immediately. He imagined he looked much like Damianos had when Laurent had entered the stalls.

“I was unaware I needed anyone’s permission to go for a ride,” he said steadily, not looking at him as he spoke. He heard Damianos exhale roughly, but he otherwise said nothing.

Laurent was aware of the last conversation he and Damianos had had, just as he was aware of what he had recently read. He closed the stall door reluctantly before turning around, leaning a hip on the wall.

“There are no Vaskian delegates coming to the palace,” Laurent said.

Damianos blinked, frowning slightly at the change in conversation. “Excuse me?”

“You said delegates were coming to the palace next week,” Laurent elaborated. And then, “I know what the festival entails.”

Damianos looked at him for a moment, his mouth opening and closing briefly. He looked like he was running through different responses, discarding each one before he finally spoke. “I said they may be coming.”

“Is that an answer?” Laurent asked.

“I wasn’t aware I was being asked a question,” Damianos replied.

Laurent gazed back at him silently, his mouth a taught line before he turned, walking out of the
stables. Damianos followed.

“Do you like her?” Damianos asked.

Laurent turned to look at Damianos as he continued to walk, not slowing down for him as he was a few paces behind. “Who?”

“Your horse.”

Laurent did stop then. He turned fully to properly face Damianos. “I had another,” he said, instead of answering. He didn’t think Damianos would know the name, so he didn’t use it. “She was larger. Where is she?”

Damianos’ brows pinched for a moment, confusion in his eyes before a look passed over his face that made Laurent’s stomach tighten. He looked away, refusing to share whatever expression was on his own face. It was silent, other than the sounds of insects and servants making their way around.

Laurent knew. He may have had no memory, but he did not need memories to know that he was not the reason his horse was gone.

“Where did this horse come from?” Laurent asked eventually, when the tightness finally subsided. He would deal with his feeling later, when he was alone.

“Do you like her?” Damianos repeated.

Laurent blew out a frustrated breath, wondering if he would ever receive a direct answer. “She is beautiful,” he said. There was no point denying that. “Do you think I would ride her if I didn’t see potential?”

It seemed that it didn’t matter how Laurent spoke, extensive answers or short cut jabs. Damianos responded all the same. He smiled at Laurent’s response, a slow tilt at the sides of his lips. Laurent turned around and continued walking, and neither of them spoke until they reached the pathway that led into the palace. Laurent had all but forgotten his question before Damianos spoke again.

“She was a gift,” he said. “From me. The first of many.” With that he turned, leaving Laurent alone in the intersection of the hall.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

i should probably save my written chapters for when i hit a big block and start to run out but I'm feeling impulsive so i guess two updates are happening this week \_/ \_)/

The baths were one of the places that best represented the palace’s new architecture, it’s blend of what was in both Arles and Ios. It was all white marble and neutral tones, but the walls were filled with complex designs, swirls and patterns, winding up as far as the ceiling. The shelves were lined with soft towels, and glass phials of all sizes filled with all different types of oils.

The baths were always a busy place, to an extent. Noble men and women, washing off the day’s sweat. Servants bustling around, wiping down shelves or mopping floors. Groups of people soaking together, reclining in a scented, heated tub as they spoke to their leisure. The taboo of nudity differed between Akielons and Veretians, though the cultures were slowly blending, as were the mixed people’s reaction to it. It was no longer such a rarity to find such a diverse group bathing together in relaxed conversation.

There was none of that now, all palace occupants kept out, all servants sent away. Now it was just Damen and Laurent, alone in the baths during their favorite time of the day. There was a large, wide opening in one side of the room, open to the breeze and the sunlight. At this hour of the day the sun was setting, the orange glow reflecting off the marble interior, adding to the warmth of the quiet room.

The water was heated, steam rising around them, keeping the tips of their hair damp. Damen had the tub filled with a milky oil, turning the water opaque and silk like on the skin, filling the air with the scent of lavender. He did not personally care for these types of additives, he never did much, but he knew it was a small touch to the simpler things that Laurent enjoyed.

Laurent was in front of Damen now, his back leaning on Damen’s chest, his head tilted slightly back on Damen’s shoulder. His eyes were closed in languid content as Damen’s hands rubbed at his shoulder, massaging oil into the muscles.

“I’m exhausted,” Laurent mumbled, sounding seconds away from sleep.

“We could always leave for a few days,” Damen suggested, digging his thumbs into the back of Laurent’s neck, the rest of his fingers rubbing in circles. “Sneak away.”

Laurent sighed, tilting his head slightly as Damen worked the tense muscles. His body loosened the more time that passed, slumping further and further into Damen’s hold. Damen’s palms were slippery on his back from the oil and the water, and Laurent’s skin felt smooth like cream.

“Where would we go?” Laurent asked. Damen knew fully well he had no intention of leaving, but they occasionally allowed themselves to indulge in childish fantasies where they were the only two people who mattered.

“The Summer Palace?”
“Unimaginative,” Laurent replied.

Damen lowered his hands, running them up and down Laurent’s upper arms, his fingers rubbing the curves of his biceps. He grazed the goose bumpsed skin with his nails. “Vask.”

“Surely you can do better than that,” Laurent said. He nestled himself better in between Damen’s thighs, breathing out slowly as Damen wrapped his arms around Laurent, holding him gently.

“Ver-Tan,” Damen specified.

Laurent nodded drowsily, humming as Damen began to rub his thumb in small, soothing circles on Laurent’ abdomen. He turned his head, just enough so his cheek was on Damen’s chest. “Tell me about it,” he said.

“We’ll take a few horses,” Damen started. “And leave in the night. We will only tell a select few.” Laurent was the storyteller between them, but Damen could still try. “We’ll sneak into the mountains and stay with one of the tribes. We’ll dress like them, blending in around the fire.”

“We will stay up as long as we wish,” Damen continued. “Or as little. We will watch the dancers. We will eat and drink, and nothing will be expected of us. When we’re ready, we will take each other’s hand and make our way to a tent, prepared just for us.”

“You will be full of Hakesh,” Laurent said, his wet lips curving against Damen’s skin.

Damen tightened his hold around Laurent, tasting the water dripping beneath his ear. “I won’t need the Hakesh.”

Laurent breathed out a laugh, lifting Damen’s hand to his mouth and kissing his fingers. “Go on.”

Damen and Laurent were in the royal throne room, each of them seated side by side on their twinned oak thrones. The hall was large, ceilings high enough that one had to crane their neck to see the top, thick cloths of blue and red falling down in waves, gold embroiled throughout each. Soldiers were strewn out, lining each of the walls from entry to exit, hand constantly on the hilt of their sword at the ready. Enguerran was standing beside Laurent as captain of their guard, Nikandros beside Damen as their kyros. Behind them, their banner of the starburst, a roaring lion protruding through it’s center.

There were three shallow steps leading down from the dais where a woman was now kneeling, her head lowered before Damen and Laurent. This was something they did often, multiple times a week, depending on the demand. This was where they would receive news, pass judgment, greet guests. Depending on their stature, some would be greeted on the steps. In this case, grant audience. They had days which were dedicated to criminal acts, all things regarding punishment and retribution. Today however was about listening to the villagers and common folk, hearing their situations and concerns, helping them in whichever way possible.

The woman before them now was Veretian, her clothes nowhere near that of the poor folk, but enough that she would fit in the lower class. She spoke with her head still lowered.

“Your Highness,” she said. “Exalted.”

“Rise,” Laurent said, and as she did, “What are your troubles?”

“I work in the markets, Your Highness,” she said. “I have for years. I sell jewelry, all different kinds that are custom made, a skill my mother taught me. It is my family’s only source of income.”

“We recognize your hard work and efforts,” Damen said.
“Thank you, Exalted,” she said before continuing. “I set my booth up myself, and work all hours of the day. I am as vigilant as I can be, but at the end of each day when I count my inventory, I have less jewels left than what correlates with the day’s profit.” She clasped her hands as she spoke. “I have acquaintances who work in their own stands, who have had similar experiences.”

Damen narrowed his eyes, turning his head to glance at Laurent whose hand was tight on the armrest, his own eyes on Enguerran. Enguerran was frowning himself, and he looked down at Laurent. They had a wordless conversation before Enguerran nodded, straightening his gaze after.

“My captain will select four good men to accompany you tomorrow,” Laurent said. “They will be stationed near you, close enough to be watchful while being inconspicuous. You will not be subjected to theft again.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she bowed her head again. “Thank you, Exalted. You bring our kingdom honor.”

Damen and Laurent smiled at her evenly before Damen waved his hand, motioning for the next person to be brought in.

Next was a man from Lys, telling Damen and Laurent of his own farm’s well that had been destroyed some time in the night. He offered no explanation for how it had happened, or if he had any idea to begin with. He was very distressed as he spoke, and the constant averting of his eyes was a clear indication of how unnerved he felt, being in the presence of the kings.

“We know the importance of your crops,” Damen said. “And we hear your complaints. We will send someone to your farm and see if anything can be done for you.”

These were the type of things that made Damen restless. He was better with hands on situations, or scenarios that involved more plotting, more cunning, but he knew this was part of his role and took it in stride. Hearing his people’s problems and doing all that he could was part of what it meant to be king.

This went on for some time, people coming and going, voicing their problems that ranged in severity, some things pressing and some ridiculous. Damen and Laurent treated each with equal amount of attention and respect.

A woman came in at some point, her skirts long and flowing as she approached the dais. She was Akielon, her coloring was enough to make that apparent, as was the older dialect she spoke in, one that was not as easy to follow as the common tongue. The only reason Damen was well versed in it was because his father had insisted on Damen being as knowledgeable as he could be in languages, and because he had trained with a boy who spoke the same way.

Laurent lost her. Damen could see it, the moment his vocabulary hit a wall and he no longer understood the woman’s story. Her heavy Dice accent did not help him either, harshening the vowels, her rapid voice slurring over some of the words. Damen reminded himself of how underdeveloped Laurent’s Akielon had been when they had first met. He could speak and understand to an extent, but his Veretian accent had come out strongly, and his vocabulary was not particularly extensive. Damen thought of long nights spent over maps as Damen spoke only Akielon with Laurent, the slight frowns and questions that came as Laurent slowly worked his way through the language. Like Laurent’s memory, the knowledge and ease that he had developed in the language was now gone.

Laurent’s face gave nothing away, and nobody looking would guess that he had no idea what she was talking about. She was speaking of market prices, something related to the intake of grain and
comparisons to previous years, but Damen had been focused on Laurent for a moment too long and had missed her request.

The silence stretched only for a moment before Nikandros spoke, something he did occasionally due to his knowledge of Delpha, attained though years of governing here before it had become the capital.

“Our kings are currently in talks over matters of currency,” Nikandros said. “And it’s impact on the marketplaces. They hear the people’s concerns, and they know the situation at hand well. Steps are being taken to offer better prices as we speak.”

The woman looked at Nikandros, dipping gracefully and smiling at his contribution.

“Was there anything else?” Damen asked.

The woman raised a hand with a shake of her head, bowing low. “Thank you, Exalted. Your Highness. A long reign to you both.”

Damen and Nikandros were in the baths, the only two there. They had just finished training together, nearly two hours of rigorous muscle work and sparring in which Damen took out everything that he was keeping pent up. Nikandros was his favored person to train with. He was strong. He knew Damen and his fighting style, something that came with years of growing up and training together. He knew what to expect from Damen and therefore knew how to counteract each move, making the fight an actual challenge for Damen. Something to put his focus on and divert his mind, his focus.

They had both been sweating when they finished, tossing their swords aside for one of the servants to put away. Nikandros had suggested the baths and Damen didn’t hesitate to follow him. The servants cleared out immediately at the sight of their king and kyros, only stopping to ensure that their service would not be required before making for the door, leaving the two of them alone.

They were each in the deep tub now, the near boiling water helping to unlock their muscles and relieve the stiffness. They were sitting across from each other, enough room between them that their knees were not touching. Damen’s head was tipped back, his eyes closed as he inhaled the steam, letting it out slowly.

“How are things?” Nikandros asked. Damen inhaled again.

“What things?”

He heard Nikandros shift, the water lapping around them as he changed the way he was sitting. “If you don’t wish to talk about it-”

“There is nothing to talk about,” Damen said. “His memory is still gone.” He opened his eyes, raising his head so he was looking at Nikandros. Nikandros’ hair was wet, pushed back off his face from where he had run his hand through it. He was looking at Damen with softened brows.

“I know,” Nikandros said. “I can tell from the way he holds himself.”

“How does he hold himself now that he did not before?” Damen asked. Laurent was an exceptional actor, and he had learned all there was to know about Akielos and the united kingdom far quicker and more efficiently than anyone else would have. It did not surprise Damen. The proficiency and skill was innate in Laurent. He was born to rule. “He’s handling his role as king as he always has, without problem or complaint.”
Nikandros looked at Damen for a moment without speaking, shifting again. “I meant with you,” he said.

Damen ran a hand through his own hair, feeling the water droplets run down his face. Nikandros was looking at Damen like he was waiting for an answer, but Damen had no idea what was expected of him anymore. He had commanded troops at seventeen, had taken the throne and two kingdoms at twenty-five, but in this arena he was completely, utterly lost. It was a feeling, a helplessness that Damen had never dealt with before.

“He is angry,” Damen said. “That much is apparent. But he does not walk around me like he is afraid. Not like the way he did when he woke up. Whether that is how he really feels or because he is too staunch and strong-willed to act frightened, I don’t know.”

Nikandros looked like he was turning something over in his mind, weighing if it was something he should say or not. Damen was well accustomed to this look. They had been each other’s greatest friends since they were boys, telling each other things they told no one else, but Nikandros was so conscious, so respectful towards his king that he often held his tongue, not voicing all that he felt. Damen appreciated it, but at times he wished Nikandros would just speak his mind.

“We are just friends right now,” Damen said, knowing he needed a bit of coaxing. “Not king and kyros. Speak freely.”

“Perhaps,” Nikandros said, speaking like he was sounding the word out. “If you were to compare this to the last time he felt… similarly.”

Damen held eye contact, but he set his jaw at the words. They didn’t speak of Damen’s first time in Arles. Damen spoke of it with no one. He saw no reason to, and he felt no need.

Damen breathed in through his nose, letting it out through his mouth as he contemplated his word choice. “It’s not the same,” he said reluctantly. “He was pretending not to know who I was, then. He acted cruelly, but in a generalized sort of way. It was not personal then like it is now.”

“No,” Nikandros agreed. “But hatred is hatred.”

Damen flinched, looking away. The reaction was ridiculous because it was nothing he didn’t know, but that didn’t make it any easier. There was no other way to say it. Laurent hated him.

“He is one of the smartest people we know,” Nikandros continued when Damen said nothing. “He is perceptive enough to see how people act around the two of you. If there were a ploy to hurt him, you would have done so in the past two years. Jord and Paschal or any of the Veretioas would not allow their king to be in your presence if they thought he had cause to fear you. He knows this. He likely prefers to pretend as if he doesn’t, but he knows as much.”

Damen rubbed his face with his hand, trying to squeeze the tension out. What Nikandros was saying may have been true, but it didn’t matter to Damen in the grand scheme of things. Laurent may know he can be around Damen, but the fact of the matter was that he did not want to.

Damen lowered his arm so it was stretched out on the edge of the bath, the metal of his cuff audible as it banged against the marble rim. The noise rang out in the room, and Nikandros’ eyes fell to it. The words were in his eyes before he voiced them.

“Have you considered-“

“No,” Damen said.
“Damianos,” he said. “Listen to me. Perhaps if you removed the cuff—”

This was not the first time they had had this conversation. It had taken a while before Nikandros had gotten used to it on each of them, Damen specifically. Months had passed before his eyes did not still on it each time gold caught the light. But some time in the past two years, he had gotten passed his reservations. He stopped looking and grew used to what was like second skin to Damen and Laurent.

“No,” Damen repeated. It was non negotiable. “I will bend on many things. This is not one of them.”

Damen received one of the many looks that he had been receiving from Nikandros for years, a look that was often brought on by situations regarding Laurent. At those times, it had been something that Damen and Laurent found amusing, laughing to each other each time they managed to irritate Nikandros. Now, neither of them seemed amused.

“He would never give up on me,” Damen said, finding it harder to keep his voice steady. “If I was in his position. How can you expect that of me?”

“I would never presume to tell you what to do, Damianos,” Nikandros said, and Damen knew he would sound exasperated, had he not been so well trained. “I say that as your subject. As your friend, I am only trying to give you my advice.”

Damen pinched the spot between his brows, willing himself to calm down. Nikandros was not his enemy. Nikandros was someone who knew Damen, and knew him well. He lifted his hand for Nikandros to go on.

“You are the most loyal person I know, Damen,” he said. “I have told you this many times before. There is nothing you would not do for those who have earned your trust, or your affections, and I know now that Laurent has both. I know now,” Nikandros said. “That he is worthy of both.”

“But?” Damen said.

Nikandros let out a wary sigh, lifting himself from the water and wringing his hair out. “There is no but, Damen,” he said. “Not that you would listen if there was. Just try to remember the way you felt when you first met him. How did you feel each time one of the Veretians sung his praises?”

Damen thought of that. He remembered Jord and Orlant, his entire Prince’s Guard, unswervingly loyal despite the way Laurent had acted around them at the time. He thought of Aimeric. Of Paschal. Even Radel. So many people had treated Laurent with such respect, such admiration, and though Damen understood now why, it had vexed him then beyond comprehension. He couldn’t understand it, because no smile or longing gaze or loving words could add up to the manner of the man Damen thought he was facing.

“I am aware that circumstances are different,” Nikandros was saying. He had stepped out of the bath and was toweling himself down. “I know that your initial feelings towards each other were negative for different reasons. All I advise is that you keep in mind all that the two of you must have endured together, before you began to see a different side to each other.”

Damen remembered that time between him and Laurent well. It was not poetic words or the two of them idly sitting around, twiddling their thumbs that caused things to develop between them. It was actions. Occurrences. Ones that caused the two of them to act, both thoughtfully and impulsively showing sides to themselves that they had not always meant to show. Damen knew he that. He simply didn’t know where to begin.
Damen was alone in his chambers, sitting alone at the table, reading through a document that he and Laurent had written up together, nearly a month ago. They had left it with the council so that they could add their own revisions, tweaking certain things, adding and removing what they felt would better it. It had been returned to Damen today, and he was just finishing looking it over when there was a knock on the door.

Damen pushed his chair back, rubbing his face tiredly. He looked around the room, the emptiness of it, feeling wary to his bones as he stood up. He thought of his real chambers, their chambers that Laurent now occupied, and he felt his heart pang in his chest at how different this was. There was no familiarity, nothing to make it feel like his. Damen had never been one for such sentiments, small trinkets or ornaments adorning his room to make it feel lived in. He had never seen the point of it, as it was nothing but a place to sleep.

That, along with so many other things had changed, since he and Laurent moved into their new palace. Their chambers were filled with things that Damen would have never cared for in his rooms in Ios. Small things that was Laurent’s, was theirs. Damen looked around this room now, this foreign place, and he could physically feel what was missing. It was an ache that he felt inside each day he woke up alone in this new reality, always aware of what was missing.

Damen pulled the door open, and he didn’t manage to quell the jolt of his body when he saw who was behind it. Laurent was standing there, paying no mind to the guards who were faced the other way, smartly showing no reaction to the fact that one king had just come to see the other in a completely separate room.

Laurent’s face was void of emotion, though his eyes flicked over Damen’s shoulder as if to see if there was anyone else in the room with him. Damen tried not to think about what he may have been looking for as he cleared his throat.

“Hello,” Damen said.

Laurent looked back to Damen, staring at him silently. Damen motioned with his hand behind him.

“Would you like to come in?” he asked, keeping all signs of hope out of his voice. He highly doubted Laurent had come to Damen’s chambers to hide away alone with him, but he saw no other reason as to why Laurent had come at all.

“No,” Laurent said. And before Damen could respond, “it has been two weeks.”

It was all he said, with no elaboration, though judging by his expression Laurent assumed Damen would understand. When Damen looked at him questioningly Laurent said, “Amis, the boy we sent to pay off his debt in the kitchens. He was given two weeks before we were to check to see his progress.”

Damen remembered. He had gone multiple times to check on the boy, despite the fact that it was not typically the role of a king. Amis had been flourishing, despite having no previous experience, and he had thanked Damen for their kindness at every opportunity.

“I am going to see him,” Laurent continued. He stopped at that, looking at Damen for a few beats before breathing in, letting it out slowly.

“Come,” he said.

Damen felt his lips part, though he had no idea what he was planning to say. He knew the feeling
stirring inside him was likely foolish, but the last thing he was expecting was for Laurent to actively involve Damen in any of the matters Laurent planned to see to.

“You want me to come with you?” Damen said.

Laurent narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know what you think I’m asking,” he said, “or what hidden meaning you’re looking for, but don’t bother. We are both kings, and we passed a sentence. It would make little sense for the both of us to not see it through together.”

Damen wanted to argue the contempt in his voice or to find another angle, but he chose instead to latch onto what little he could. Laurent may not have wanted to, but he had taken Damen into account when making a decision. He nodded, motioning ahead of himself for Laurent to begin walking. He followed behind, hearing the doors shut behind them.

The kitchens were on the opposite side of the palace, and it would be many steps and winding halls before they reached it. Damen could feel that it would be a quiet walk, and although he knew it would be better to let it be that, he also knew that he could not.

He thought of the throne room that day, of what had gone through his mind towards the end. He looked towards Laurent who was walking forward purposefully, not sparing Damen a glance. Damen steelied himself, clearing his throat quietly. When Laurent continued to pay him no mind, Damen said his name.

Laurent’s head jerked to the side, a surprised look on his face like he didn’t expect to be spoken to, a look that quickly went flat. Damen ignored it, speaking over his reservation.

“There is something I wanted to speak to you about,” he said.

Laurent stopped walking, and it was so abrupt that Damen had continued walking for a second before he realized Laurent was behind him. He stopped, turning to face Laurent whose eyebrows were raised. Damen hadn’t expected Laurent to respond willingly, and his surprised pause turned Laurent’s look to irritation.

“Well?” Laurent said.

Damen took a deep breath, stepping forward.

“Your Akielon,” he said.

Laurent’s eyebrows lowered, and his expression turned to one that Damen couldn’t decipher. His arms were crossed loosely. “What of my Akielon?"

They hadn’t spoken Akielon once, not since everything had begun. They had only spoken Veretian, something Damen hadn’t thought much of until now. Laurent’s Akielon had been good before they had met, passable, but it was nowhere near as good as Damen’s Veretian, and he knew Laurent had taken notice of that.

“It’s very good,” Damen said. ”But it used to be better.”

Laurent’s look of irritation did not go away, though it was joined by impatience. “Excuse me?”

“When we were on the road,” Damen explained. “To the border. You told me you wanted us to speak Akielon from then on. All of our conversations, private or public.”

“Why would I do that?” Laurent asked, after a small scoff of disbelief.
“You said it was in the case of eavesdroppers,” Damen said. “But you had been planning to secure an alliance with Akielos to gain more manpower against your uncle, and you knew it would be wiser for your cause to be as fluent as possible.” Damen hadn’t known of that additional reasoning at the time. He had only put it together later on, when people would comment quietly on how good he spoke the language, and Laurent looked on impassively as if he had always known he would gain this upper hand.

Laurent understood that now as well, Damen could see. Laurent knew himself, and he knew that was something he would do. It was simply one of the ways his mind worked, always three steps ahead, planning for every possible obstacle.

“And your point?” Laurent asked.

Damen hesitated, knowing Laurent would not react well.

“I can help you improve again,” Damen said tentatively, looking for all signs of emotion that might pass over Laurent’s face. “I remember where you excelled and where you needed correcting. You managed to speak nearly as well as you speak Veretian.”

Not much to Damen’s surprise, Laurent did not take the suggestion well. His look of irritation turned to aggravation, lines in his forehead deepening as his face contorted. “Do you think I require your help?” He asked sharply.

Laurent didn’t want favors. He didn’t want help. As far as Laurent’s memory served him, Laurent was used to doing everything on his own. He didn’t know what it was to be offered assistance in anything. It was one of the things he had slowly adjusted to with Damen. Taking someone else’s council. Taking someone else’s help.

“No,” Damen said honestly. “You don’t need anyone’s help, but this is not a matter of need. This is a matter of doing all that you can for your kingdom, and speaking the language to the best of your ability, a necessity that I can help with.”

Laurent still said nothing. He looked entirely displeased by the whole situation, but Damen knew the biggest displeasure to him was that he knew Damen was right.

“Someone can be in the room with us,” Damen said quietly. “If it will make you more comfortable.”

That did not seem to make Laurent any happier. “I don’t need a guard,” Laurent snapped.

Damen nodded, not wanting to worsen his response, or his reception of the situation. Laurent did not like it. Hated it, in fact, but he had to think like a ruler. A king had to make the decisions that were hard on themselves, as long as it benefited their people. All leaders knew this, and Damen knew it was what Laurent was thinking, as much as he didn’t want to.

Laurent looked around the hall aimlessly, his mouth a tight line as he brought his gaze back to Damen.

“We begin tomorrow,” he said, and then he turned, continuing down the hall before Damen could say anything else.
The next night, alone in the tent, Laurent said:

‘As we draw closer to the border, I think it would be safer—more private—to hold our discussions in your language rather than mine.’

He said it in carefully pronounced Akielon.

Damen stared at him, feeling as though the world had just been rearranged.

‘What is it?’ said Laurent.

‘Nice accent,’ said Damen, because despite everything, the corner of his mouth was beginning helplessly to curve up.

Laurent’s eyes narrowed.

‘You mean in case of eavesdroppers,’ said Damen, mostly just to see if Laurent knew the word ‘eavesdroppers’.

Steadily: ‘Yes.’

And so they talked. Laurent’s vocabulary hit its limits when it came to military terms and manoeuvres, but Damen filled in the gaps. It was of course no surprise to find that Laurent had a well-stocked armoury of elegant phrases and bitchy remarks, but could not talk in detail about anything sensible.

Damen had to keep reminding himself not to grin. He didn’t know why listening to Laurent pick his way through the Akielon language had him in good spirits, but it did. Laurent did indeed have a pronounced Veretian accent, which softened and blurred consonants and added a lilt, with stresses on unexpected syllables. It transformed the Akielon words, gave them a hint of exoticism, of luxuriousness that was very Veretian, though that effect was at least partially combatted by the precision of Laurent’s speaking. Laurent spoke Akielon as a fastidious man might pick up a soiled handkerchief, between thumb and forefinger.

For his own part, being able to speak freely in his own language was like having a weight lifted from his shoulders that he had not realized he was carrying. It was late when Laurent called a halt to the discussion, pushing a half-drunk goblet of water away from himself, and stretching.

Laurent was in the large hall, his shoulder reclined comfortably on a stone pillar. Dinner was nearly over, the remnants of the dessert scattered on platters and plates. The evening had reached the point where people had changed seats so they could converse with other people, or were simply wandering around the room, finding something to pique their interest.
Laurent had needed a little bit of space and distance so he had left the table and come here, quickly to be joined by a young Akielon man. Laurent was unsure who he was, but the familiar way the man was speaking with Laurent told him that he should, at least to some degree. He had mentioned Thrace twice, and something of the trade routes between there and Delfeur. Laurent could feel that the conversation was beginning to veer into unfamiliar territory.

“You must join me for a walk in the gardens, Your Highness,” he said, finishing off his wine and setting it on the table by them. “I would love to continue our last conversation.”

It was far past time for Laurent to extract himself from the situation. Luckily, he had somewhere else he needed to be. “Perhaps another time,” Laurent said. “I have something I need to attend to.”

Perhaps luckily was not the word, because Damianos’ chambers was where he needed to be. Regardless, an opportunity was an opportunity.

“Certainly,” the man said. “Another time.”

“Certainly,” Laurent echoed. He allowed himself another moment to take in the man’s appearance and retain as many of his features as he could so he could question Herode about him later. He turned towards his original table and when he saw that the seat beside his was empty he sighed, making his way for the door.

Laurent was seated at a table across from Damianos, a goblet of water in his hands. There was nothing on the table but a jug of water and a bowl of oranges. The first time Laurent had come into Damianos’ chambers for these lessons he had eyed the oranges, looking at Damianos questioningly. Damianos had shrugged, saying they were there in case anyone wanted them, pushing them forward in a way he likely thought was subtle. Laurent had not questioned it since, but he had yet to eat from the bowl.

When they had begun, Laurent had reluctantly sat down in this same spot, eyeing Damianos who was looking at Laurent carefully.

“Well?” Laurent had said. “This was your suggestion. What is your strategy?”

Damianos had smiled briefly. “This is not strategy,” he said. “This is taking steps to be the best we can be for our kingdom.”

So, strategy. Laurent looked at him impatiently.

“Well?” he repeated.

“Speak,” Damianos said

Laurent gazed at him flatly. “What.”

“As I said, I don’t have a strategy,” Damianos replied. “I did not quiz you, or seek out your knowledge the previous time we did this,” he said. “We continued to speak as we did before, about whatever it was we would speak about, only it was in Akielon. I would correct you when need be, or fill in your blanks.”

Laurent was silent for a moment. “And that was effective?” He asked in Akielon now.

Damianos’ smile was back. Laurent didn’t understand what about this situation was causing
happiness. “It was,” he said, in Akielon as well. It was the first time Damianos had spoken Akielon to him. Until now they had been speaking only in Veretion, something Damianos was infuriatingly, effortlessly good at. “Multitudes of people commented on your fluency,” he added.

Laurent settled back in his chair, lifting a brow. “And what had we spoken about?” he asked. He was speaking slightly slower than he did in Veretion, something he did not like but could not control. He did not have much practice in the language, though some inner part of himself had always known he should. Knowing your enemy’s language was just as important as your friend’s.

Damianos stared at him in suspended silence, briefly, before leaning forward, resting his forearms on the table between them.

“It’s been a while,” he said. “I don’t particularly remember our exact conversations.”

Laurent had shrugged, not really all that interested. Damianos brought up an issue from the council meeting that day before Laurent could ask anything else, and the conversation had begun.

They had had a handful of these lessons where they only spoke Akielon, Laurent only switching to Veretian when he needed to know how to say something. Damianos spoke slowly, not at an obnoxious speed but slow enough that Laurent knew it was for his benefit.

Laurent didn’t like it. He didn’t like any of this, but he was helpless in the matter. As much as he wished to pretend this was unnecessary, or some ploy, he knew it was not. The kingdom consisted of both Veretians and Akielons. Damianos spoke both languages in a nearly identical manner of ease. Laurent could not, and that was not only a problem for his leadership, but for himself. Apparently there had been a time where he knew it was wisest to learn the language for a future alliance. That alliance was now.

Laurent’s Akielon was improving. Not in a drastic way, he knew a few nights of this were in no way enough, but sometimes when he spoke, the words flowed out easier than they had previously, in that way when you practiced a new language and felt that small thrill of pride when you executed a line perfectly. Words came easier to him than they had at first. He spent less time thinking how to say this or that, and more time trying to ignore the heavy fact that it was just he and Damianos alone in these rooms.

Now they sat alone again, Laurent still trying to ignore this fact.

Damianos seemed at ease, though he continued to speak with a certain hesitancy as if he was testing out each word before saying it. Laurent spoke dully, as he was sure his facial expression reflected.

Up until now they had been discussing the Games. It was not particularly of importance in that moment, but they were extensive and it was something that could be talked about at length, and it was an Akielon custom. It only made sense. Damianos had been explaining The Okton, some odd sport done from horseback which involved competing in a spear throwing competition with others. Laurent would occasionally ask questions about it, not because he particularly cared, but because the more he spoke in the language, the better.

The conversation had eventually exhausted itself, and Damianos reached for an orange the moment it was silent. He began to tear away at the peal, waiting for Laurent to redirect the conversation as he tended to. Laurent’s leg that was crossed against his knee shook, and he focused on the rhythm of it as he looked at Damianos, who would only occasionally glance up at Laurent, fleetingly, as if he was only allowing himself moments. Laurent’s thoughts drifted back to the Akielon from dinner with the similar coloring.
He sighed. He might as well ask, if he was to be subjected to conversation regardless.

“There was a man who approached me,” Laurent said. “At dinner.” Damianos nodded.

“He mentioned Thrace quite a few times,” Laurent continued. “I don’t know who he was.”

Damianos was looking down at the orange as he tore the peel off. “Pyrrus,” he said. “He is the son of the kyros.”

Laurent looked at Damianos oddly, waiting for him to meet his gaze, which he did not. “You were not at the table when I checked,” Laurent said, which caused Damianos to look up. “How do you know who I’m referring to?”

Damianos looked at him for another moment before looking back down, shoving a segment of the orange into his mouth. “He tries to capitalize your attention each time he comes to Delpha,” he said. His face was scrunched like the orange had soured. “Did he speak about trade again?”

Laurent quirked a brow. Damianos finished the orange.

“He was very…” Laurent began, his mind searching for the word and failing. He ignored the instinct to huff indignantly. “Enthusiastic,” he said in Veretian. Damianos said the word in Akielon, which Laurent repeated.

“I’m not entirely sure what you would speak about,” Damianos said, answering Laurent’s unasked question. “You tended to remove yourself from the conversation quickly.”

Laurent felt displeasure seep into him again. He knew he should get used to constant reminders of the insight that Damianos seemed to have, but he didn’t know if he could. At the very least, he had gotten better at not wanting to snap something each time, and he was able to be around him for longer than half an hour without wanting to retch.

Regardless, there was only so much he could take for one night. He dropped his leg and brought his hands to the surface of the table, pushing himself up. Damianos looked up as he went, standing as well.

Laurent narrowed his eyes. “What are you doing?”

Damianos looked to the door behind Laurent’s shoulder, looking back at Laurent with slightly parted lips. “I-“

“I’ve told you before,” Laurent said. “This is not a courtship. You are not walking me out. Sit back down.”

Damianos looked like he wanted to argue, but Laurent did not stay long enough to hear it. He turned and began to walk for the door, speaking once over his shoulder.

“He will continue tomorrow,” he said in Veretian.

Laurent was pacing in his room. It had been a long day, and he was feeling the affects of it now. His muscles ached from his sparring session, a feeling that had become a familiar thing to him over the years, though as a child he had never been one to associate themselves with sore arms from rigorous athleticism. That had come later.
When Laurent had entered the training arena to meet Jord, he had found him with someone else. Pallas, one of the men in his guard. Pallas had immediately sheathed his sword when he saw Laurent and stepped away, bowing his head with a, “Your Highness,” before turning for the door.

“Stay,” Laurent had told him in Akielon, unsheathing his own sword. Laurent had yet to spar with an Akielon, and it was both something he needed to do, and something that would prove insightful. Akielons and Veretians had different forms of fighting, different techniques. Everyone did, and Laurent knew Jord well at his point. He could anticipate most of his moves, and knew how to dodge them, almost by instinct. A fresh opponent would be good.

He switched off between Pallas and Jord, the constant alternation of style proving useful as he had thought. Jord had taken his cues, and they spoke only Akielon for the duration of their sparring.

Laurent’s Akielon had certainly improved. His lessons were helping, and as reluctant as he was to admit it, he had only one person to thank for that. However, Laurent’s self-admission of the benefits of his lessons were not what caused his reluctance now. Perhaps it was willfulness.

An increase in his Akielon fluency would help him tremendously. It was pivotal for meetings with delegates, and it was imperative for his Akielon subjects. Above all, it as simple logic and respect to be able to speak the tongue of your people, and Laurent would have not known that he had been able to, effortlessly, had Damianos not told him. This was a skill he picked up in the past two years, years which were extremely vital. Kingdoms had been united in that time. Laurent had been crowned as king. Laurent had-

He could only imagine what else had transpired between then and now. What other essential events had occurred, but he could no longer imagine. He had to know, which meant he had to swallow his averseness and allow himself to be walked through it.

Now he was in Damianos’ chambers, having walked passed him the instant the door opened before Damianos could get a greeting out. He stalked towards the table they sat at every night, reminding himself that this was not a reminiscence. This was a necessity.

Laurent sat first, taking an orange and rolling it between his palms. He was looking ahead, waiting until Damianos came to the table before speaking. It was only when Damianos stepped in front of him that Laurent spoke.

“I don’t wish to practice,” Laurent said. “There is something else I want to discuss.”

Damianos paused halfway down, stopping for a moment before sitting all the way, placing his hands in front of him slowly.

“Allright,” he said in Veretian.

Laurent looked at the orange, spinning it slowly before placing it back in the bowl. He looked up, exhaling quietly.

“You said I left the palace for border duty.”

It seemed to take Damianos a few seconds before he understood what Laurent was referring to, a situation from the past. He blinked. “Yes.”

“And you left as well.”

Another pause. “Yes.”
Laurent nodded, tapping his fingers against his thigh. “I want you to take me through that time,” he said half-heartedly.

Damianos’ eyes widened, and Laurent held a hand up before he spoke. “I do not care to reminisce,” he clarified. “But I understand that that time was crucial, fundamental to my play against my uncle, and resulted with me on the throne. It is something I need to know.”

Damianos looked at him, seeming to be searching for something that was certainly not there before he nodded back. “And you don’t…” he said, his eyes slightly downcast. “Want to start from before then?”

Laurent’s lip quirked. “Would you like to recount your time as my slave?” he asked. “I have no objections.”

Though in all honesty, that was not exactly true. Laurent had contemplated whether it was worth asking about Damianos’ time in Arles, but ultimately decided against it. Damianos had been in chains, and Laurent had seen his back. Laurent had extracted some form of revenge during his time as Laurent’s slave, of that he had proof, and truth be told, he did not feel the need to hear more about it. Authentic usage of one or not, there was no situation in which Laurent would ever relish slavery. In anyone.

Damianos looked away. “No.”

“Pity,” Laurent said.

“Pity,” Laurent said.

Damianos turned back to him, his features contorted into anger. Laurent felt his smile grow, and Damianos ran a hand down his face, shaking his head as he inhaled. He dropped his hand after, his features slightly more smoothed.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

Laurent felt his smile slip away. He did not want to know, he needed to. And now he would push down his own discomfort for the good of his people, as he had been for weeks now.

“As Crown Prince, border duty was a requirement for me,” Laurent said. “An expectancy. It was also a death trap, one that I had carefully been avoiding for years.” Damianos said nothing, but he did not look as if he had heard anything knew. “I am having a hard time understanding why I would knowingly put myself into such a hole.”

Damianos lifted his other hand to the table as well so both palms were faced down. “Your uncle had been badgering you about it since I had met you,” he said, frowning. “Eluding to your cowardice. You were neatly pushing it off, but evidently, you were backed into a corner.”

Laurent looked at him steadily. If he was backed into corners, he found his way out.

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“You were on trial,” Damianos said.

“That seemed to happen a lot,” Laurent mused flatly. Damianos let out a breath, lifting his shoulders.

“What was the trial for?”

Damianos looked away slightly. “It was not- initially for you,” he said. “But your uncle was nearly as good at talking as you, and he managed to turn it around.”

Laurent’s mind momentarily latched on to the past tense that was used for his uncle before he cleared
his throat. “And what was the original purpose of the trial?”

Damianos lifted the goblet to his lips, taking a long sip before setting it down carefully. He kept both hands around the rim. “There was an assassination attempt,” he said. “The insurgents were unclear, as was who they intended to kill. At least to the court.”

Laurent did not need memories to put it together. “I see,” he said. “And who did my did my uncle plan to use as his scapegoat?”

“Akielos,” he said. Then, “Me.”

It occurred to Laurent then, though it should have sooner.

“My uncle knew who you were,” Laurent said numbly. Of course he had. It was perfect, really. How he must have relished in seeing Laurent in such close proximity to his brother’s murderer. Laurent would not have been surprised if his uncle had somehow arranged for Damianos to be sent to him, which in all likelihood, he probably had.

Damianos held his eyes. “Yes.”

Laurent pressed his lips together, waiting a moment for the surge or anger he felt to pass before speaking. “And how am I to know you weren’t colluding in my attempted murder?” Laurent asked.

“If I had wanted—” Damianos began, but he stopped himself midsentence and started again. “Because I am the one who saved you.”

Laurent narrowed his eyes, his fingers tightening on his thigh. He had seen the scars he had given Damianos, and he remembered the crippling hatred he had felt, all those times he had fantasized about what he would do, given the chance to face Damianos. Nothing about what he had planned amounted to treating Damianos in a way that would make him want to save Laurent’s life.

“I’m sure,” Laurent replied.

“I would not lie to you,” Damianos said. “Even if I had been involved, it would not change where we stand now, so I have no reason to lie to you.”


Damianos looked away again, bringing a hand to his chin. “I don’t know.”

Laurent scoffed, causing him to look back. “I don’t,” he insisted. “Do you want me to be honest? I am. I had no love for you then, and I had no reason to do anything for you, but you were alone. You had been drugged, unarmed, in a place you thought was safe.”

“And?”

“And, what?” Damianos replied. “What manner of a man simply stands by when someone is being harmed? Where is the honor in that?”

Laurent looked at him. And looked. He waited for Damianos to continue, which he did not.

“Go on,” Laurent eventually said.

“The weapons were Akielon,” he continued. “As was the pleasure drug you induced. You knew it was your uncle’s doing from the start. To have you killed, and to pin it on Akielos. You knew it was not something you could prove, and pleaded the case that I was the one that was attacked. You spent
“Why,” Laurent said through his teeth. “Would I even plead for you?” He didn’t know how much longer he would be willing to listen to this.

“Because I saved your life,” he said in a quiet voice. “And you are a man of fairness and honor.”

Laurent lifted his own goblet to his lips, swallowing the water before he spit it out. He set it down heavily. “Get on with it.”

Damianos took a moment to reply. “Your uncle turned things around, contradicting everything you said, attempting to make it seem as if I had attacked you. Your... sympathizing with Akielos did not look good for you, the defense being uncharacteristic, and there was the matter that I...“

“You what,” Laurent said, after a pronounced silence.

With colored cheeks Damianos said, “ran.”

Laurent leaned back in his chair, resting a cheek on his fist. “Well,” he said. “It looks like we didn’t have such a nice time together after all.”

Damianos continued on as if Laurent hadn’t spoken. “I was brought back by the Prince’s Guard quickly,” he said. “And you were hours into an interrogation. The council was weary. Your uncle was resilient. He claimed that if your defense was true and not out of sympathy for Akielos, if you truly had no sympathy for Akielos, then you would not continue to deflect border duty.”

Laurent’s mouth set in a tight line. He brought his fist to his mouth, focusing on the table. He nodded his head slowly. It was just the thing his uncle would spin. Laurent remembered all the times he had sidestepped riding to Delfeur, wishing he could go fulfill his duty but knowing it was a suicide mission. There was no way he could go and survive.

And yet, he had.

Laurent raised his eyes slowly. “Why would I take you with me?” he asked.

Damianos just looked at him. Laurent lifted an impatient brow.

“Because you needed me,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Laurent spat.

“Push aside your anger for a second and just think,” Damianos said. “I was another person between you and your uncle. I knew the terrain. Whatever was between us then, you were still a better option on the throne than your uncle who wanted to weaken Akielos.” When Laurent was silent he said, “I had multiple opportunities to harm you. I took none of them.”

“That’s enough.”

“You couldn’t do it alone,” Damianos continued. “You would have if you could, you knew that.”

“Enough,” Laurent said. “I did not ask for an analysis on my character or a rundown on my experiences with my uncle. That is not what I want.”

“What do you want?”

To understand. “Tell me of the journey to the border. I would assume my uncle did not make it easy
“No,” Damianos agreed. “But we made it easier on ourselves. We went south-west instead of your uncle’s direct route, through Varenne and Alier. We avoided ambushes that way.”

It was a sound plan. “And what exactly was your position?”

Damianos blew out a slow breath, lifting his shoulders. “It was a bit ambiguous at first,” he said. “I did simple, menial tasks, almost like a steward. But you also used my knowledge to your advantage.”

He paused as if waiting for Laurent to question him, which he didn’t.

“I knew the terrain,” Damianos repeated. “Geography, strategizing, tactics, those were all second nature to me. They were things I excelled at, which you knew. We spent hours into the nights over maps, planning and maneuvering. I answered any questions you had, and I offered my opinions, which you listened to. Usually.”

Laurent inhaled slowly, hoping to clear his head. Taking war advice form this man was not something Laurent wanted to sit and ponder, but he understood it now, as he was sure he did then. Damianos had been commanding troops since seventeen. Laurent knew the skill and capability that had to entail. Beating his uncle had always been Laurent’s main priority, and he would have been a fool not to use every weapon in his arsenal to do so. Damianos was that and nothing else. A weapon.

“I assume we began at Chastillon,” Laurent said, feeling like he was stepping around the word.

“Yes,” Damen said. “That was the first night we began our strategizing, after we clarified our… misgivings.”

“Misgivings.”

Damianos licked his lips like we was prompting himself to speak, which irritated Laurent. “Speak,” Laurent said. “I opened this conversation, don’t act as if you are shy.”

“We were gong to be alone,” Damen said. “Sharing a tent, for the duration of the ride. You did not want any false threats or eluding, it would serve no purpose. You put a dagger in my hand and directed it towards yourself, knowing I would not use it.”

“And why would you not use it?”

“I told you,” Damianos said. “You were a better prospect for the throne. The stronger you were, the weaker your uncle was. At the time, that was enough reason to help you.”

“‘At the time’?”

Damianos shook his head. “I would do anything for you now, Laurent.”

Laurent ignored that. “Lovely,” he said. “So we were friends.”

“But not yet,” Damianos replied. “But we had an understanding.”

Laurent rubbed his face. “After Chastillon.”

“You have to understand,” Damianos said. “Your uncle put you in a horrible situation. He set it up so you would be doomed form the start. The mercenaries he provided were useless. Your captain was Govart.” He ran a hand through his hair, disturbing his curls. “And there was Aimeric…”

Laurent searched his brain for the name but could not pinpoint it. “Should that name have any
significance to me?”

Damianos pursed his lips, nodding his head almost reluctantly, like he was hoping to bypass this. “He was from Fortaine,” Damianos said. “Guion’s son.”

Laurent continued to rack his brain, and eventually, something small fit into place. He had never been to Fortaine, but he knew his uncle had frequented there. Though the memory was hazy, he recalled a letter announcing the extension of a certain tip.

“He was one of my men?” Laurent asked doubtfully. Aimeric had to have been quite young, not much younger than Laurent had-

Laurent’s mind halted. His stomach turned as he put his face in his palm, swallowing down what felt like rising bile.

“What did he do?” Laurent asked in a low voice. He wasn’t even sure if he was referring to Aimeric or his uncle. He assumed it was all the same.

Damianos didn’t seem too sure either, but he answered nonetheless. “He was wrong,” He said. “But he thought he was doing right-“


“He caused trouble,” Damianos conceded. “He picked fights, instigated arguments. Stirred up problems.”

“And when that didn’t work?” Laurent guessed.

Damianos exhaled. “He got into bed with your captain.”

“Govart?” Laurent’s face twisted.

Damianos’ own face scrunched. “Govart was no longer your captain, at that time.”

“Jord had said he was removed,” Laurent recalled. He hesitated before adding, “at your advisement.”

“Govart was worthless,” Damianos said. “Both as a man and a captain. He shirked all his duties. Did nothing to make something of the men you were given. Mocked everything. Made a mockery your company.”

He was saying nothing Laurent didn’t already know, regardless of the fact that he recalled none of it. He had memories of Govart, unfortunately, and although he was sure his uncle had sent him as Laurent’s captain for those very reasons, Laurent could think of no way he had managed to have him removed without setting his uncle off. He voiced as much.

“I know,” Damianos said. “You knew that too, and you were waiting for a situation to arise organically, but it was taking time which we did not have. I brought that to your attention, insistenty, and it had been enough to spur you into action.”

“And what did I do?”

“You fought him,” Damianos said. “Effortlessly. Brilliantly. It was the last thing- he had been expecting. You won, of course. You let him live but sent him away, because you thought he had information on your uncle that would prove helpful.”

Laurent looked at him contemplatively. Of course he had won, Govart was no match for him in a
duel, but that was hardly the point. Laurent could not have simply decided to fight with him because
he felt like it. That would have solved no problem and only added fuel to the fire that was his uncle.

“What prompted me?” Laurent asked.

Damianos’ gaze changed. Altered. “He insulted your family,” he said, lifting his water to his lips
Laurent felt something inside him clench, and he ignored it. “What did he say?”

“I’m not going to repeat it.” When Laurent looked at him, waiting, Damianos shook his head. “No.”

“Do you think I need coddling?” Laurent asked.

“This is not about that,” Damianos said exasperatedly. “This is about you never being disrespected
again.”

“I seemed to have done a good job of that myself,” Laurent said.

Damianos slammed the goblet down. It impacted the table loudly, water sloshing over the sides.
Laurent did not flinch as he looked at the spilled water, and back up at Damianos who’s eyes were
dark.

“Enough,” he said.

“Is it?” Laurent asked.

“Stop,” Damianos said. He looked like he wanted to stand and was holding himself down. “I don’t
know what to tell you,” he said. “I don’t know how to make things better, but stop belittling yourself.
I don’t want to hear it.”

Laurent looked at him blankly. This man was a joke. The only thing he had taken from anything
Laurent said was that Laurent had disparaged himself? He was more deluded than Laurent had
accredited him. They held each other’s gaze infuriatingly, but Laurent was not one to back down.

“Jord said he was my captain, after,” Laurent said, after Damianos looked away first.

Damianos nodded wordlessly.

“He said there were complications, and that he made mistakes. I assume Aimeric was that mistake.”

Damianos nodded again. “Aimeric had him fooled. He had us all fooled. He had been spying for
your uncle, reporting back to him. The revelation of that, among other things that were spun against
you had evidently led to the battle against Lord Touars’ men, which was when the captaincy was
passed to me. Aimeric was taken prisoner.”

Laurent leveled Damianos with a gaze, contemplating his thoughts. He knew who Damianos was.
He knew what he could do. Unfortunately, that also meant that Laurent knew his capabilities. It
could not have just been Laurent’s pride that had made him delay handing the captaincy over, had
that really been the right choice.

“I see that you have garnered the respect of the Veretians,” Laurent said. “How did they respond to
you initially, that it took a battle against a border lord to make you captain?”

“It took a bit of time,” Damianos amended. “But they adjusted fairly quickly.” After a pronounced
pause: “My being Akielon was not the only reason for your reluctance.” He was silent, his eyes
flicking away as he lifted the arm with the cuff slightly.
“Their assumptions were false,” he added, when Laurent blanched, his face souring. “But their judgment would have been clouded nonetheless.”

This was nothing Laurent couldn’t figure out himself. Damianos had been his slave. Of course people that thought they were fucking. He made a gesture with his hand, partly waving this conversation away, partly prompting Damianos to go on.

“The men,” Laurent said.

“Your uncle provided them,” Damianos explained. “So naturally, they were inept. Disloyal. They couldn’t fight, and they didn’t care to. We had two weeks, and it wasn’t enough. You were aware of the severity of the situation but felt as if your hands were tied. You planned to mold them through deception and cynicism, but that was not going to accomplish what was needed.”

“And what would?” Laurent asked.

“Time,” Damianos said. “I told you, you listened to some of my advise, more so as time went on. You managed to gain an extra two weeks, and we used them wisely. Jord would help, and the three of us worked hard to shape something of the men. We created drills, and taught them to hold a line. It all felt helpless at first, but we pushed hard, and eventually, they responded.”

“A month was not enough,” Damianos continued. “But we made it work. We made something of the men, and weeded out the worst of them. They became something.”

Laurent traced the rim of his goblet with his finger. “What next?”

Damianos tilted his head, his eyes glazing over in the way they did when someone was reflecting. He was trying to remember, his head straightening when he did.

“We were camped in Nesson-Eloy,” he said. “You had to go into town to meet a messenger, and you could not go alone. You needed help. You took me.”

Laurent pursed his lips, his finger still circling the rim. “What messenger?”

“I didn’t know at first,” Damianos said. “You didn’t say. The night was extremely long. When we finally got to him, he handed you a scroll which you read and burnt. You gave him your signet ring. I believe you said, ‘Tell him I will wait for him at Ravenel’.”

“‘Him’?”

“Nikandros,” Damianos clarified. “He was a general in the Akielon army at the time, as well as Kyros. You had been in contact with him, and promised him proof of Kastor’s treachery in exchange for men against your uncle.”

“I assume you were the proof.”

“Yes.”

Laurent removed his hand from the goblet, leaning back in his chair. He tried to absorb this. His intentions had been to take Ravenel, and to have an Akielon army show up to find Damianos, the Crown Prince who had supposedly dead, well and alive. Proof. He was no fool, They would not have left them there. Damianos would have left with them. Laurent had gone into the situation, knowing it would result in letting Damianos go.

The problem was, Laurent had no idea when that decision had been made, and Damianos would
have no idea, he said himself that he had not even known who the messenger was.

Laurent took in a calming breath, which did not do all that much to help. Every decision he had ever made since he was fifteen was to beat his uncle. It drove his every single move. He had to trust himself, and the choices he had made, even if he couldn’t remember them. If he had strategized that letting Damianos go was an equal exchange for an army, then it had to have been.

“You said the night was long,” Laurent said, mainly to change the course of his thoughts. “Where was the problem?”

“We were being followed,” Damianos said. “By two men. We took turns and shortcuts to throw them off our trail, but they were persistent. Instead of going directly to the inn where your contact was waiting for you, you took us to a brothel.”

Laurent felt his brows pinch. “With women?”

To Laurent’s surprise, Damianos laughed at that. He didn’t know what was funny about what he had said, but it was enough to cause Damianos’ face to light up, his eyes crinkling as his shoulders shook lightly. The unexpected reaction was simply that: unexpected, and it caused Laurent to shake his head in bewilderment. “What?”

“Nothing,” Damianos said around a lingering smile. “Yes, women, but we didn’t touch anyone. You requested an empty room which we retired to quickly. We planned leave out the back and mislead our followers, but the window was grilled shut.”

“Well versed in brothels?” Laurent asked.

Damianos still looked at ease as he continued to retell what happened. “I pushed the chest in front of the door so no one would come in, and tore the grill off so we could escape out the window.”

He paused as if he was trying to remember what came next, and Laurent just looked at him. “With what?”

Damianos gave him an amused look. “My hands?” he said.

Laurent looked at him for another stretch of silence before nodding. “Continue.”

Damianos squinted in thought. “We had lost them at that point, though they found us later on. We made our way to the inn, but you needed to disguise yourself. The mistress at the brothel had recognized you.”

Damianos held his tongue then, and Laurent lifted his hand for him to go on.

“You brought an earing with you,” Damianos said, in a softer tone that you would use with a spooked horse. “Blue sapphires.” Hesitantly, “It was not yours.”

It was clear Damianos did not want to say who’s it was, and he didn’t have to. Laurent could conjure the earing up in his mind, just form the simple description. He had seen it a handful of times before, the long gems brushing a lean shoulder, peaking out from a tumble of brown curls.

“Go on,” Laurent said. He was looking at the table.

In the same gentle tone: “You still have the earing-“

“I said go on.”
Damianos cleared his throat. “You orchestrated the evening. You had me wear aristocratic clothing, something excessive enough that would cover my cuffs and collar. You presented yourself as my pet.”

Laurent willed himself not to react. He knew as much, he had assumed as soon as Damianos had mentioned the earring.

“Well?” Laurent said. “What happened in the inn?”

“I ordered food,” Damianos said. “You played cards with Volo, another patron.”

“Cards?”

Damianos nodded. “You like card games.”

He did like card games. That was not what gave him pause. “Why would I play someone at cards when I had a messenger to meet?”

“You wanted to win his hat,” Damianos said, motioning to Laurent’s hair. “To cover your mousy hair. And,” he added. “You were having fun.”

Laurent highly doubted that. He was conducting business. “And then?”

“We went upstairs,” Damianos said, after a gap. “You met with the messenger.”

“And after he left?”


“I thought you ordered food.” Laurent said.

An odd look crossed Damianos’ face. “You didn’t eat.”

Laurent returned the odd look before shrugging it off. “What then?”

After another pause, “We slept.”

“Did you know,” Laurent said. “You have the same look on your face each time you lie.”

“I’m not lying,” Damianos replied, his mouth a little crooked. “You slept.”

“I would assume I eventually slept, yes. I’m asking what came before that.”

“We spoke,” Damianos said. “I don’t remember about what.” He was beginning to look uncomfortable, which oddly lightened Laurent’s mood. Some instinctual part of his mind latched on to the fact that Damianos was not telling him what they spoke about, but his squirming amused Laurent nonetheless.

“Fine,” Laurent said. He was almost grinning. He didn’t know why. “Then?”

“Our followers came back,” Damianos said. “Some time in the night. We didn’t have time to leave properly, so we left out the window, jumped to the adjacent balcony.” he shook his head. “It was a very long night.”

“And they found us?”
The edge of Damianos’ lip curled. “Not initially, no. We had been stuck on the balcony for some time in extremely tight quarters, needing to stay quiet when they barged into the room with the houseboy and the man you played at cards.” His smile deepened like the memory amused him. “We eventually scaled the wall and made it to the roof, away from them, until you kicked a loose tile down.”

Laurent blinked. “I don’t see why I would do that, especially if escape was imperative.”

“Apparently,” Damianos said. “You enjoy the game.”

Before Laurent could comment, he continued to speak. “It turned into a chase. Us jumping across rooftops and throwing things down, the two of them running below us. It went on for some time until we had outran them, only then getting down and back onto the street.”

“The pursuers separated,” Damianos said, when Laurent stared at him blankly. “We could not lead them away together, because one had gone for your messenger. It was too much of a risk. We split up. You went back to camp, I went after them.”

Laurent’s eyes narrowed. “Why would I let you go?”

Damianos said, simply, “you trusted me.”
Chapter 11

“I think they’re looking at us,” Damen whispered. He was covering his mouth with the rim of his goblet in an attempt to be more inconspicuous.

Laurent looked to the side, towards the table of men who in fact were not looking at them.

“I don’t think so,” Laurent said, lowering the goblet so it would not block Damen’s mouth. Damen reached for the pitcher, filling his cup to the brim with wine before he had even finished it.

“Are you sure you don’t want?” Damen asked, pushing the pitcher towards Laurent.

“No,” Laurent said. “I think one of us should hold on to sobriety.”

Damen shrugged, pausing mid sip to set his goblet down and fan himself. It was too hot in there, the flames feeling too close, even though they were tables away from the fire. Laurent smiled softly, leaning across the table and unlacing the top of Damen’s collar. Damen smiled back at him, dipping his head to kiss the soft skin between Laurent’s brows.

“Laurent,” Damen whispered again, louder this time so Laurent would take him seriously. “They know who we are.”

Laurent did not look over his shoulder this time. He propped his chin on his palm, his face relaxed. “Do they?” he asked. “How do you know?”

Damen frowned. Before he could come up with an answer, Laurent placed his own goblet of water in Damen’s hand. “Drink this.”

Damen’s frown deepened as he looked at the clear liquid. “This is water.”

“Good observation,” Laurent said. He nudged at the hand holding the goblet again before standing from the table. “I’m going to find Rhea and have her bring you bread.”

“Can you request more wine?” Damen asked. He wrapped his arms around Laurent before he could walk away, pulling him closer and kissing whatever part of him was closest to Damen’s mouth, which was his stomach.

He felt Laurent’s body move from light laughter and he tilted his head back, feeling the dopey smile on his own face as Laurent pushed his hair off his forehead. Laurent kissed the cleared skin once before untangling himself, stepping out of Damen’s reach.

“Drink,” he said, before turning around and making his way through the tables.

Damen woke slowly the next morning.

He had never been one to linger in bed, until he had begun to share one with Laurent. There were always things to do, kings were always busy, and unless it were one of the days where Laurent kept him longer, they had each always risen quickly, eager to begin the day. Since everything had happened, Damen had risen just as quickly, not feeling any incentive to draw it out. That morning, things felt different.

There was no reason to. Logically, he knew this. Nothing had changed, and it would likely be a while before anything changed, but somehow it felt like the first step had been taken, or the potential
for a first step to be taken.

Laurent was talking to him. Really talking, and not in the emotionless way he regarded Damen when no one was around. They had a past, and as difficult as that was for Laurent to grasp, he was taking the steps to understand it.

Damen was no fool. He was under no impression that Laurent had particularly enjoyed himself, or the discussion they had had, but he was actively making the decision to have it. For the time, it was enough for Damen. It would have to be.

Their conversation had continued on late into the night. Damen told Laurent of how he had borrowed Charls’ horse and found the two men, heading southwest for Patras. He had infiltrated them, taking one down immediately and easily catching the other. He told Laurent of the information he had pried out of the man: a three-stage assault orchestrated by his uncle. First, the attack on Laurent in town, which he had survived. Second, an uprising within his troop back at camp, which Damen had arrived at the tail end of, but they had survived as well, due to their new strengths. And if those had failed, a mercenary ambush in the hills, which they had also survived.

Laurent had accepted all of this news with a stoic face, showing no signs of surprise. As Damen now knew, personally, Laurent had long learned that he had to expect every form of atrocity from his uncle. There was no room for surprises in victory.

“Orlant was killed, in that faction attack,” Damen said. “I had not been there for it, but Aimeric had been the one to do it. I assume he had learned something of Aimeric’s treachery, which resulted in his own demise.” He paused before saying, “Orlant was loyal.”

Lauren nodded once, but said nothing further on the matter. “Tell me of the third attack.”

So he did. Damen told him of the meticulous plotting, of how the men had been exhausted and not yet recovered from the morning’s bloodshed. Of The ambush that was awaiting them south in the hills, and how Jord has insisted on changing course and avoiding the fight.

He told him of his own advisement, of striking when the iron was hot. The last thing anyone would expect was for Laurent’s men to surge on when they were still in their bloodied state, and that was exactly why they needed to fight. To prove to themselves that they could fight.

“That is not what I would do,” Laurent said, skeptically.

“You prefer to think your way out of traps,” Damen replied. “Which was why you did it.”

Laurent gazed at him wordlessly before motioning for Damen to go on.

Damen told him of their plan, and of how it had been thwarted when they did not meet the ambush that they had expected, but rockfall. Of how they had rallied at Damen’s command, and rode hard for Laurent’s group of men, encountering the mercenary at a speed and efficiency which they had not been expecting. He told him of their first victory.

Damen did not try to analyze the look on Laurent’s face as he spoke. He could read Laurent far better now than he could when they had met, but some things were still out of Damen’s reach of understanding.

They continued to speak. The correspondence with the Vaskian woman, the beginning of the Akielon lessons as they neared Acquitart. He neatly skipped over all mentions of attending Laurent, and any conversation that followed. He had been Laurent’s slave, and they had shared a tent. Laurent knew himself, and he could deduce those moments on his own. Those private, oddly illicit
moments had no place to be rehashed.

He told Laurent of the night they left Acquitart together, sneaking away into the Vaskian mountains to be taken to Halvik for negotiations, which he had not known the contents of at the time either.

He remembered that night, as he remembered all of their encounters with the Vaskian tribe. The low tents, the scattered fires. Dancing figures and low beating drums. The hypnotic feeling in the air, a certain ambiance that Damen associated with warmth.

Laurent was looking at him carefully. By this point of the night, he had adopted a bit of a more relaxed sprawl. It was not necessarily as comfortable as he had been when they had been on the road discussing strategy, but he appeared more languid.

“I remember the custom of the Vaskian women,” Laurent said. His leg was extended beneath the table, Damen could feel it. “They claim from the dominant male.”

Damen flushed.

“You had me drink the Hakesh,” Damen said in reply.

Laurent hummed. “What did I need,” he said, “that I required that of you? I assume I was attempting to get in Halvik’s good graces for something. Fighters, was it? Supplies?”

“You needed allies,” Damen said. “Bribes, gifts, exchanges. That had been your way with the Vaskians.”

“That displeases you.”

Carefully, “no.”

“It does,” Laurent said. “I can hear it in your tone, and see it on your face. You do not agree with the efficiency of bribery.”

“I only have a different approach,” Damen said.

“Yes,” Laurent agreed. “I know very well what your preferred approach is.”

Damen drew in a painful breath. It was easy to forget, when they were together like this.

“Don’t stop now,” Laurent said.

Damen thought of the rest of the night. Not of Kashel, or the rest of the women, or the affects of the Hakesh. He thought of staggering into their tent, expecting to find Laurent asleep. Instead he had found Laurent, drowsy but awake, propped up on an elbow. He remembered the brightness of his eyes, and the laughter that had left him almost helplessly, filling the quiet tent as Damen clumsily fell into his pallet, alcohol infused warmth pulling his body towards sleep. He thought of Laurent’s quips, his continuous laughter, the way he had gazed lightly at Damen. He took in another breath.

Damen pushed on. He told Laurent of the attack on the border that had happened while they were gone, the Akielon attack on Breteau.

“It was retaliation,” Damen said, when Laurent looked as if he had been expecting such news. “Your uncle had paid raiders to cut down the Akielon village Tarasis, hoping to provoke conflict on the border.” Damen stopped then, giving a small shake of his head.

“There is no justification,” Damen said. “I heard the reports. I saw the village. The victims.” He
looked at Laurent. “I’m sorry.” He was still sorry.

Laurent did not acknowledge any of it, and Damen did not push it. He continued to tell him of their cold reception at Ravenel. Of Lord Touars, of Guion. They had all been siding with The Regent, that much had been obvious, though Guion’s ways only became clear when it was too late. It had all been so fragile, everyone waiting for simplest thing to incite war. It was all around them.

They had stopped then. Laurent had dropped his leg, pushing himself away from the table. Damen looked over his shoulder and out into the darkness of the night. When had it gotten so late?

“We will resume tomorrow,” Laurent said, rising from his seat.

Damen nodded, rising as well. Unlike the night before Laurent didn’t make him sit back down, but he didn’t wait for Damen to walk with him either. He stepped around the table, making for the door and leaving Damen alone.

Damen pushed himself up in bed now, feeling the sheet tangle around his waist. He stretched his arms behind his back, his chest feeling a bit more light.

There was not much, but there was communication.

They were in Laurent’s chambers tonight. Their chambers. It felt so familiar to be here, so many decisions and memories made here between them. He could feel however, how different it was now. The way he walked inside like it had not been his own room for years. The way Laurent sat stiffly, not in the comfortably way he used to when they were up late discussing something, his shirt unlaced and a leg pulled up to his chest.

Laurent had acted the same towards him during the day, which he had expected. Standoffish. Cool. But he was not being as callous as he initially had been. He did not go out of his way to see Damen. Avoided it in fact, but Damen knew they would have their nightly discussions, which was what pulled him through each empty stare. And an empty stare was better than an odious one.

Damen wasn’t even sure why they had met here tonight. As they walked out of the dinner that night, Laurent had turned down the hall leading to his own chambers, and Damen had followed without question. Now they sat across from each other again, picking up from where they had left off.

“We were going south,” Damen told him. ‘Into the hills. We planned to seek out evidence of a strike force or an encampment.

“We went alone,” Laurent said, not in a questioning tone. He did not seem bothered, he was simply confirming a fact he had reached based on what he had already made of their story.

Damen nodded. He thought of that day, deep in the woods by the steam. He thought he could still heard the sound of the Akielon horn, could still see the line of red cloaks in perfect formation. He remembered that feeling, tearing at something inside him as he felt the gravity of the situation. How close he was to his people, to freedom. He remembered the way Laurent was gazing at him as Damen looked from them, to him.

“We separated,” Damen said. “We agreed on a rendezvous, and you took cover while I scouted.”

Laurent said, “Took cover from what?”

“The Akielon troops were closer than we thought.” Laurent looked as if that answer did not appease
him. Damen said, “You were too valuable.”

“And you?” Laurent asked.

“I told you. I scouted. I gathered information. I found you.”

Laurent poured himself more water. “Continue.”

It only took a moment for Damen to remember what had come next. Laurent, at the opposite bank, Damen only halfway across the stream. The hint of red. The pump of hysteria that drove him by instinct.

“I had been careful,” Damen said. “But not careful enough. One of the outriders had left the troop. He was coming to you, and I was too far away.” He saw the crossbow in his mind’s eye. “Your horse fell badly, you had fallen with it. All I had was my sword, but I-“ it was still difficult. He had been one of his men. “It took him in the chest. I took care of the rest after I made sure you weren’t hurt.”

Laurent wore the expression that Damen had seen a handful of times before, the careful casualness. He spoke after a pronounced gap, like he was running through events in his mind. “Why?” It was all he said.

Damen felt a flare of annoyance. It felt like a trick question. Laurent had an answer, Damen had told him the night before that at the time, he was still the better option for the throne than The Regent. That would not be possible if Laurent was dead.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked.

“An answer to my question would be helpful,” Laurent replied.

“You know why,” Damen said. “There is nothing I can do if you don’t like the answer.”

Laurent was silent, and because Damen was feeling indignant he said, “your horse was injured, so you rode on the back of mine.”

Laurent did not enjoy hearing that, and the way his face pinched dispensed the childish anger Damen was feeling. He closed his eyes. Breathed in.

“We stopped after a while,” Damen eventually said. “Made camp. We…” He stopped. He thought of that conversation. The quiet, vulnerable conversation. The past felt close, and yet it couldn’t have been farther.

It was too much.

“We slept,” Damen said. He knew his voice showed that that was not all that had happened, and he also knew that Laurent would not care enough to ask.

“I woke up to a crossbow bolt in my face,” Damen said. He could not linger on that night. “And six arrows pointed to you.”

“Clansmen,” Laurent said. Either because he had guessed based off the geography, or because Laurent somehow always knew everything.

“We were blindfolded and bound. Lashed to their horses and taken through the mountains for hours. When we finally stopped, they removed our gags and blindfolds, but kept us bound.”
He remembered the way Laurent had mouthed off. He had not understood the things he had said, the Vaskian dialect one Damen could not penetrate, but it had been nearly enough for the men to turn on each other, rather Damen and Laurent. Nearly. “We were powerless.”

He remembered what had come next, when the clan leader had set his attention on Laurent exclusively. The burning in his veins. Never had he felt so powerless.

But that had not stopped him then.

“The man hit you,” Damen heard himself say. “He—touched you. My hands were restrained. I—”

He knew he had skipped ahead, that he was not giving a consistent explanation, but the words were leaving him with the building anger, almost like what it had been that day. But it was different now. Damen’s understanding was different now.

“My hands were tied,” Damen said. “I could only get to two before they stopped me.” Damen felt his anger spiraling out of control, taking him back to a time that was separated by two years. He willed himself to relax. He made himself breath.

Laurent was drinking from his goblet. His knuckles were white. Damen ignored that. Pretended to ignore that.

This was not something Damen would linger on. He trudged on, telling Laurent of how Laurent had saved Damen, and how they had been separated. He told him of his relatively easy getaway and of how he had found Laurent. How they had fought together. The Vaskians that had come for them, the counterattack that Laurent had arranged with them to draw out the men that had attacked Tarasis. He told him of how the night had ended, half the men dead, the other half taken as prisoners.

And as far as Laurent knew, that was how the night had ended. The duration of that night had no place, here, between them now. It was a time he still thought of occasionally, a night he and Laurent had even joked about on one of their more recent visits to Vask. Damen thought of lingering stares, private smiles, unsaid thoughts. Rhythmic drums. Warm furs. Melting ice.

He told him of the next morning, of returning to camp with the men who started the attacks as their prisoners. They were nearing Ravenel. Damen continued to tell him of that last night, the hours they had spent inside Laurent’s tent discussing every inch of land between there and Ravenel and the northeastern border. Damen felt it creeping up on him as he spoke about those frivolous things, what had come next in that tent.

Damen’s mind was full of memories, his heart beating as that private space between them came back to him. Laurent rolling his shoulder the moment it was released from armor, Damen reaching out to squeeze it instinctively.

“You brought me ice, last night.”

“This,” said Laurent, “is a little more—“ It was a word of sharp points: “–intimate,” he said, “than ice.”

“Too intimate?” Damen said. Slowly, he was kneading Laurent’s shoulders.

Damen remembered how out of control he had felt, how everything seemed to be out of his grasp. The helpless way he had touched Laurent’s face, the way Laurent had jerked away. He remembered Laurent stopping him from leaving, his painfully vulnerable words. He remembered how they had mad him feel.
“You remind me of him. He was the best man I have ever known.”

There was no sense in telling Laurent any of these things, or Laurent’s mind-altering admission. Either Laurent would not believe him, or he would be painfully hurt, and Damen swore that he would never hurt Laurent again.

He had to push aside his own wants and feelings. To think of others before himself. Laurent had taught him that.

“We arrived at Hellay,” Damen said. “Lord Touars’ men were waiting for us, hundreds of them. Guion.” Damen paused. “Aimeric.”

“Ah, yes,” Laurent said. “I was waiting for his conclusion.”

“It was his testimony that had set everything in motion,” Damen said. He remembered the shock. Jord’s shock. “He had been spying, and he twisted all that had happened to condemn you. You were accused of treason, betrayal. Conspiracy. They had already been setting themselves up against you, Aimeric’s words acted as the final blow.”

Laurent was listening intently, calmly. He gave a slow nod of his head, prompting Damen to continue.

“They tried to cow you,” he continued. “We were outnumbered, unprepared. They knew this, and were counting on this. Either to have you taken to Ravenel to be tried and executed, or to cut us down effortlessly on the field. They were prepared.” Damen said, “but so were you.”

“I fought,” Laurent said.

“We fought,” Damen confirmed. “You foresaw this. You had an agreement with Prince Torveld, long before this when you arranged for the safety of the Akielon slaves at Arles.” Damen waited to see if this garnered a reaction and received none. “A trade: them for his men. He had initially disagreed, but ultimately, his men were yours. We had the Patran troops backing us.”

He thought of what had come next. What, unexpectedly, had come next.

“You passed me the captaincy.”

Damen did not expect a reaction, and he did not receive one. Laurent knew this already, Damen had told him this before. He hoped the lack of reaction was because Laurent might understand a bit better now, but he also knew it was better not to hope in vain.

Laurent said, “tell me of the battle.”

So he did. Damen told him of the advantages and the disadvantages. The field, the numbers, the tactics. Lord Touars’s men were a veteran force drilled in large-scale manoeuvres, but they had the Patrans flanking them. They had a group of men, who they had spent over a month honing and reshaping into an admirable, loyal group of soldiers, who would ride to the death for their prince. If there was one thing they had been taught to excel at, it was line work, and that was exactly what they did.

Damen remembered it all. The trumpets blaring out, the sound of hooves, pounding against the ground, Damen’s heart beating against his chest, his blood pumping as the horses collided. The sound had been deafening, muscle against metal, horse and man.

He told Laurent of how they had pushed, not stopping to fight at the front but smashing through,
throwing all force into it until an opening had been made, allowing the momentum of men behind them to flow through. Touars’ men giving way, slowly slipping, his lines buckling. Breaking their lines while Damen called for their men to regroup, reforming around him while Touars’ men were taken by a second wave of Patran troops.

He told him of the chaos. Of the constant shifting, and of how Enguerran, Touars, Guion had all had one direct, unrelenting goal: to kill Laurent.

“I went for him,” Damen said. “As soon as I saw him charging for you, I crashed my horse into his. We both collided, fell, and it became a matter of man to man combat.”

Damen remembered Laurent that day, his unrelenting, effervescent abilities on the field. The way Laurent had his horse jump over the thrashing obstacle and kill two men in the process. Laurent was not a person who needed saving, but seeing Touars ride for Laurent had sparked something instinctive inside Damen.

Damen remembered what came next, unexpectedly, heart stoppingly, as swords swung and shields shattered. He remembered Touars’ pause, and his step back. His look of disbelief, and recognition.

I know you.

Damianos. Prince-killer.

“I killed him,” Damen said, feeling like he was pushing the word out. He would never forget what it had like that day to be recognized. To turn and see Jord, stripped down horror on his face.

Does he know?

“The battle was won.”

Damen said no more. He knew it had been an inconstant explanation, his retelling jagged, but it was all he could manage in that moment. That moment with Lord Touars was long ago, but with everything happening now, it might as well have been now, the wound feeling fresh, a scab reopened.

Laurent was considering him, considering everything. At some point throughout the story he had leaned back in his seat, crossing his leg beneath the table. He had a calculating look on his face now, as if he too were back to that day, analyzing everything.

Eventually, he spoke. “Ravenel had impeccable defenses,” he said. “The legendary impregnable fortress.” His eyes scrolled Damen before he spoke. “What was your course of action?”

“It was yours, actually,” Damen replied. “You knew there was no possibility we would infiltrate the fort as we were. You had us right Touars’ banners, and wear his armor. You knew we would be mistaken for his troop from the distance of Ravenel’s walls.”

Laurent gazed at Damen silently for a moment, and then the side of his lips lifted. “Really,” he said. “You need to work on hiding your displeasure.”

To Damen’s surprise, the curve of Laurent’s lip was not mocking, and his words did not sound condescending in Damen’s ears. It felt like the first time he had seen Laurent smile in weeks, and he felt a little breathless as he looked at him wordlessly, a moment too long before he made himself speak.

“I understand the merit,” Damen said. “A fair chance, with no bloodshed, but it’s the deception of it,
disguising yourself as a friend. There is honor in the traditional forms of warfare because they give your opponent a fair chance.”

Whatever ghost of a smile was on Laurent’s face disappeared at that, gone as quick as it had come. The flat, uninterested glare was back, like a hat adjusted on the head.

“What next?” Laurent said, stiffly.

Next. Damen knew what came next. It had been two long years, and he still remembered each part of that night like it was engrained in his flesh. Walking into Laurent’s room to have him turn around, a bright look in his eyes and an unselfconscious smile on his face at the sight of Damen. The banquet, sitting beside Laurent and feelings something so intense that it was palpable. Their kiss. Their first kiss, so achingly sweet and illicit, something Damen had known he would never experience again.

Their night. A night Damen had never wanted to end, had wanted to stretch out and hold on to, to live the rest of his days there with Laurent in his arms. He would have given anything and everything up to live inside that night forever.

He looked at Laurent now, his eyes so cold and detached, nothing of that night in his mind, or his heart. Damen felt a crack inside him, and he didn’t know if it could ever be mended.

He was standing, his hands on the table, his chair pushed away without even realizing it. Laurent’s eyebrows were raised in surprise at Damen’s abrupt movement, but he didn’t question it yet. He looked down at Damen’s seat, and up at Damen who was now looming over him.

“You took Ravenel,” Damen said. He needed to leave. “The fort was won, and it was yours.”

“Are you late for something?” Laurent asked. His sarcasm was clear, it was the middle of the night.

Damen closed his eyes. Took in a deep breath to alleviate the pressure on his chest. Opened his eyes.

“It’s late.”

Laurent continued to look at him skeptically, though he did not question it further. He nodded his head, which somehow pained Damen further. That was not their whole story. It did nothing to explain his uncle’s demise, Damen’s reclaiming of his throne, or how they came to be. Laurent was aware of this, of course, and the very fact that he did not point it out caused the void inside Damen to grow.

Damen needed to leave. He needed to tell Laurent one thing, and then he could take himself away from that empty look.

“I’m leaving the palace tomorrow night,” he said. “I am taking Nikandros.”

Laurent rose from his chair as well, but he made no move to leave his spot. “Taking a vacation?”

“There is something we used to do,” Damen said. He breathed in again. “You and I. We would leave the palace once a month and visit an old tavern, farther into the village. We would disguise ourselves.”

Laurent looked at him oddly, and he continued. “The idea was to blend in with the common folk,” he explained. “To see how they were, how they were responding to everything. We would observe them without them knowing they were in the presence of their kings.”
It was not the only reason they went. Initially it had been an idea of Laurent’s, to be involved with their people, to keep a closer eye. Over the months it had become one of their traditions, a reprieve from everything but each other.

“I see,” Laurent said. “And may I ask why Nikandros is taking on the role of his king?”

Damen blinked. “You’ll go alone with me?”

“It makes little sense for you to kill me,” Laurent said. “Politically wise.”

“You’ll go alone with me?” Damen repeated.

Damen could see Laurent inhale, from the shallow way his chest moved.

“It is my duty,” he said.

Damen didn’t care. He couldn’t bring himself to care about anything else in that moment, but the fact that Laurent would go with him. He was no fool. He knew Laurent was likely acting out of his innate sense of kingship and tradition, but he would cherish this nonetheless.

He nodded his head, stepping away from Laurent before he did something stupid. “Tomorrow,” he said, making for the door backwards, not looking away from Laurent until he had to. “By the stables. We leave at dusk.”

The ride was long, nearing four hours. That was familiar, just as the route had been, the row of trees and sweep of stars above them. The river they would ride alongside, the smaller villages they would pass until they finally neared the one they were looking for, deep in Delpha. What was unfamiliar was the quiet, the tense silence as they rode side by side, so unlike the conversation and laughter that used to come so easily between them.

They had met by the stables as Damen as told him, Laurent already there when Damen arrived. Damen had not seen him throughout the day, and Laurent had been quiet at dinner, focusing on his own plate unless he was pulled into conversation by someone else. Damen had tried to catch his eye to no avail.

When Damen approached the stables he saw Laurent immediately, his golden head of hair illuminated from one of the lit torches. He had been standing with the horse Damen had gifted him, caressing her neck and murmuring softly, too quiet for Damen to hear from his distance. Damen had seen Laurent with her multiple times, and had often come to the stables to see her gone, the stable boy telling Damen that Laurent had taken her for a ride. Something about that comforted Damen.

Laurent had said nothing when Damen stepped up beside him. His pulled the hood of his cloak up, his wrist covered without Damen needing to tell him to do so. Damen himself was wearing Veretian clothing, the type of outfit he generally opted for when they went on these outings, as it covered his cuff as well. It had felt odd to have someone other than Laurent lace his clothing for him. Wrong.

“Are you ready?” Damen asked.

Laurent had nodded wordlessly, putting his foot in the stirrup and swinging onto his horse effortlessly. Damen followed suit, tugging on the reins so his own horse turned, and together they left, leaving the palace behind them.

They stepped into the old tavern now, the wooden door creaking as it closed. Damen looked around,
taking in the familiar place that had become somewhat of a reprieve for them over the months that they had begun doing this.

The room was relatively small, the amount of tables could likely be counted on two hands. There was a fireplace on the right side of the room, carved into stone walls with logs that Damen knew were periodically replenished. The walls were old stone, benches surrounding the tables and set against the perimeter. Lanterns lined the walls, filling the room with a flickering orange glow, making the atmosphere feel warm and pleasant. The place was filled with noise, though not to the degree that it would bother the patrons to linger for hours into the night. Nothing more than an even murmur.

It was like a cross between a tavern and an inn. Although not necessarily marketed as such, Damen knew firsthand that there were a number of rooms up the stairs. Nothing too lavish, but enough to house someone who had too much drink in them and could not make it back to their home safely.

Laurent immediately made for a certain table on the side of the room, placed in the perfect spot to feel the warmth of the fire but close enough to one of the wide windows, the breeze making it so that you didn’t get overheated, especially during a night indulging in wine. Damen smiled. It was the same table Laurent had chosen when they had first come here.

Damen followed Laurent and sat across from him, placing his hands on the table and looking at him. Laurent was sitting straight backed, his hands on top of one another, his eyes expressionless. He looked around the room, at all the different people before settling on Damen.

“This is underwhelming,” he said.

Damen shrugged, letting himself enjoy the restless way Laurent was holding himself.

“What exactly is it that we’re doing?”

Damen looked around as well. “Waiting,” he said. “Listening.”

Laurent crossed a leg under the table. Damen felt it in the movement by his own legs. They were close enough that he could feel such movements.

“There isn’t really an objective,” Damen said truthfully. “We’re not on a mission, exactly. As I told you, this is just something we did. It was partially helpful to hear how the common folk were fairing, and just as amusing.” Damen had been wary when they had first began their undercover outings, but it really was amusing now. Seeing the way people acted around them, to them, when they had no idea who Damen and Laurent were.

“Fairing,” Laurent repeated. He raised a brow. “You’re saying the people have still not adjusted to the unification?” The tone of his voice gave the same impression as the nudge of an elbow.

Damen understood the underlying meaning. “You know as well as I do,” he said, “that there will always be people who disagree. It is impossible to please everyone, or to have every single person in a unit view things similarly. That does not mean our people aren’t happy.”

“And you think they’re happy?”

“I know they are,” Damen replied. “They have no reason not to be. We work well together, and they see that.”

Laurent looked like he had a response on the tip of his tongue, but one of the tavern’s servers showed up at the table then. Damen recognized her, as she tended to them each time they came here.
A lovely girl named Rhea with rounded cheeks, winding brown hair and large eyes. She smiled brightly as she approached, and Damen found himself smiling as well.

“You’re back,” Rhea said, setting a jug down in front of Damen before placing her hands on Damen and Laurent’s shoulders. This familiar action was not unlike her, but Damen knew there were no certain intentions behind them. She had a taste for women, another server at this tavern to be specific. Rhea had sat down with Damen and Laurent before, telling them about her troubles with the unattainable Narkissa. Damen and Laurent had joked in private about telling Rhea who they really were, just to see how she would react to the fact that she had drunkenly jabbered to her kings about the person she wished to bed, more than once.

Damen was unsure how Laurent would react to her forwardness, knowing that the Laurent of two years ago might not take it well, and it was with some surprise that he saw Laurent lift his hand and squeeze Rhea’s.

“We’re back,” he smiled.

Though it really shouldn’t have surprised Damen. Laurent could read people, could woo anyone, and he knew perfectly well how to adjust to a situation, even if he felt out of his element. It would not be hard for him to read Damen’s body language and facial expressions and understand that Rhea was someone they were casual with.

“We’ve run out of the wine that you prefer,” She said, looking down at Laurent apologetically. There was a certain wine they served here made from berries grown on the Akielon border that Laurent enjoyed, and he often indulged when they came here. “Would you like me to bring you Lamen’s drink?”

“I’m fine,” Laurent said. “But thank you.”

“I’ll bring you water,” She said, smiling again before turning back for the kitchen.

Perhaps it was for the better that Laurent didn’t drink. It would be easier to deal with a more detached Laurent than a Laurent in dim lighting with flushed cheeks and wine stained lips.

Though if Damen was being observant, detached might not be the word he would use to describe Laurent. Perhaps it was the distance from the unfamiliar palace, perhaps it was the cozy mood in the tavern, but for now, Laurent appeared calm. Present. At the very least, he did not look like he was seconds away from clawing at Damen.

“What did that woman call you?” Laurent asked.

“Her name is Rhea,” Damen said. “And she called me Lamen.”

It didn’t register at first. Damen saw that, in the way Laurent looked at him like he had not yet received his answer. But then Damen saw the moment it did register, his expression shifting, his eyes blinking.

“I’m sure I can guess whose idea that nonsense was,” Laurent replied.

Damen lifted the jug of wine to his lips. “Not mine.”

Laurent expression didn’t change, though he blinked a few more times.

“Would you like to see a trick?” Damen asked impulsively, wanting to take advantage of the rare occurrence of a speechless Laurent.
Laurent had been looking at something over Damen’s shoulder, his gaze focused, and Damen watched as he pulled his attention away. “What?”

“A trick,” Damen repeated, removing a coin from one of his pockets. Laurent said nothing, but he was looking at the coin in Damen’s hand. Damen twisted his wrist a certain way, the way Laurent had taught him before, slipping it into his sleeve as inconspicuously as he could manage. When he opened his hand it was gone, only to fall out and onto the table, seconds later. If Damen was truly trying to replicate Laurent’s skills, he had technically gotten it right.

Laurent looked down at the table, his brow quirked. “You must have had a great teacher.”

“You were alright,” Damen said, taking another draught of wine.

Laurent lifted his eyes to Damen slowly, not saying anything. Damen was trying to decipher the look on his face, and just as he opened his mouth to speak, Laurent’s eyes widened slightly, flicking over Damen’s shoulder.

“She’s coming back,” Laurent said, and his tone was urgent in a way that Damen didn’t understand. He straightened himself, just as Laurent pushed Damen’s drink closer towards him, looking at him now. “Quick.”

“What?” Damen said. The humor he was feeling dispensed at the serious look on Laurent’s face.

“Spill the drink, Damianos,” Laurent insisted. “Quickly, before Rhea gets back.”

Damen didn’t have the slightest clue what Laurent was talking about, but his exigent tone, coupled with the fact that this was the first time Laurent had referred to him by his name was enough for Damen to grab at his wine clumsily and turn it over, ignoring his own confusion in favor of trying to quell the pressing, worried look on Laurent’s face.

The wine sloshed off the table’s edge and onto Damen, and he gasped as the cool liquid spilled onto him and soaked into his pants. The first thing he registered was discomfort, the second was the smile that was slowly growing on Laurent’s face.

“What-“ Damen started.

“That looks uncomfortable,” Laurent commented as he glanced over the table and onto Damen’s wine soaked pants.

Damen’s hands were at his sides, and he couldn’t help the breath of laughter that left him as he glanced down at his drenched clothes, and up at Laurent who looked all too pleased with himself. He turned to look behind his shoulder to see that no one in fact was coming, not that someone approaching would justify anything.

“What exactly did you think pouring wine in your lap would provide?” Laurent asked. His voice was light, and any irritation Damen may have hypothetically felt dispensed at the sight of Laurent speaking through a lingering grin.

“I don’t know,” Damen admitted. “You told me to do it, I assumed it was serious.”

“I’m capable of joking,” Laurent replied.

Damen looked at him. “I know.”

A sound rang out before Laurent could respond, a fist slammed drunkenly on a table, calling out for
more wine. Laurent broke his gaze to look towards the commotion. Damen tried not to feel like something had been snatched away from him.

Rhea appeared just then, a jug of water and a cloth in hand. She set the water down in front of Laurent, glancing at Damen oddly as she dropped the cloth on the table. “What was that?” she asked.

Laurent reached for his water, taking a long, slow sip. “Lamen was feeling a bit clumsy.”

Damen said nothing as he took the cloth, rubbing at his pants pointlessly. Rhea set her weight on one foot, her hand on her hip in a casual stance.

“All of the rooms are occupied tonight,” she said, looking between them. “Control your drinking, because there will be nowhere for you to stay if there is a repeat of the last time you were here.”

Damen glanced up at Laurent as she said that, and he felt a tightening pressure in his chest as Laurent’s face soured. He tried not to think of what it had been that had upset him. The mention of Damen and Laurent sharing one of the rooms. The mention of a last time.

“Bring us the desserts we like,” Damen said, taking advantage of Rhea’s presence, knowing Laurent would object to sharing a private meal with him had she not been there, prompting him to hold himself a certain way.

Laurent looked at Damen blankly for a moment before dragging his eyes to Rhea, the original smile on his face. “Please,” he said.

She nodded her head, taking the dripping cloth from Damen’s hand. “I already gave the order to the kitchen,” she said, looking over her shoulder as she spoke. “It should be ready.”

Laurent’s smile remained as she walked away, his head only turning back to Damen sharply once she was through the swinging wooden doors. “What is this?” he said with narrowed eyes.

“What is what?” Damen asked. “I'm hungry. They make good cakes.”

“You never touch the dessert at dinner,” Laurent replied. His eyes were still sharp on Damen, but Damen felt his heart stutter in his chest. He knew Laurent was an observant person by nature, but he rarely glanced at Damen’s way during meals unless he had to, and he still noticed something so trivial.


Rhea arrived then, setting an array of cookies and cakes down, and a fresh jug of wine for Damen. She wiped down a spot that Damen had missed, slinging the cloth back over her shoulder after. “I'll check on you both soon,” she said as a group of people entered the tavern. “Enjoy.”

Laurent was still looking at Damen, his smile now tight. “We will.”
Chapter 12

Damen,
It has been weeks. It feels as if things are moving too slowly, as if nothing has changed, but I remember what we spoke about on our last night together. The greatest things take time. I have had several meetings with Herode in regards to the pet system, and I told him of your ideas. He has approved for the most part, and new contracts are being written starting tomorrow. Vannes had many things to say on the matter, but after I told her the new regulations would have no impact on her private affairs with Talik, she wised up and quieted down.
I need a distraction. Tell me about something other than the complications in Arles.
If I hear you have strained your wound the instant I left, I will reopen it myself when we’re together again.
I am always thinking of you.
Laurent

Laurent,
My wound is fine, and healed, as it had been each time you asked about it, and the extra weeks you took to stay with me even after I was healed. I have resumed my training just days ago with Nikandros as my primary sparring partner. You can take it up with him, I’m sure he misses you and would be delighted to receive a letter from you.
Things have been hectic here as well. The government is unstable as ever, and we are still in the midst of purging the palace of all those who had sided with Kastor. It feels different, without you here by my side for it all. I think the Akielons miss you a bit too much.
Nothing is the same without you, Laurent. Your lack of presence is a constant ache.
Do you remember when I told you of The Summer Palace? I do, and I think of taking you there every day. Tell me we will meet there soon.
Damen

Damen,
You’ll be happy to hear that Nikandros and I correspond regularly. I think he may like me after all. I’ll have to ask him if you’ve truly healed, because I know better than to trust your word when it comes to your own health.
I might miss the Akielons myself. How are the children we would visit? I have kept every drawing they gave me before I left.
Of course I remember The Summer Palace, but don’t be foolish, Damen. You know as well as I do that the timing is completely impractical. I have not yet reached my ascension, for one.
Practicalities do not stop me from thinking about it.
I miss you, my lion. I’ll be with you soon.
Laurent

Laurent,
You are corresponding with Nikandros? I didn’t know the two of you have bonded. What do you talk about?
The children are well. They ask about you every time I see them, inquiring about the foreign golden prince and when he will return. I ask the same question.
I don’t care. I don’t care about practicalities or logistics. I want to be with you now.
I miss you more each day, my king.
Damen

Damen,
I’m sure you would like to know. Don’t you worry about it. Friends have secrets, or so I am
learning.
You would drop all of your duties and expectations to hide away with me? Be realistic, Damen.
Soon.
Laurent

Laurent,
I would drop everything for you. Tell me the instant you want to go and I will be there.
Damen

Damen,
I want to go.
Laurent

“Please eat something.”

“I told you,” Laurent said. “I’m not hungry.”

“You don’t need to be hungry for sweets,” Damianos replied. “And regardless, we ate hours ago. I’m sure you’re hungry.”

“Quiet,” Laurent mumbled, his eyes averted. He was trying to listen in on a conversation two tables away, and Damianos’ incessant chattering was not helping.

Two women were sitting together, their chairs close so they would not have to lean across the table to touch. They were Vaskian, Laurent could understand the dialect of Ver-Vassel, one of the things he had taught himself when he finally understood that there was no one else to help him learn.

They were not speaking of anything of significance to Laurent, the conversation revolving around names he didn’t know, but he watched them nonetheless. They each had dark eyes, and the stronger build that most Vaskian women had. They were young, he would not be surprised if neither of them were above the age of twenty. They were sharing a drink, either passing the jug between them or tasting the wine on each other’s lips.

“What are they talking about?” He heard.

Laurent continued to watch them for a moment, one of them laughing at whatever the other had said before looking at Damianos.

“Are you deaf?”

That didn’t seem to irritate Damianos, which in turn irritated Laurent. “No,” Damianos said. “I cannot understand them.”

Laurent frowned. “You don’t speak Vaskian?”

“I do,” Damianos said. “I can speak and understand the language the Empress uses in the court, but I struggle with the mountain slang. You’re teaching me, but they’re speaking too fast for me to follow.”

Laurent pursed his lips, letting his eyes linger for a moment before they drifted towards the girls.

“I’m not really sure,” Laurent said. “Their story is personal between them. Something involving a trip in the mountains.” He paused, stopping to listen to a bit more. “Another girl was with them, I’m not sure how she ties in.” He looked back at Damianos, who was smiling.
“What?”

“You like this,” Damianos said.

“‘This’?”

He motioned towards the two girls, who would not realize that someone was pointing at them. They were too caught up in each other.

“The ambiguity of it,” Damianos explained. “The fact that you don’t know what is between them, and there’s room for you to imagine. You like stories.”

Laurent crossed his arms loosely, leaning back in his chair so he was comfortable. “Everyone enjoys a story,” he said, though he knew that wasn’t true, but Damianos nodded his head nonetheless.

“Do you?” Laurent asked, stiffening after. He didn’t know why he asked that.

Damianos seemed a bit surprised as well, but he spoke quickly as if Laurent would take the question back.

“I didn’t read much as a child,” he said. “Aside from what my tutors had me read. I was more interested in sports, and hands on things, but I have taken to reading in the past few years. You recommend me things.”

“You need to know what someone enjoys to recommend them something.”

Damianos said, “You know what I like.”

Laurent took a long sip from his water.

“I find it interesting,” Laurent said, licking his lips as he set the goblet down. “That you continue to use the present tense.”

“I-“ Damianos started, but he stopped, looking away as he trailed off. He did not continue his thought, just looked at the Vaskian women two tables away. Laurent looked too, and he was surprised to see that the four of them were the only pair in the tavern. Every other table was filled by groups.

“So,” Laurent said eventually. “We have been here for approximately half an hour, and I’ve learned nothing riveting about our people.”

Damianos nibbled at his lip, his eyes circling the room slowly before settling on something over Laurent’s shoulder. He nudged his head, prompting Laurent to turn and look in the same direction.

“You see those people?” Damianos asked. “That table is a mixed group of both Akielons and Veretians.”

“And?” Laurent asked. The two kingdoms were one now. “This isn’t a revelation.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Damianos asked. “The last thing you recall of Akielos and Vere was that they were enemies. Did you ever expect to see them sharing a drink, enjoying each others company?” He motioned towards them again, just as laughter rung out from their direction. “It is one thing to be told something, it is another to experience it for yourself.”

Laurent took a moment to swallow before responding. “Have we ever actually spoken to anyone here about anything useful?”
Damianos began to answer before he stopped himself, his lips spreading into a grin.

“What?” Laurent demanded. “Why are you always smiling?”

“You always opt for the chocolate one first,” Damianos said.

Laurent frowned, and it took him a second to realize that he was holding a pastry in his hand, a single bite taken from it. In the midst of their conversation he had reached for one without even realizing it. He dropped it back on the platter, unfinished.

Damianos rolled his eyes. “Don’t be a child,” he said, pushing the platter forward. “Eat it. I’ll pretend I haven’t noticed.”

A stubborn part of Laurent wanted to push the platter off the table, but they were good and he was hungry.

“We haven’t personally conversed with anyone about it,” Damianos said, answering Laurent’s question after he picked the pastry back up. “But we’ve overheard conversations.”

Rhea the server girl was just passing their table as he spoke, and Laurent lifted his hand, motioning for her to come over. Damianos turned in his seat to see who Laurent was looking at, just as she approached.

“Come,” Laurent said, pulling a chair out. “Sit.”

“I’m working,” She said, but she sat down regardless.

She was Patran, Laurent could tell from her accent, despite the fact that she had spoken Veretian to them. She settled in her chair, and Laurent laughed a little in amused disbelief as she pulled the platter of pastries towards herself.

“Lamen and I were debating something,” Laurent said, keeping his face straight as he said that ridiculous name. Damianos looked at him strangely, looking a little scared. Rhea raised a brow, taking a large bite.

“We were discussing the alliance,” Laurent said. “Between king Laurent and king Damianos. Lamen thinks the people are enthusiastic about the unification. I’m not so sure.”

“Why do you feel that way?” Rhea asked.

“It seems unrealistic to me,” Laurent said. “The nations were enemy kingdoms for as long as I can remember. Even if certain people are happy with it, I find it hard to believe that the general consensus is positive.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” She said, frowning. “To me, it seems as if this is the first time we have experienced true peace in ages. And Akielos and Vere were so different, I think it’s wonderful to see the way the two have mended, the people adopting customs and rituals from both. My friends all feel the same.”

“How so?” Damianos asked.

“Well,” she said again, swallowing the last bite. “I don’t get to travel too much, but I have experienced here the smaller changes. The kitchens have begun serving a more extensive selection of foods, blends of spices and recipes from both cultures that I’ve never tried before. And the people that come in seem to enjoy the integration of the clothing style.”
Laurent glanced at Damianos, who was looking at Rhea fondly, and at Laurent like he had won something. As if something had been proven.

“I understand your point of view,” Laurent said, still looking at Damianos. “I guess it’s just hard for me to wrap my mind around how little self respect the king of Vere must have to align himself with his own brother’s killer.”

Laurent didn’t think he had seen Damianos’ expression drop so rapidly in all the weeks that had passed. He looked away from him, feeling that he had proven his point as well.

Rhea was blinking, looking between the two of them oddly. “You are Veretian,” she said slowly. “And Lamen is Akielon. I would think you would be happy about the alliance.”

“Thrilled,” Laurent replied. “I’m not talking about myself, I’m talking about king Laurent.”

“I think we’ve all wondered about that,” Rhea responded. “No one knows the real story of how they came to be, but my sister was in the capital for a festival months ago. She saw the kings, and said she had never seen two people who seemed happier.”

“Did she,” Damianos said. He was still looking at Laurent.

She nodded. “Have either of you been to the capital?” she asked, but her name was called out before they could respond. She looked behind her shoulder towards the open door of the kitchen, muttering a string of Patran curses under her breath before standing up.

“I need to get back,” she said, taking Laurent’s empty goblet with her as she made for the kitchen.

The silence felt pronounced after she left, the two of them sitting there in silence. Laurent looked to check on the Vaskian girls but saw that they had left.

“Well?” Damianos asked.

“Well, what?” Laurent asked.

Damianos sighed. “Do you see what I was telling you?” he asked. “The people are happy.”

“And I’m glad to see it,” Laurent said honestly. His people’s happiness and safety was the most important thing. “What I fail to understand is why you seem to think that will change anything.”

Damianos looked at Laurent, looking as if he had a million things he wanted to say. Laurent looked back at him, having nothing else to say.

Eventually he spoke, his voice softer than it had been all night. “You wouldn’t be with me if you didn’t want to.”

Laurent brought his hands to the table loudly, pushing himself up. “Rhea said there are no rooms,” he said. “There is no point in lingering. The journey is long.”

Damianos looked from Laurent to the door, his expression still desolate. He remained in his seat as he spoke. “It’s late. We shouldn’t travel in the dark.”

“According to your storytelling, we have handled worse,” Laurent replied. “There are no available rooms, and I’m not camping in the middle of the road. Get up.”

Damianos drained his cup, gripping the edge tightly before setting it down heavily. He stood up and turned, making for the door without waiting for Laurent.
They had been riding for nearly two hours. It was dark out, well past midnight, but they had stuck to the perimeter of the towns and the light coming from the hanging lanterns and torches had been enough to illuminate their way. Laurent had kept an eye out on the people as they rode, watching all the interactions, from family members to companions and lovers.

Laurent couldn’t help but take notice of the mixed cultures, just as he couldn’t ignore it in the tavern. He didn’t know what to think about it, and begrudgingly, he noted that Damianos was right. It was one thing to be told something, another to experience it for yourself.

They had veered off the road, reaching the point where they could no longer stick to a single pathway and would need to go into the trees, along rivers. They were riding fast, not hard enough to overexert their horses, a common mistake, but enough that this would not be drawn out longer than it would have to. The stars were above them, a span of greenery on either side of them when Damianos reined his horse in.

He stopped a few feet away from Laurent, not glancing his way as he swung off his horse, pulling it towards a nearby tree and tethering it’s bridle onto a branch.

“What are you doing?” Laurent asked. He heard how irritated he sounded.

Damianos finished tying it with a sharp tug, not looking at Laurent as he turned away.

“I need to piss,” he said over his shoulder, walking into the trees. Laurent rubbed his face, adjusting himself impatiently. He didn’t know why Damianos was suddenly acting like an indignant child.

Laurent shifted again, and then decided to take this small reprieve as a chance to walk a bit and stretch his legs. He dismounted as well, restraining his horse beside Damianos’ before stepping away, looking out onto the path ahead of them.

It was still a long way, somewhere near two hours. Laurent was tired, he could feel the weariness in his bones as he put his hands on his hips, breathing the night air in deeply. He inhaled again, trying to clear his head of his swarming thoughts. He simply wanted to get back and put himself to bed.

Laurent could hardly hear the sharp whistle, the sound of something moving through the air at rapid speed. He lifted his head slightly, straining to hear something more when he felt a heavy impact at his side, shoving him aside so roughly that he was thrown onto the dirt.

Laurent fell hard, his side slamming the ground as his arm twisted uncomfortably beneath him. Laurent instantly felt the sharp pain twisting up his back, an instant throbbing sensation on the parts of his body at that hit stone. He began to push himself up, just as he saw an arrow fly above his head and into the tree ahead of him.

“Stay down!” He heard Damianos whisper sharply, who was suddenly standing above him.

“Are you insane?” Laurent hissed. “What is the matter with you?”

Everything happened very quickly after that. Laurent could hear the sounds of gravel crunching as they were no longer alone, men suddenly upon them. Laurent ignored Damianos’ warning as he pushed himself up, refusing to remain on the ground as they were then facing three other men.

They were Akielon, Laurent could instantly tell from their darker coloring and the animalistic look in their eyes. The largest one of the three had a crossbow in his hands, the bulkiest one a long-sword. The third was hardly paying either of them any mind, his eyes trained on Damianos and Laurent’s
“He’s even prettier up close,” the taller one said, his voice deep and rough, his eyes on Laurent. Laurent felt his insides coil, and he focused on remaining as impassive as possible.

“Look at this,” the other one said as he caressed the length of his sword slowly. “Four Akielons and a Veretian.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke,” Laurent replied.

The man grinned, looking at his companions. “He’s funny too,” he said. “Maybe we should keep him.”

“Watch your tongue,” Damianos said, stepping forward until their chests were almost touching. “Or I’ll tear it out.”

They were bandits. Laurent could tell immediately, based off the grubby, dingy clothes they were wearing, and the way they kept eyeing Damianos and Laurent’s aristocratic clothing. Their well-made horses did not help in alleviating their stature, nor did their visibly full saddlebags.

The man seemed undeterred from Damianos’ rising anger. Amused, if anything. His smile grew. “No need to be combative,” he said. “We’re not opposed to sharing.”

It was the only thing the man managed to get out before he was thrown back, Damianos’ fist impacting his face so hard that Laurent could hear the unmistakable sound of bones cracking. Laurent could see the blood begin to seep out from his nose immediately, but it was all he could afford to look at because the instant Damianos made contact with skin, the shortest of the men with the darkest eyes was on Laurent.

Contrary to popular belief, Laurent could fight. Most people didn’t know this, wouldn’t assume this from looking at him, and while some in his position may be irritated by it, Laurent chose to look at it as a positive. An advantage. When people undermined you, it was that much greater when you proved yourself.

Laurent would never consider himself a fighter, but he couldn’t deny that he enjoyed the gutted sound the man made from the impact of Laurent’s closed fist against his stomach, a half choked out gasp for air as he hunched over, a half yelp of surprise that Laurent was not just a pretty face.

Laurent could hear the loud grunts and impacts of fist against flesh from Damianos and his opponents, but Laurent’s focus was entirely diverted by the man before him as he composed himself rather quickly, charging for Laurent. He was bulkier than Laurent was, which helped him in that he had more weight to throw in his hit, but equally worked against him by slowing him down. Laurent dodged the first swing with ease, but the second hit came quickly from the other side, landing him in the jaw.

Laurent stumbled back just slightly, but like many other things, his reflexes were quick. He spared a moment to moving his jaw and made sure that nothing was broken, and then moved aside at the last second to avoid the man’s leg as he attempted to sweep Laurent off his feet and back onto the ground.

Laurent was distantly aware of a snapping sound and a loud cry of pain, just as he caught the man’s fist that was coming for his throat, grabbing him by the wrist and twisting as sharply as he could. The man hissed, throwing his entire body forward in an attempt to slam Laurent backwards, but the man was overconfident and Laurent had long ago learned to always be prepared. He caught the man’s
other wrist and with all the strength and speed he could muster, drove his knee up in between the man’s legs.

Laurent relished in the way the man’s face twisted, instantly contorting in pain as he fell to his knees, and Laurent didn’t hesitate to drive his fist one last time into the side of his head, causing the man to drop down onto his side, unconscious.

The victory was short lived. Just as Laurent backed away he heard it, the deafening sound of hooves pounding against the earth, coming closer by the second, followed by the unmistakable sound of a sword being unsheathed. Impulse whirled Laurent’s body around just in time to see a man in similar clothing charging for him, seemingly coming out of nowhere. Instinct threw Laurent’s mind into overdrive in considering all of his limited options-

And the shock of seeing the man impaled on a blood soaked long-sword thwarted all thoughts, causing Laurent to stagger back as he body fell from the horse with the loud impact of dead weight on solid ground.

Laurent was spun around by Damianos, whose dirtied hands were on him now, his chest moving with ragged breaths. His tousled curls were a disheveled mess, his jacket twisted on his body haphazardly.

It was only after Laurent was able to take a breath that he realized that his chest was moving as well, his fingers aching from the impact against the man’s bones. He pushed his hair away from his face, feeling like he needed to do something with his hands.

“Are you alright?” Damianos asked. Laurent wanted to answer, but his eyes were now on the men who Damianos had fought. The man whose arrow had come for his back and the one whose sword had lunged for his chest.

Three bodies were faced down in the ground, all of them twisted in a way that could not be natural. The crossbow had been snapped in half, one part of it a few feet away from his hand, the other lodged into his neck. The second laid with his face so mangled it was unrecognizable. The third with a sword lodged in his chest, like a banner stamped into the ground to represent newly taken territory.

Blood was pooling everywhere, seeping into the dirt, turning the fallen leaves dark. Laurent couldn’t tear his eyes away from the blood. He heard the whistling sound again, felt the gaze of the men on his body.

He felt something touch his cheek and he flinched instinctively, looking up in time to see Damianos take his hand away.

“Tell me you’re alright,” Damianos repeated. His dour mood form earlier was gone, his eyes filled with something entirely different.

“I’m fine,” Laurent said, taking a step away. “I can handle myself.”

“I should have insisted we find somewhere to stay overnight,” Damianos continued. “I’m sorry. I-”

“I said I’m fine,” Laurent said as he turned away. He looked at the moon above them, trying to focus on something else until his breathing was steady before he turned back to Damianos, motioning towards the unconscious man on the ground. “He will wake up soon,” he said. “We need to leave before he regains consciousness.”

“No,” Damianos said. “It wont be long before he wakes. I wont give him any opportunity to follow us.”
Laurent nodded his head slowly, his eyes returning to the Akielons lying in the dirt. He imagined the man between then now was Veretian, and tried to envision himself being forced to kill four of his own men in a row.

“’I’ll do it,” he said.

“No,” Damianos repeated, making his way around Laurent and towards his own horse. He opened his saddlebag, riffling through it until he pulled out a rope.

“We’re not killing him,” he said as he bent down for the man, winding his arm around his upper body and dragging him towards a nearby tree. Laurent watched in confusion as Damianos propped his back against the bark, adjusting his body to his liking before wrapping the rope around his midsection, stepping behind the tree and tying it in three tight knots.

“What are you dong?” Laurent asked.

“Restraining him,” Damianos replied without looking up.

“I can see that,” Laurent said, making for his own horse. “What is the point?”

Damianos gave the rope one hard tug to make sure they could not be easily opened before pushing himself up, walking towards his own horse. “Someone will find him,” Damianos said, untethering his horse from the branch as Laurent swung up on his own. “Or he will untie himself. Whatever comes first.”

That was not what Laurent meant. Damianos knew that was not what he meant. Damianos had still not looked at him, and it was only when he swung up onto his own mount that he met Laurent’s questioning gaze.

“He was unnamed,” Damianos said. “I could not harm him.” And then he was tugging on his reins, leaving Laurent with no choice but to follow.

The duration of the ride had been quiet. The beginning half had been quiet as well, but it did not feel the same. For some reason, something about it did not feel the same.

Laurent was tired beyond measure. It had been a long, trying day, but it was not the vigorous riding or even the unexpected altercation that made Laurent feel like his head would not stop throbbing. All he wanted was solitude, no one around but himself so he could dispense of everything that would not leave his head, and let sleep take him away.

But that had not been an option, for at least those remaining two hours. Laurent and Damianos rode a few feet apart, the sound of the hooves against dirt, and eventually stone intrusively loud in the silence of the night. Laurent worked hard to keep his gaze forward. He worked hard to keep his mind blank, which was not always a success.

When they finally reached the palace, Laurent looked towards Damianos to take his cue, and nodded his head as Damianos nudged his to the side, motioning for him to ride around to the back. They softened their hold on the reins so the horses slowed to a trot, quietly making their way through the courtyard and towards the stables.

They dismounted at the same time, Laurent focusing on his own horse as he took hold of the bridle and led her inside her stall. Laurent closed the door quietly, rubbing her flank softly just as he heard Damianos putting his own horse in its place.
Laurent walked outside, looking at the high walls of the palace, focusing on its exterior. There were some aspects of it that mirrored the architecture of the palace at Arles, just as it did on the inside, but it was like it had been morphed with something Laurent did not recognize. Something simpler.

“Have I been to Ios?” Laurent asked, not turning his head to Damianos who had just stepped up next to him.

Damianos was silent, and Laurent swung his eyes aside to see Damianos looking at the palace as well.

“Yes,” Damianos said simply. Laurent nodded. He had assumed it was Akielon architecture that he was unfamiliar with. He began to walk towards the entrance, the need for seclusion increasing as Damianos walked with him.

They reached Laurent’s chambers first, as Damianos’ were much farther down the long hall. The guards were faced forward as they always were, showing no reaction to their kings arriving to their rooms in the middle of the night. Laurent stopped a few feet away from the door and Damianos stopped as well, looking at Laurent questioningly.

Laurent opened his mouth to speak, but he closed it immediately, unsure what it was he had thought to say. Damianos nodded his head like he still understood, looking ahead towards the direction of his new chambers.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said in a quiet voice. “Goodnight.”

Laurent did not wait to see him walk away. He turned away, walking straight passed his guards and entering through the doors that they had pulled open for him. Laurent made straight for the archway into the bedchambers, his fingers already tugging at the laces of his jacket, eager to undress and get in bed.

When he was finally in his sleep shirt, his clothing off and set aside for a servant to take care of, he sat on the edge of the bed and gazed off into the darkness of the room. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, blowing out a long breath before taking his hands away.

Laurent turned to face the headboard, ready to pull the covers aside and bury himself in cool sheets. Just as he began to recline he saw the book he had been reading earlier in the day, still open and turned over, resting on top of his pillow. He picked it up and made to close it, looking around for something to mark his spot with and coming up short.

Laurent sighed impatiently, yanking the drawer of the bedside table open. He riffled around through all of its contents, finding nothing that would work as a placeholder. The only thing Laurent saw that might work was a folded up stack of papers being held together by a blue string, fraying at the tips. Laurent untied the string easily and placed it inside the book, shutting it and placing it inside the drawer. He picked up the stack of papers and went to put them inside as well, but stopped himself right before as he noticed his own handwriting.

Laurent frowned. He had been through majority of the documents he could find, but he had not yet come across these. They were a stack of a handful of papers, and Laurent noticed that they were inconsistent in parchment, every other paper alternating in color. It was curiosity that made him begin to read them, despite the late hour.

And it was body seizing shock that made him stop, setting the papers down forcefully as he looked away as if that would erase the words. Laurent closed his eyes, feeling for the first time as if things were really, truly out of his understanding.
He wanted to burn the letters. He wanted to fold them back up, to tie them with the string and hide them in the drawer, to act as if he hadn’t found them and as if this hadn’t happened. Instead, for reasons unbeknownst to him, he slowly picked them back up.

Laurent felt discomfort and confusion. It was like reading something from one of his books, so intimately personal, so impossibly foreign, though he could not look away. Whether that was cynicism or something else, he did not know.

This was Laurent’s handwriting. This was his signature with a big loopy L. It was his voice, translated to paper, but it was not his heart. It could not be.
“Are you sure about this?”

Laurent smiled at Damen, but despite the lightness in his eyes, there was a sadness there as well that Damen would never be able to take away.

“I’m sure, Damen,” Laurent said. “You don’t need to keep asking. I want you to come with me.”

They had been inside their chambers for this conversation, Damen sitting on the edge of the bed while Laurent finished tying the laces on his boots. Damen didn’t want his uncertainty to show, he wanted to be able to hold himself as confidently as he did with everything else, but this was one arena that Damen would never wish to overstep in.

Laurent had straightened himself when he finished, walking up to Damen with a sure look on his face. He held both hands out, waiting patiently as Damen placed his own hands in Laurent’s, letting himself be pulled up. Laurent kissed Damen’s fingers once before leaning up on his toes, reaching out to adjust the laurels on Damen’s head.

“I told you,” Laurent said, still playing around with Damen’s hair. “He would have liked you, and he would have teased you for being nervous.” He brought himself down to his normal height, brushing Damen’s cheek with his knuckle.

Damen didn’t think he would have been this nervous, under different circumstances. Nerves would entail that Damen felt unsure of Auguste’s approval, or as if something would go wrong, but nothing would have in another world. Damen and Laurent were meant for one another, and nothing could have changed that.

However, Damen knew Laurent meant nothing by the comment. He was simply doing what he did best, which was soothe Damen and bring him back to himself. There was no one else who was as in tune with Damen as Laurent was. Somehow, Laurent always knew what Damen needed. Most times, he knew when Damen needed something when even Damen didn’t.

Damen had nodded, and Laurent leaned forward to kiss his neck.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s go see my brother.”

Now they were here, little more than five feet separating them and Auguste’s statue. Damen’s time facing Auguste had been fleeting, and hectic, and because of that he had not had the opportunity to properly take the man and his features in. However, Laurent seemed pleased at the sight of his statue. This one seemed to better resemble the person that Laurent had idolized, both in life and death.

Damen stood as tall as he could, looking down at Laurent after a few seconds of silence.

“What do you mind if I speak to him alone first?” Damen asked.

Laurent blinked twice, looking at Auguste’s statue before nodding. “Okay,” he said, touching Damen’s shoulder briefly before walking off, far enough that Laurent could still see him but not be able to hear him. Damen watched as Laurent sat on a bench, his hands on his lap as he looked to the opposite end of the garden, giving Damen his privacy.

Damen took a deep breath, facing forward again and taking the few remaining steps. He tipped his
head back, tilting it upwards so he could look into Auguste’s eyes, and tried to imagine how this would have gone, if things were different. Damen would have approached Laurent’s father King Aleron in the great hall and knelt before him, requesting permission to court his youngest son. Such was the protocol, but that would have been more out of respect and tradition. It was not Laurent’s father’s opinion that mattered most to him. It was his brother’s.

Damen faced Auguste now, and indulged himself in thinking of another universe, one where he and Laurent could have met properly, with no lies between them. Laurent often said that he and Auguste were similar, and that he and Auguste would have gotten along well. Surely Auguste would have seen through Damen immediately, and would have known from the start of Damen’s desire to court Laurent.

“I wish we did not have to be meeting like this,” Damen said in Veretian, knowing he had to begin somewhere.

There was plenty Damen wanted to say, but he knew those things on the tip of his tongue would render meaningless. Damen knew better than many that life could be cruel, and that in many cases, our actions could not be taken back. Damen so badly wished that he could, that he could change the past and have things be different, but there was no use in wishing for empty things.

Damen looked back again towards Laurent, who was looking up at the sky. Damen thought of all the things he could tell Auguste now, thinking back to that day they faced each other on the field at Marlas, but there would be plenty of other days for that. Today, there were other things he wanted to speak to him about.

“I don’t know where to begin,” Damen said, finding it hard to tear his eyes away from Laurent. “He is the most amazing man I have ever met, and I know much of that is attributed to you. I know what you were to him.” He looked back up at Auguste. “I know what the two of you were to each other.”

Damen touched his cuff lightly. “I can only imagine how proud you are of him. He has the ability to change lives, and I am awed of him every day.” A breeze picked up then, causing leaves to fly against the stone, Damen’s cape rustling against his back.

“I know it may seem like it’s too late for this conversation,” Damen continued. “But I’d like to believe that it isn’t. I believe that Laurent’s happiness is all that matters to you, and that you would approve. I must admit though,” he said, looking back at Laurent a bit helplessly. “It’s far too late for any other outcome. Your bother has my heart.”

Damen took another step forward. “I know that I have his as well. I swear to you Auguste, I will treat it tenderly. I will cherish him, and protect him for as long as I live. I swear,” he said, “I will make you proud of me as well.”

Damen lingered for another moment, letting the past feel close for a little longer. He turned his head towards Laurent’s direction and when their eyes met, they smiled.

They were sitting in the council room, in the midst of discussing the arrangements for the upcoming wedding between Chelaut’s niece and a nobleman from Patras. They were to wed within the next two weeks, and with the wedding so close, preparations were becoming more hectic. There were palace coordinators who were in charge of the actual ceremony and things related to color schemes, the following banquet and such, but the council and the kings were in charge of managing the political aspects of it.

“Have they sent word of how many people we are to be expecting?” Jeurre asked.
“Not precisely,” Herode said, his eyes scanning a parchment before him. "But an approximation of fifty people is the estimation. “

“And what of the royal family?” Laurent asked.

“King Torgier,” Herode read. “His four children will be attending, as will his brother Prince Torveld.”

“Be sure that each individual person is given the finest rooms in the palace,” Laurent said. “All Patrans will reside in the West Wing.” The servant that was brought in to the meeting nodded, writing down each and every thing that was said.

It was the first time Damen was seeing Laurent since the previous night. Damen had not wanted to come to him in his rooms, nor could he think of any practical reason to do so, and had walked into the meeting with a bundle of nerves in his stomach. He had no reason to feel anticipation, though some odd part of him felt as if something profound would happen when he saw Laurent.

It was all for naught, of course. Laurent did not look at Damen in any new way. He had pointedly ignored Damen’s stare, to be more precise.

“Has Prince Torveld married yet?” Vannes asked.

“No,” Damen replied.

“Perhaps this trip away from Patras will bring him possibilities,” Audin said. “Offer him new places to look.”

Torveld had no problems looking. “Yes,” Damen said. “Perhaps.”

“And the man your niece is to marry has no qualms of the ceremony taking place here in Delfeur?” Herode asked, setting his papers down and looking at Chelaut.

“No,” Chelaut replied. “So long as they live in Patras.”

“Be sure that the linguist has the verses translated in both Patran and Veretian,” Laurent said to the servant. The servant pulled a fresh sheet of paper on top of his growing pile, arranging the papers neatly before writing what Laurent said down in a hurried scrawl.

Damen could not stop looking at Laurent. He knew it was not wise because each time he looked at him, he saw the men from the previous night, heard the things they had said, the vile things they had most likely been thinking. Each time that happened, he felt the need to find the man he had let live and decapitate him. He told himself to look away, to think of other things, but his eyes falling to Laurent every few moments was instinctual.

“Is there anything else that needs to be discussed?” Jeurre asked, looking around the table.

“No,” Herode said. “That should be all in regards to the wedding for now.”

“On a separate note,” Audin said, looking at Laurent. “The documents you requested are being drawn up as we speak, Your Highness. They should be ready in a matter of days, and then we may proceed as the two of you wish.”

Damen looked to Laurent, who hesitated only for a fraction of a second before nodding once.

“I look forward to it,” he said.
Damen stood. “If that will be all.”

Everyone stood from their seats as well, saying their honorific attached goodbyes to Damen and Laurent before filing out. Laurent remained in his seat, his eyes now wholly on Damen as they all left.

“Sit,” he said.

Damen sat, turning to properly face him without thought. Laurent’s legs were crossed, his wrist hanging off the edge of his armrest. His expression gave nothing away. Damen looked back at him, trying very hard not to think of all the other times the two of them had stayed in the council room after everyone had left.

“How are you?” Damen asked, after a beat of silence.

Laurent bent his arm, leaning the side of his head on his fist. “In regards to what, exactly?”

As Damen had assumed, they were going to pretend as if nothing had happened the previous night. He brought his fingers to his forehead, rubbing at the skin.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “Your day so far.”

“Wonderful,” Laurent replied. He waited for Damen to look back up before continuing. “The documents Audin mentioned. Are you going to tell me what they are of?”

Damen’s mouth gaped slightly, feeling foolish for forgetting that Laurent would have no recollection. It was such an odd thought, considering it had primarily been Laurent’s idea. The notion that he couldn’t remember something he had been so passionate and excited about sat uncomfortably in Damen’s mind.

“We’ve been waiting for documentation for a long time now,” Damen said. “It had taken months for everything to be arranged, from the architecture to the more minuscule necessities.” Laurent raised a brow and lifted his chin, indicating for Damen to continue.

“We are working to create a schooling center for children,” Damen said.

Laurent blinked, remaining silent for a second before shaking his head in question. “There are plenty of schools in Delfeur,” he said. “And new school establishments rise regularly, I don’t see why another one would be worth mention, or any particular documentation.”

“This is different,” Damen said. “This is your vision.”

He thought of that day, after they had come back from the village and had retired to their rooms. Laurent had been silent on the way back, off somewhere in his head, and Damen hadn’t wanted to disturb him. He had undressed and gotten into their bed, stretching out on his back and waiting for Laurent to join him.

Laurent had undressed slowly, not really looking at anything in particular as he got under the covers as well, adjusting himself comfortably, his head on Damen’s chest. Damen had stroked his hair, his fingers trailing his shoulder blades and the bumps on his spine until Laurent twisted slightly, propping his chin on Damen’s body.

“There are so many children … so many in the lower class.”

Damen had nodded. He had seen them as well, he could tell they were of low birth from the state of
“Do you ever wonder what will come of them?” Laurent asked, his fingers grazing the line of Damen’s bicep. Damen hesitated, and Laurent had gone on before Damen could speak.

“They won’t be able to afford an education,” Laurent said. “Their families won’t be able to pay for schooling. If they have dreams, they won’t have the means to accomplish them.” Laurent lowered his hand, pushing himself up and into a sitting position. Damen sat up as well, his back propped up on the headboard. Laurent’s hand was on Damen’s knee. “All children have dreams.”

Damen smiled softly, taking Laurent’s hand in his. He knew where Laurent’s mind was.

“Are you afraid,” Damen said, hesitating again. This was something he still avoided speaking about, knowing some wounds would always remain fresh. Laurent nodded his head for Damen to continue.

“Do you fear they will have to result to other things, if they cannot afford to point themselves in a certain direction?”

Laurent’s lip was between his teeth, his fingers clutching Damen’s. “Don’t you?”

Damen sighed, but he nodded his head, because he had thought of it. His time at Arles had shown him exactly what could happen when a poor child felt helpless when it came to income. Despite the fact that Damen and Laurent had implemented an age limit of eighteen for pets and that they would never be subjected to any danger or public displays, the fate of a pet was no ambition.

He tugged at Laurent’s hand lightly, waiting until Laurent came closer to him, turning around so he was sitting between Damen’s legs, his back on Damen’s chest. Damen brought one hand around Laurent, running his other hand up and down Laurent’s arm soothingly. “Tell me your idea,” he said.

Damen looked at Laurent now. He was the same person, the same morals and ethics innate in him. Damen thought back to the Laurent he had first met, so full of ideas for a better kingdom, but so trapped, so unable to make these dreams happen. Damen reminded himself that in a way, Laurent had been taken back to that mindset.

“We are building a school,” Damen told him. “In the heart of Delpha. We have yet to plan out all of the details, all of the smaller elements, but it will be targeted towards people that are low born. It is primarily made with children in mind, but it will give anyone a chance, if they need one.”

Laurent had moved his fist so it was in front of his mouth, his eyes sharp on Damen. He visibly considered a few things in his mind, running through them like a list before speaking. “If it is targeted towards lowborn,” Laurent said. “How will they afford it?”

“They won’t be expected to,” Damen replied. “A portion of taxes will go into funding so the entire kingdom will be involved, but above that, we will be funding the school ourselves. We have already selected a building which will be finished soon, and we will work with one of the palace tutors to create a list of subjects, and ways they can each be implemented into the children’s future. It will take time, but we are creating it slowly.” Damen paused, holding Laurent’s eyes as he spoke. “Together.”

Laurent was gazing back at Damen, and despite the way he was attempting to remain stoic, Damen could see something in his expression, in his eyes, that mirrored the way he had looked that day when he had told Damen of this idea. He had the same passion, the same fire that moved inside him, igniting the need to help others. The sight of it brought a smile to Damen’s face.

Laurent eyes fell to Damen’s grin before he looked down, his hands on the table now. “This will be very expensive,” he said.
“The more expensive it is,” Damen said. “The more options it means we have made available for the children.”

Laurent looked at Damen the way one would look when receiving an unfinished letter, the words stopping halfway down the parchment, incremental pieces of the bigger message missing. “And you are in equal support this?”

“Why would I not be?”

Laurent didn’t say anything in response, so Damen spoke.

“We are creating a new empire,” he said. “One that gives options to everyone, and does not take any away from anyone, despite the life they were born into. I know,” he said, “that not everything will be in our hands. We will not always be able to fix everything, but we will help those who cannot help themselves, if it is in our power.”

He stood up before Laurent could say anything, waiting for him to look up at Damen and nodding in resolve when he didn’t.

“We will look over the documents together when they are prepared, and decide on where to proceed from there.”

He didn’t wait for a look this time. He turned around and made for the door, leaving Laurent alone to his thoughts.

Dinner that evening was a long affair, and the thrum of impatience inside Damen only seemed to make it feel longer. He held himself proudly and confidently, smiled at the right people and conversed as he should, but he longed for the meal to be over so he could go to Laurent’s room and resume their conversation, or their lessons, whichever Laurent preferred. Laurent had not mentioned that the routine would come to an end, so Damen assumed he planned to continue.

The end of dinner was nearing, as they were at the point where the servants were clearing the main course from the table and setting out fresh bowls of water to clean your fingers off in preparation for dessert. Damen nodded his gratitude as his goblet of wine was refilled, waiting for the servant to move on to the adjacent table before resuming his conversation with Nikandros.

“I don’t understand,” Nikandros was saying as he lapped the oil from his plate with a piece of bread. “He went with you?”

“He did,” Damen said.

“Willingly?”

Damen narrowed his eyes. “As apposed to what?”

Nikandros shook his head, wiping his hands off before he took a sip from his water. “I’m just surprised. The last I knew, he had no desire to be in the same room as you. Now he’s leaving the palace with you in the middle of the night to sneak away in disguise?”

“It wasn’t as it once was,” Damen said. “We were always less inhibited when we were out in disguises. We would touch freely, he would indulge in wine, we would occasionally take a room—“

“Yes,” Nikandros interrupted, rubbing his forehead. “I know, thank you.”
“I’m not saying that is how it was,” Damen continued, ignoring Nikandros’ expression. “But he did not abandon the tradition, even if it was for different reasons than what they used to be. He still went with me, alone.”

“What has changed?”

Damen took a long draught from his wine, willing himself not to look to his left, towards the bright presence that he took comfort in knowing was there. He didn’t know what changed. He didn’t know if something had changed, but Laurent had done something that Damen knew he would not have done, had it been weeks ago.

Damen had not seen Laurent after the council meeting that day. Damen had sparred, trained and bathed, and by the time he returned to his chambers, the only thing he had time for before dinner was to oversee certain documents that had been accumulating on his desk. He had come to dinner alone, simply because he had been late. Since the night Damen had gotten Laurent from his rooms, they had come to dinner together unless an oversight in time had occurred as it had tonight.

Laurent had already been seated in his spot when Damen arrived, majority of the table already filled. Damen smiled instinctively at Laurent as he sat, and Vannes who had been speaking to Laurent greeted Damen enthusiastically. Laurent looked at Damen in silence for a moment before his expression shifted as he remembered the importance of public appearances, and whatever had been on his mind allowed him to smile back at Damen. Damen’s chest felt warm as he reveled in the sight of it, latching on to Laurent’s murmur of, “hello,” before he turned back to Vannes, motioning for her to continue speaking.

“I don’t know,” Damen said to Nikandros. “As well as I have come to know him, there are still complexities of his mind that even I cannot understand.” Despite the confusion of the situation, Damen could hear the fondness in his voice. Nikandros sighed, reaching for his fork. Damen opened his mouth, intending to speak when he felt a gentle touch, causing him to start.

Damen turned away from Nikandros the instant he felt a hand cover his, his heart rate increasing as he turned towards the source of the touch. Laurent’s hand was on top of Damen’s, his fingers on his, and Damen tried desperately to control whatever reaction was on his face. Normal. These things should look normal between them.

Laurent wasn’t looking at Damen. His gaze was on the opposite end of the hall, focused on the table where the soldiers were sitting. His hand on Damen’s seemed to be absentminded as his eyes were steadily on Jord, who’s back was turned to them from where he was sitting.

“Yes?” Damen said.

Laurent blinked twice, turning towards Damen as if he hadn’t expected to be spoken to. Damen looked at him questioningly and Laurent’s eyes widened as he pulled his hand away quickly, setting it in his lap. Damen reached for his goblet and took a large sip, not wanting Laurent to feel as if Damen was directing attention to the touch.

Damen set his goblet down, licking the wine off his lips. He continued to look at Laurent, waiting.

Laurent’s eyes trailed back to their original place, his chin slightly jutted out towards Jord. “You never finished telling me what happened with Aimeric,” he said quietly

Damen let out a slow breath, reaching for his wine again, though he had no intention of drinking it. Laurent took it as directive to continue speaking.
“I remember what you said,” Laurent said, leaning in to Damen slightly, murmuring his words. “He made an enemy of me, and I cannot imagine that I treated that lightly. I assume I had him taken as prisoner. Leverage of sorts.”

Damen closed his eyes for a moment. “Yes.”

Laurent looked at him with a well? expression. Damen looked around the table, and despite the fact that no one was listening, it did not feel right to discuss this in such a jovial atmosphere.

“Perhaps- not here,” he said.

Laurent’s eyes flicked around the room before they were back on Damen. He inched closer. “No one is paying us any attention.”

Damen sighed softly. His eyes were on Jord as he spoke. “He was being held at Ravenel,” Damen confirmed. “But there was an… altercation.” He considered leaving out the confrontation in the tower, but Laurent deserved the complete truth. “You had him brought to you, and the two of you spoke. The matter escalated.”

“Escalated,” Laurent repeated.

Damen purposely kept his eyes averted as he went on. “You knew of his situation with your uncle.” It was all Damen said. It was all he had to say.

A servant was taking Damen and Laurent’s plates. A noblewoman was whispering something in Vannes’ ear that had her pushing away from the table and walking away with their arms linked, towards the opening that led out into the garden. Dessert was being cleared from the table. Damen heard a noise, and he turned his head to see Laurent standing from his seat.

“Come,” Laurent said, and Damen did.

Damen said nothing as they left the large hall, but he allowed his eyes to wander towards Laurent as they walked. Laurent was looking straight ahead, and Damen could see the tension in his jaw, in the straight set of his shoulders. Laurent said nothing until they were passed the doors and in one of the long halls, out of earshot of anyone. It was only then that he stopped walking, turning towards Damen.

“What happened?” He said.

Damen looked down at him, weighing his words only for a moment. “You went to check on him the following morning,” he said. He spoke abruptly, because delivering the news in any other manner would not change the past, and he knew Laurent wanted the simple reality. “He was no longer alive.”

Despite the passing years, and despite the fact that Damen and Aimeric had had no lost love between them, it was not an easy thing to say, nor was it an easy thing to remember. He stood firmly as he spoke, searching for any signs of emotion in Laurent’s eyes, though he found none.

Laurent had no memory of Aimeric. He was simply a name to him. Damen remembered the way Laurent had reacted when Nicaise’s fate had been thrown at his feet. Laurent’s face had remained expressionless, and his reaction was shown through the jolt in his horse alone. If Laurent had managed to mask his emotions for a boy he had cared for deeply, he was certainly able to mask it for a faceless boy now.

Despite all this, Damen knew Laurent better than any, and he knew the way things settled in
Laurent’s heart. He nodded his head once like this news was to be expected before motioning down the hall, towards the direction of his rooms.

“Wait for me in my chambers,” Laurent said. And then as Damen had anticipated, “I have something I need to see to, I will be there shortly.” And then Laurent was turning the opposite direction and walking away, not because he had anything he needed to do, but because he needed time to be alone.

Damen made his way through the palace, eventually finding himself at the doors of what was his and Laurent’s chambers. He paid the guards no mind as he stepped in, allowing himself to look around the familiar room in a way he did not when he was in here with Laurent. He saw the balcony where he and Laurent often stood together, taking in the vast blanket of stars. He saw the table where they had shared many meals when they had wanted to be alone. He saw their bedchambers.

Damen sighed deeply, walking towards the end of the room where the sitting area was, two reclining couches in its center. He made to sit, resigning himself to wait however long Laurent needed when he noticed something at the opposite end, leaning on a wall. Damen squinted for a moment before he stood, walking around the couch and towards the corner of the room. Whatever it was was long and rectangular, being covered by a sheet, looking like it had been set there as an afterthought.

Damen looked around the room as if the answer would be on the walls, and then towards the door as if Laurent would walk in and explain it. When neither of these things happened Damen turned back towards the object, lifted it with one hand and with the other, drew the sheet off.

It was silent in the large, empty room. Distantly, Damen could hear the rhythmic sounds of crickets outside, just as he could hear his shallow breathing.

His chest ached. His entire body ached as he took in the portrait that he had not yet seen, but could so vividly remember being created. The way he and Laurent had looked at each other to say something before looking forward for the artist to begin, and instead had simply remained that way, neither of them able to look anywhere else.

“Please,” Damen whispered, his fingers trailing Laurent’s smile. “Come back to me.”
Damen looked up at the sound of laughter.

He felt something inside of him soften, his chest feeling both warm and tight at the sight in front of him: Laurent crouched down on his knees, three children no older than six crowding him. Laurent was even in height with them from the way he was crouched, and his smile seemed to be lighting up his entire face.

This was something they had begun doing a short while ago. Damen was heeled enough to leave his sickbed, but nowhere near well enough to resume his usual training. Laurent had threatened to have his cuff chained to the bed if Damen so much as thought of touching a sword.

Until he could, his trips out of bed were mild at best. Paschal had advised that Damen leave for short amounts of time to stretch his legs and acclimate his body with movements, but to keep it brief and simple. At first Damen and Laurent had done nothing more than take walks through the halls and occasionally the gardens. It had only been a few weeks since this had been added to their weekly ventures out of the bedroom.

They had been walking through East Wing of the palace, Damen’s arm around Laurent’s waist for comfort rather support when they had heard a gasp. They each glanced at each other before turning their heads to the side to see two young boys standing across the hall from them.

“IT’s the king!” one of them whispered, his voice at a volume he most likely thought was low.

“Hello,” Damen said.

The boy’s eyes widened, just as his friend nudged him with his elbow. “It’s the prince,” he whispered, just as loud.

“It is,” Laurent agreed.

The two boys looked at each other, seeming to have a silent conversation over whether they should proceed as they wanted or follow what was ingrained in them when it came to their king.

“Where are you both off to?” Damen asked them, wanting to make the deliberation easier on them.

They grinned then, looking as if their mutual decision had been made. The smaller boy came up to them first, the one who had spoken to Laurent. “We’re going to see our friends,” he said, his hands clasped behind his back. “Do you want to come?”

Laurent looked at Damen quickly, and Damen could see on his face that he was torn between wanting to sate his curiosity and not having Damen over exert himself.

“I’m fine,” Damen assured him. Laurent looked at him doubtfully.

“Really,” Damen insisted. “Who could their friends possibly be that it would risk my wound reopening?”

Laurent looked at him for a few more seconds, his lips pursed in contemplation before he sighed, turning back to the boys.

“We would love to come,” he said.
That had resulted in two children grabbing their king and his strange foreign prince by the hand and
dragging them through the palace halls, ignoring every yelp of surprise from each passing servant,
torn between prostrating themselves or gaping in confusion.

They had been pulled into a large room, a wide stone balcony at the edge which opened the room
up to the sound of waves and the scent of saltwater. The marble floor had a large carpet on it, and
there were many couches and chairs strewn around the room. Each surface had something on it,
whether it be toys, puzzles or art supplies.

The room was filled with children, both boys and girls. All of different ages, but no more than ten at
best. Some were sitting across from each other playing games with their hands, some were on the
balcony taking in the view. There were a few girls that were drawing, sitting on the floor in a circle.
Some boys were wrestling.

They all looked up at the sound of the door opening, everyone’s face lighting up.

“Look who we brought!” The boy holding Damen’s hand called out, pulling Damen further into the
room. The children all scrambled in their spots, standing up quickly at the shock of seeing the king in
their playroom. Damen had never been there before.

Laurent stepped forward, looking around the expanse of the room with a soft, considering look on
his face. He wasn’t smiling exactly, but Damen could see from his eyes that he may as well have
been.

A little girl climbed down from he couch, walked over to Laurent with wide unblinking eyes. She had
long golden hair that was braided over her shoulder, and she was tugging at it as she looked up at
him.

“I like your hair,” she said. “It’s like mine.”

“It is,” Laurent said. “But yours is much longer. I like yours more.”

An older women walked out of an antechamber then, her own graying hair pulled back from her
face. She had a baby cradled in her arms and she walked over to a wooden crib immediately, setting
it down amongst the blankets before turning back to Damen and Laurent.

“Exalted,” she said. “Your Highness.’

Damen had recognized her immediately. She had been his primary nursemaid when he was a child,
and Kastor’s as well, when he was a young boy. Damen had memories of her cutting his hair for
him, reading to him when he was very little, and watching him when he had been too young to
watch himself, and his father the king far too busy. She had been much younger looking then, her
hair brighter, her posture more straight, but Damen recognized her alone from the way she looked
at him.

“Azalea,” Damen said, stepping up beside Laurent. “Are you the caretaker of these children?”

“I am,” She replied, which pleased something in Damen.

Damen and Laurent had stayed there for a while, each one of the children introducing themselves
until Azalea had told them all to wash their hands for their meal. When they scampered off Laurent
stood, pulling Damen up by his hand as if Damen had needed the help. This pleased Damen as well.

“I apologize for their enthusiasm,” Azalea said, standing up with them. “They hear so much about
their king, I think it excited them to see him for themselves.”
“They were no bother,” Laurent said. “But Damianos needs to go rest.”

“I’m fine,” Damen said.

“I didn’t ask,” Laurent replied. Azalea smiled.

The little girl with the braid approached them then, tugging on her hair again.

“She asked Laurent.

“I have to leave soon,” he said. “But I’ll come back.”

And thus begun Damen and Laurent’s weekly routine of visiting the children, ranging from five minutes to thirty, depending on the day. Sometimes they spoke with them, sometimes they just sat and watched them play.

Laurent was leaving for Vere the next day, something Damen had known was coming but preferred not to think about too much. Damen asked him what he wanted to do on his last day in Akielos, and one of the first things Laurent had mentioned was to see the children. He was with them now, crouched down on his knees as they all took turns saying goodbye.

“It warms my heart to see you smile, Exalted,” Azalea said, a smile on her own face as she said this. “You deserve a lifetime of happiness.”

Damen looked at his primary source of happiness, his heart feeling full. “I don’t think there is anyone who truly deserves Laurent,” he said. “But I will work my whole life to try.”

Laurent ate his breakfast of fruit and yogurt that morning alone as he generally did, looking out into the courtyard absentmindedly. There was much going on, soldiers training, servants bustling around the grounds. It was exceptionally hot that day, the sun feeling like it was baking Laurent’s skin though the drawn curtains. The hair at the back of his neck felt uncomfortable, sweat damping his nape.

Laurent’s eyes followed two soldiers sparring, trailing towards a group of horses that were being led into the stables. The commotion went on, activities taking place all around Laurent, and yet none of it was registering in his mind. He felt that he was looking, not watching.

Laurent had woken up feeling out of sorts that morning, something weighing down on his chest that he could not pinpoint. He had not received bad news, nor good news for that matter, yet he felt some form of ambivalence that for a portion of his morning made him feel as if he were simply going through the motions of his regular morning routine.

Perhaps it was because it had been years since Laurent had stayed up for long hours into the night with another person, exchanging words and opinions. It had been so long since he had done that, he could barely remember what it was like. To converse passed a required conversation, to actively make the decision to speak to someone else. The irony of the last person Laurent had done something like this with before Damianos was not lost on him.

That was likely the reason for the incongruity, Laurent thought as he added a spoonful of berries in. The odd, out of character communication that felt like unfamiliar territory.

Laurent stood from the table and turned for the door, preparing to call for a servant to come clear his dishes. He wanted to spar, and preferred to return to a clean room. As he walked through the sitting area and towards the entryway he caught a bright flash of color, something out of his peripheral vision causing him to pause. He stopped in his tracks, turning his head slightly, only to see
Damianos’ red cloak, folded on one of the cushions.

It took Laurent a bit to sift through his confusion, but after a moment he remembered the point from the previous night at which Damianos had removed the cape which he tended to wear to most dinners. It kept catching under him, tugging at his shoulders each time he shifted from the way his body weighed it down, and eventually he had simply unpinned it, setting it aside, leaving his shoulders bare.

The night had been long. They had resumed their conversations in Akielon, and Laurent found himself easing into the language more and more each day. It was odd, and a bit uncomfortable to be increasingly more fluent in the language of his enemy. However, that discomfort shifted into something else each time he reminded himself that the kingdoms were no longer enemies. Laurent was becoming more accustomed to seeing things like Akielon and Veretian adults sharing a meal, or children sharing a game. It was still odd, bordering distasteful to see so many men and women as a pairing, but that confusion was an entirely different situation. Some things were simply out of Laurent’s reach of understanding.

Laurent could hardly remember everything they had spoken about, the entirety of it blending together. He knew they had talked about the soldiers, and the techniques Enguerran had been teaching them that week, comparing them to the previous one. They had continued a conversation on taxes that had been broached during that day’s council meeting, and they had even touched on Amis, the boy working in the kitchen. He had requested to continue in the position when they had checked on him at the end of his two weeks of service, which Damianos and Laurent had agreed to. Surprisingly, Damianos had been visiting him frequently. He had only positive things to say.

“Why?” Laurent had asked, when Damianos mentioned that he had been to see him that week for the second time.

It was then that Damianos had removed his cape, unpinning it and pulling it from around his shoulders. “Why not?” He had replied simply.

Laurent’s eyes had followed his hands as they folded the cape over once, setting in on the side. He brought his arm around the backrest of the couch after, his fingers dangling comfortably, and Laurent was reminded of the unwelcome memory of his indiscretion during dinner, the way he had accidentally touched Damianos’ hand in a mindless gesture as if it were natural to him.

Laurent strode forward towards the couch now, snatching up the cape and letting it unfold. It was obscenely large, most likely custom made to match his obscene size, and it unraveled before Laurent, going as far as to pool at his feet on the ground. Laurent looked at it, the deep, stark red that could be seen from the tops of battlements before he bunched the fabric in his hands, tossing it towards his unfinished food to be taken away with it.

Laurent was halfway towards the door before he stopped again, turning around slowly with an impatient exhale. He could not leave anything of Damianos’ for one of the servants to bring to his chambers. No one was meant to know they were no longer sleeping in the same room, unless Laurent felt like having Jord run errands for him.

Laurent trudged back towards the table and looked down at everything, weighing his options before going with the most appealing one. He reached for the largest bowl and with a careless flick of his wrist, turned it over so that all of the remaining yogurt fell down onto the cape in a splash, the juices of the berries soaking into the material immediately, dripping down like trickling blood.

Damianos had clumsily spilled his breakfast all over himself, and left his cape for the servants to wash. Laurent dropped the bowl back onto the table, wiping his hands off before turning around,
finally leaving the confines of the room that somehow still held the lingering scent of someone else.

“Very good, Your Highness,” Jord said, though the words came out a little breathless from his position on the floor, splayed out on his back. The impact from Laurent’s sword had knocked Jord off his feet, his own sword fallen a few inches away from him. Laurent held his hand out in response, which Jord looked at for a few seconds before taking a hold of it, allowing himself to be pulled up.

This was familiar. Laurent had vivid memories of his fifteenth year, after an imperative goal had been set for himself, and he had begun putting things in action. One of the first steps had been assembling his guard. Another had been forming himself into a man they would respect.

He remembered the first time he had led Jord into a private training arena, Jord’s disbelief visible on his face, though he likely thought he was hiding it. Jord didn’t think Laurent would be able to fight, no one did. That much was evident in his look of surprise when Laurent had steadily said, “fight me.” In the way he had swung his sword, the amount of power behind it laughable.

That look of surprise and the tame swing of his arm was quickly dispensed as he began to take Laurent as a serious opponent and as a result, ended up on his back. Repeatedly.

“Thought you weren’t a fighter,” Jord had said.

“I’ve been practicing,” Laurent replied as he stretched a hand out, much like he did now. The memory of that first interaction was stark in Laurent’s mind because it had been the beginning of something. Now here he and Jord were, seven years later. Though things may have felt the same in here, with nothing but sweat and exertion and the familiar sounds of swords and roughened breathing, everything on the outside was so different.

“We’re done for the day,” Laurent told him, though he kept his sword in his hand instead of handing it off to Jord to take care of as he generally did at the end of each session. Jord took the hint for what it was and nodded his head, sheathing his own sword and stepping away.

“Your Highness,” He said before turning for the exit.

Laurent sat himself on the bench at the edge of the room, his sword clasped in both hands between his knees. He looked around the large room, his eyes roaming around the dust, the armor, the different swords lining the walls, each length and size acclimated for a different hold, a different arm. It was quiet, now that Jord had left and Laurent was alone. A different time Laurent had been here with someone else was another stark memory in his mind.

The quiet did not last long. Laurent was looking at the ground absently, somewhere in his head when he heard footsteps, the sound of someone else entering. He looked up from his spot between his feet to see the kyros, stopped in his tracks with his eyes on Laurent.

“Your Highness,” Nikandros said, eventually.

Laurent placed his palms at his sides, leaning his weight back on his arms. “Nikandros, was it?”

Nikandros looked at Laurent, simply blinking as he lingered in the doorway. Laurent quirked a brow, prompting Nikandros to nod his head dumbly.

“Yes, Your Highness.”
Laurent shifted the weight on his arms, his mind drifting back to the letters he had found. It had mentioned something of he and Nikandros corresponding, and Damianos had used the term bonding. Laurent had used the word friends.

Laurent had looked for any other letters, anything that could signify what he and Nikandros could have spoken about regularly, but he had found nothing. Looking at the man now, Laurent was drawing a complete blank as to what they may have had in common.

“I apologize for disturbing,” Nikandros said. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Who said you were disturbing?” Laurent asked, motioning towards the props and swords. “Please.”

Nikandros entered the room slowly, moving as a rat might around a sleeping cat. Laurent stayed where he was, his eyes following Nikandros as he walked.

“If I may ask, Your Highness,” Nikandros said. “How are you doing?” He had a tense look on his face as he spoke. Laurent could not place if it was because he felt nervous asking Laurent a personal question, or if it was because he didn’t care for the answer and only felt as if he should.

Although the question generally tended to bother Laurent, it didn’t so much now. Perhaps it was because of how unnerved Nikandros seemed, as if he were being pulled in two separate directions.

“I keep getting asked that,” Laurent replied. “I really wonder what response people are expecting. Are you all surprised that I have yet to throw myself from the battlements?”

Nikandros’ mouth twisted. “Of course not, Your Highness.”

“Did you expect me to kill Damianos in his sleep?”

Nikandros’ mouth went flat at that, and Laurent felt his own lips curve. He really was fun. Perhaps Laurent should seek him out more often.

“Rest easy,” Laurent said. “Half the kingdom would come for me if I had him killed.”

“More than half,” Nikandros said boldly. “The Veretians admire Damen just as the Akielons do. He is an excellent king.”

Laurent tilted his head. “Did I say anything in regards to his kingship?” he asked. “I don’t think I did. Maybe my memory is only getting worse.”

Nikandros exhaled slowly, but otherwise said nothing.

“You don’t like me,” Laurent observed.

Nikandros gave him an odd look at that, different from any other way he had yet to look at him. “You are my king.”

“I don’t think that’s quite what I asked.”

Nikandros walked the rest of the way in the room until he was on the outskirts, his hand trailing a shelf full of armor. He seemed to be considering his words, and he didn’t look at Laurent when he eventually spoke.

“I was skeptical of you at first,” Nikandros admitted, his hand stopping at the edge. “I had reason to be. Damianos trusts blindly, and I have tried to advise against it many times in our lives, though he’s never listened.” He trailed off in the middle of his sentence, something turning his thoughts before he
looked back at Laurent. “I have great admiration for you now, as your subject and your friend.

“Are we friends?” Laurent asked. He could not place the tone of his own voice.

“You have called me as such,” Nikandros said. “Before.”

Laurent remembered that first dinner, where Nikandros had spoken to him pleasantly, not yet knowing what had happened. He had spoken with ease, a smile on his face, very much unlike now, where he spoke as if they were walking on a thin layer of ice over a frozen lake. He remembered what Nikandros had asked him as well, and Damianos’ explanation after.

Laurent looked at the sawdust reluctantly, trying to imagine rolling around on the ground like animals with this man and failing utterly. He could not even begin to fathom how that would have begun.

“Let me ask you,” Laurent said, looking at Nikandros. “Since we’re friends. How exactly did you coax the ice cold prince of Vere into wrestling?”

That same odd expression fell back onto Nikandros’ face, morphing his features. He looked quite similar to Damianos, Laurent noticed. They could have been related.

“I did not,” Nikandros said carefully. “You approached me.”

Laurent looked at him flatly. “What.”

Nikandros squinted, looking as if he was reflecting on the memory. “Wrestling is Damianos’ favorite sport,” Nikandros explained. “You had said you wanted to learn—“

It was now Laurent’s lips that twisted in distaste. He uncrossed his legs, rising from the bench.

“I believe I have had my fill of bonding for the day,” Laurent said as he made for the door, speaking over his shoulder. “I will see you at dinner.”

Laurent was in his bedchambers when he heard the knock.

It was late afternoon, the sun just beginning to set, streaking the sky in pink and orange when Laurent heard the sound, pulling his attention away from what he had been reading. He waited a moment, wondering if it had been his imagination when he heard it again.

He set the book down, not bothering to mark the page as he rose from the couch, walking through the room until he reached the door. He puled it open, not entirely sure who to expect but also not entirely surprised to see Damianos.

Laurent said nothing. Damianos would have no problem speaking if Laurent was silent. Maybe if he was silent for long enough, he would simply go away.

There was no such luck of course. Damianos was holding a stack of parchments in his hand, though they were turned to face him so Laurent could not see the contents. Damianos looked over Laurent’s shoulder and into the room before speaking.

“May I come in?”

Laurent gripped the handle. “You’re asking for my permission?” This seemed to confuse Damianos, whose eyebrows furrowed slightly.
“I won’t throw you aside and barge in if you don’t let me,” Damianos said, in a tone that suggested that his reply had been as ridiculous as the question. “But there are things we need to discuss,” he continued, raising the papers.

Laurent eyed them skeptically before he stepped aside, waiting for Damianos to pass before he shut the door.

He turned, remaining where he was and leaning his shoulder on the wall as he watched Damianos walk through the room comfortably, as if he were his own. Something nagged at Laurent as the thought came to him, and he pointedly ignored it.

Damianos walked up to the table, taking a side at the chair right next to the head of the table, setting the papers down. Laurent was still where he was, and Damianos motioned to the vacant chair with his hand.

“Well?" Laurent asked, pulling a random one towards himself.

“Should I bring the chair to the door so you will be more comfortable?” Damianos asked.

Laurent nodded absently as his eyes scrolled down the paper, but he could tell from the way the words began at the top of the page that it was not the first one in the stack, and he couldn’t make sense of something if he began in the middle.

“Are all contracts written like this?” Laurent asked, setting the paper back in its spot.

“Subjects, hours, those such things,” he said, shrugging.

“Those decisions are not a king’s job.”

“It’s our job,” Damen said. “This is not simply another school. It is ours, and we decided to make
these decisions ourselves.”

Laurent pursed his lips, and Damianos exhaled roughly. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Laurent raised his brows. “Excuse me?”

“I’m trying to understand,” Damianos continued as if Laurent hadn’t spoken. “Are you looking to catch me in a lie? Do you think I would fake documents for a nonexistent school just so you would spare me twenty minutes of your time? I don’t know what you are trying to achieve by acting as if this is not something you’re excited about, as if you don’t see the benefits, but there is no reason for it. As much as it seems to vex you, I know how happy this project makes you.”

Laurent looked at Damianos blankly, watching as he visibly tried to tamper down his irritation before speaking. “If you think we can accomplish anything in just twenty minutes, then the children of Delfeur are doomed.”

Damianos looked back at Laurent wordlessly for another stretch of silence before he let out a breath, his shoulders relaxing as he rubbed his face. He stacked the papers up after, passing them to Laurent. “Read these,” he said.

Laurent took the papers from Damianos, straightening them out in his hands before beginning. He read through them carefully, rubbing the edge of the pages in his fingers as he did. He made his way through them slowly, absorbing the information. He flicked his eyes up to see what Damianos was doing somewhere on the second page, looking back down and continuing to read when he saw Damianos was simply watching him.

The documents spoke of practical things such as location and currency, breaking each aspect down and going into detail on certain matters. On the final page were a list of signatures, none of which Laurent recognized, though he didn’t really expect to.

“And we’ve been to the property?” Laurent asked, his head still tilted downwards, only glancing up with his eyes.

“We have,” Damianos confirmed. “We can go again if you like, but Herode has gone to see it and approves of the location as well. You can get a second opinion from him.”

Laurent set the papers down, considering the matter. He would certainly go to see the property, but all things considered, it all read quite well to him. The advantages of the location were written in subparagraphs, and he liked the idea of the school being located in the center of Delfeur.

“What do you think of it?” Laurent asked. Damianos gazed at him.

“I’m serious,” Laurent said. “What do you think of the property?”

“I like it,” Damianos said, looking at Laurent carefully. “I approve of it.”

“Of course you approve of it, you wouldn’t be bringing me papers to sign, papers that you clearly intend on signing yourself if you didn’t. Tell me why.”

“The location is a good choice,” Damianos said. “It’s enough that we will be able to build a foundation large enough that there won’t be an oppressive limit, but the size will not overwhelm the children. They won’t feel as if they are coming to a foreign palace each day that they are unwelcome in. There is a lake not too far that they can be taken to, and a forest nearby. With guards accompanying them, they will be able to explore nature and incorporate forms of activity into their days.”
Laurent leaned back comfortably in his hair, motioning for Damianos to go on.

“There is a marketplace in the area,” he continued. “Trips can be taken, things can be arranged. Geographically, it can be more than educational for them. It can be a safe thing that they look forward to, all while they are given the privileges that not every child is born with.”

Damianos and Laurent had been given those privileges. They would now be the ones giving them back.

Laurent studied another section more carefully, nodding along slowly.

“What have we discussed on the matter, other than practical things,” Laurent asked, motioning towards the documents.

“Not too much,” Damianos said. “We wanted to hold off most things until the situation was more in motion.”

Laurent balanced his chin on his hand, rubbing his skin with his thumb. He looked down to all the papers strewn across the table surface before raising his eyes, lowering his hands.

“Tell me what we’ve discussed,” he said.

So he did. Damianos told Laurent of the things they had decided: that the school would be open for five days week, and the hours of each day would be catered towards each age group of children. He pulled out another folded piece of parchment and opened it, smoothing it out on the table and showing him the things they had jotted down. Notes, ideas that they had apparently had. It was still odd for Laurent to see these types of things. His handwriting, outlining things when he didn’t recall them, especially when it was accompanied by an unfamiliar scrawl.

Just as Laurent began to read through the lists, he felt his stomach clench, and he looked up and over his shoulder to see the room bathed in darkness. He hadn’t even noticed, and that night’s dinner had most likely started.

“We need to go,” Laurent said, though he was reluctant to leave when they were in the middle of something. He didn’t like feeling like he left things unfinished.

Damianos looked up as well, frowning when he saw how dark it had become. “I hadn’t noticed,” he muttered, standing up. “I’ll call for a servant to come light the lanterns and bring our meals here.”

Laurent frowned from his seat. “Shall we sprinkle rose petals and hold hands as well?”

Damianos audaciously rolled his eyes, walking away from the table and entirely disregarding that Laurent had spoken. Laurent looked at his retreating back in part annoyance and part surprise, watching as he opened the door and muttered something he couldn’t quite hear to the guards before shutting it, returning to the table and taking up his seat. He looked at Laurent expectantly, but Laurent just returned it with a flat glare before looking back down at the paper.


“These are just ideas,” Damianos said, tracing the words with his finger. “And general terms. This,” he said, pointing towards the first subject, “Can be broken up by age. This,” he said, pointing to Science, “Will have many different segments. History will go through everything, from the days of the Artesian Empire to now. Mythology will be included, and folk tails can be told to the younger children. Art may range.”
Damianos looked at Laurent like he was waiting for a response, lifting a hand when he did not receive one. “These are just suggestions,” he reiterated. “They were mutually made, but nothing is set in stone. We are here to discuss these things, alternatives included.”

But Laurent did not have a problem with the outline, he was only absorbing it, turning it over in his head, adding and removing elements.

“Hand me the quill,” Laurent said.

He pulled the paper slightly towards himself and added philosophy to the list. Damianos took the quill and added language below it, looking up at Laurent after. Laurent nodded, drawing a line next to it and jotting down Veretian, Akielon. In smaller letters, Patran, Vaskian. An arsenal of languages were always helpful.

“Do you have a fresh parchment?” Laurent asked. Damianos stood from his seat and went back to the desk, opening one of the drawers and pulling a stack out, knowing immediately where to go. He handed the pile to Laurent, and he began to copy over everything more neatly, with more detailed descriptions. Halfway through there was a knock on the door, and Laurent called out for them to enter without looking up.

A servant came in with the food, Laurent could tell from the sounds of platters, glasses and rattling silverware. He did not acknowledge them as things were set down before them, and the servant did not disturb them. Damianos had brought his chair closer and was looking over Laurent’s shoulder, towards the paper where Laurent was putting things down, circling, underlining and pointing with his finger. Damianos nodded, taking the quill from him and rearranging one thing on the list, which Laurent looked at for a moment before nodding his approval.

Laurent was excited about this. He may not have been showing as such, and he may not have been voicing the enthusiasm, but he knew in his mind that this was a good thing. This was a step he was proud to be taking a part in leading. He remembered the heaviness he felt when the weight of the crown had fallen on his shoulders. He remembered the feeling of inadequacy, and the fear of not measuring up to the shadow he had always been in, had been happy to be in. He hoped this was something that would have made him proud.

Laurent looked up briefly to see that they were alone again, lanterns lit around them, a platter of food before them. There were roasted vegetables and rolls of bread, cuts of meat and chicken, pastries and candied nuts. A pitcher of wine and water, with two tall goblets. Laurent was famished, and he pulled the food closer without giving it much thought, immediately reaching for the bread.

They took a few minutes to eat so they were temporarily sustained, putting something in their stomachs so they could continue their work. Damianos had the paper in front of him, and he was rubbing his thumb along his bottom lip, looking at Laurent.

“I think there should be some form of sport implemented,” he said, bringing his hand to the table. “Nothing too intensive, but I think it would be a wise addition.”

Laurent reached for a chunk of spiced meat, chewing it slowly as he wiped his hand off. Eventually he nodded, pushing the quill towards Damianos. Certain sports could help with balance and precision, and though Laurent had not grown up with nor did he currently possess a mindset that constantly revolved around physical strength and fighting, he knew there were certain skills that everyone should possess. No one should grow up feeling weak.

They continued to work through everything, exchanging ideas, occasionally disputing them. They slowly made their way through the food until the platters were eventually empty, the papers slowly
filling. It was odd, being here, exchanging thoughts and showing his ideas to another, let alone the man before him. It was not something he was generally comfortable with, but he knew that certain things were to be set aside for the greater good.

It was equally odd, because as new as working with Damianos in close quarters was, pointing things out with a leg drawn to his chest, Damianos reclined in his seat as he countered each thing, it did not feel as foreign as Laurent may have thought it would, had he imagined this scenario. It made little sense to Laurent, and was not something he felt the need to ponder too much. However, the fact still stood: as odd of a concept as it was to grasp, something about the night felt familiar.
Damen and Laurent were out in the open, walking through the marketplace together, their hands linked. They each had sleeves coming down past their wrist, but Damen could still feel the press of metal from Laurent’s cuff against his own hand. The smooth, solid feel of it was like a comfort.

Damen did not come to the marketplace often, as it was not a king’s place to shop for himself. They each had servants for that, and it was unsafe for royalty to walk around these parts, especially unguarded, but he knew Laurent enjoyed exploring the different stands and taking part in the simplicity, and Damen enjoyed seeing Laurent happy. Damen did not particularly relish the thought of walking unattended, despite the fact that he and Laurent could sufficiently hold their own against an attacker. However, most people outside the palace could not recognize them, especially this deep into the village, and so long as their cuffs were out of sight and Laurent’s bright hair was covered, they had no cause to worry.

They circled around the different tents, taking in all that was being sold at various prices. There was plenty of food; an array of sweet fruits, platters of nuts and sweetmeats, the fresh smell of loafs of bread wafting through the air. There were stands laying out jewelry, all different kinds of paintings and little trinkets for a home.

“Would you like something?” Damen asked, speaking low in Laurent’s ear.

He watched as Laurent observed everything around him, his expression light and at ease, despite the dark shadows his cloak cast on his face. He nodded his head at one of the tables holding the sweets, causing Damen to smile.

“How can I help you both?”

Laurent’s eyes scanned the contents of the table, waving his hand in the general direction of the candied nuts and jellies. “How much?”

The man clasped his hands in front of him. “I sell them by the pound,” he said. “It is four silver lei’s per.”

Damen nodded, and watched as Laurent filled a sack with everything he wanted, occasionally adding in things of his own. He was not much one for sweets, but he enjoyed the occasional indulgence.

When they were finished they paid the man, nodding in farewell as he thanked them for their...
purchase. They bid him a good day and turned away, winding their way through the rest of the
market.

Damen looked through the corner of his eye as Laurent pulled out a small, flaky pastry, coated in
nuts that were sticking together with glazed honey.

“I don’t understand how you can stomach it,” Damen said. “It is sickly.”

Laurent raised a brow as he lifted the unfinished pastry to Damen’s lips, waiting for him to open his
mouth.

“You like it,” he murmured, the side of his mouth lifting as Damen inevitably ate from his hand.
Laurent traced the line of Damen’s bottom lip after, some of the stickiness from the honey still on his
finger.

Laurent pulled his hand away with a growing smile, just as Damen had begun to re open his mouth.

“Come,” Laurent said, beginning to walk again. “I want to hear the music.”

They walked what was now the familiar route, occasionally stopping to observe the stands or to feed
each other sweets. They were each a bit more inhibited when others were around, but the disguises
almost made it feel like they were alone.

They reached a clearing near the end of the strip where a man always sat against a low tree, a
kithara in his lap between his crossed legs. He played a number of different melodies, a wooden
bowl on the ground by his feet where people would occasionally toss in copper sols as he played.

There were different groups of children around, a handful of them recognizable. There were multiple
boys and girls playing with a dusty looking ball on the side, a game Damen had seen them play
before but still didn’t quite understand the gist of. There were a group of girls standing in a circle,
matching scarfs with tinkling bells wrapped around their waists, causing a rhythmic chiming sound
to ring out as they danced in what was an attempt at a synchronized dance. Other children were
simply playing with each other, calling out random things or chasing each other around the small
fountain.

Damen looked over to Laurent and saw him watching the children play, a serene look on his face
that Damen could not explain, only admire. A slight breeze caused the hood of his cloak to sway, but
not enough to fall down his head.

Damen brought his hand to Laurent’s arm, brushing the fabric with his thumb. When Laurent
turned to face him, Damen simply tilted his head with a soft smile. Laurent smiled back at him
briefly, leaning over to kiss Damen’s cheek before walking over towards the children.

Damen watched with an indescribable feeling in his chest as Laurent crouched low, lowering
himself to the children’s level, making eye contact with them as he spoke. He was incapable of
exuding himself as anything but regal, but he never made children feel inferior to him, like he was
someone for them to fear. A few moments like this passed before two of the children were laughing,
a third one tossing the ball to Laurent which he caught with ease.

Laurent passed the ball back and fourth between his two hands, all of the children’s eyes following
the motion as they nodded at whatever it was Laurent was saying, entirely mystified. Eventually
Laurent rose from the ground, and that movement seemed to set everything in motion. Two girls
stood on either side of him, a few feet apart each of them, and two boys and a girl mirrored their
position across from them, the remaining children created a line in between them, each facing a
different way. Laurent called out something Damen could not decipher from where he stood, tossed the ball into the air, and all of the children acted at once.

About five minutes passed like this, Damen remaining where he was, preferring one of them to remain as vigilant as possible when they had days like this where they left the palace. It was while Damen was smiling helplessly as Laurent and a young boy fought over the ball, laughter etched into each of their faces when Damen felt a tug on his sleeve.

“Lamen!”

Damen quickly turned at the familiar voice, looking down at the young girl with large green eyes and light brown hair that wound down one shoulder.

“Hello,” he smiled.

She smiled back up at him, bringing a hand above her eyes to shield them from the sun. “You’re back.”

“I’m back,” Damen said. He crouched down in front of her so she wouldn’t have to crane her neck to look up at him, though he was still a few inches above her. “How is your brother?” he asked.

“He is well,” she replied, twirling her hair around her finger. “He’s feeling much better now that we gave him the remedy you suggested, though he doesn’t like the broth.”

“Neither do I,” Damen replied.

She looked around him for a moment before speaking in her light voice. “Is Charls here?” she asked, tugging on him now.

Damen turned slightly and motioned behind him, back to where Laurent was kicking the ball around with the children. Her eyes lit up as she grabbed Damen’s hand unselfconsciously, tugging on him to rise and yanking him with her towards the growing group.

The game was still in full swing, but Laurent paused when he felt Damen approach, grabbing the ball instead of kicking it towards someone else. He turned to Damen with a quirked brow, but his expression immediately shifted into something else when he noticed the girl holding Damen’s hand.

“Hello, Adalene,” he said, looking down at her with a tender expression.

Adalene clasped her hands behind her back and smiled a big, gap toothed smile up at Laurent, her cheeks tinged pink the way they normally did when Laurent set his attention on her.

“Where is your hat?” she asked him. “The one with the big feather,” she explained, spreading her arms out wide on either side of her.

“I’ve misplaced it,” Laurent said.

“A real shame,” Damen added.

Adalene pouted as if she was upset for Laurent, her features souring slightly for a moment before her face lit up like she thought of something to raise his spirits.

“I’ve been practicing the trick you taught me,” she said, lifting her chin proudly. “My father can never understand where his coins keep going.” She then stretched back the fabric from the pocket of her dress, showing three glinting coins packed in tight. She attempted what Damen assumed was a
wink, though it only caused her nose to wrinkle, one eye scrunching too tightly.

Laurent grinned at her, seemingly genuinely proud of her. Damen found Laurent’s private love of magic tricks charming, if not a bit under practiced.

“Next time, I will teach you something with cards,” he promised.

Adalene beamed, just as they heard the loud, thundering sound of horse hooves against cobblestones. Most of the children flinched and covered their ears, frowning until the sound passed.

“Why does that keep happening?” a young girl with dark hair asked.

“My mother says they are going to the palace,” one of the boys answered. “Groups have been coming for days now.”

“My father was speaking of it this morning,” another boy said, the ball in his hands now. “He says they are arriving in preparation for the banquet this week.”

“What banquet?” Laurent asked.

“The banquet in celebration for the anniversary of the unification of the kingdoms,” a girl standing near the back of the crowd said, in a voice that suggested that Laurent was senseless for not knowing. “My aunt does not believe they have lasted two years without a war breaking out,” she added.

“No?” Damen said.

“Who?” another girl asked.

“King Damianos and King Laurent,” she explained, in a voice similar to the way she answered Laurent’s question. She looked at the girl. “I agree with her. I don’t know how the kings can be united, after everything.”

“They must be happy together,” Laurent guessed.

Adalene looked up at Damen and Laurent. “Like you two?”

Damen kissed Laurent’s fingers. “Yes.”

A chorus of groans and displeased sounds rung out around them, only causing the flush on Laurent’s cheeks to spread. Before either of them could speak, the boy with the ball stepped forward and pushed it into Damen’s arms. “Will you play with us, Lamen? I want you on my team.”

Laurent looked at Damen, a glint in his eyes. “Yes, play with us. Those large hands should be good for something.”

Damen opened his mouth to respond, immediately closing it when he remembered their company. Instead he took the ball from the boy, his eyebrows raised as he took a step towards Laurent. “You think you can beat me?”

Damen stood with Nikandros in the courtyard, his hands clasped behind his back as he watched the men train before them. Enguerran was their captain, he was the one who reported back to Damen and Laurent and was present in meetings that required him, but Nikandros acted as his second in command. He was more than capable, and together he and Enguerran implemented a useful blend of Veretian and Akielon tactics. The simple force of Akielon fighting and the intricate tactics of
Veretian warfare made for an unparalleled combination.

“They are still improving,” Damen observed.

“Yes,” Nikandros said.

Damen watched as two Akielons sparred, though he did not recognize either of them. He recognized their movements as ones Damen had grown up around, applied to his own training, though there was something unmistakably different about it.

“Enguerran mentioned a new method to me the other day,” Damen said. “In regards to their sword work. Has he shown it to the men yet?”

“Yes,” Nikandros repeated. He said nothing else, unlike the informative answers he tended to give Damen in these conversations. Damen turned to look at him, his brow raising when he saw that his eyes were not on the men. He followed his gaze to the side of the yard, only to have them fall on a young woman seated on a stone bench on the opposite end. She sat alone, her own eyes on a book on her lap.

Damen’s lips quirked. “If I sit beside her, will that make you actually listen to me?”

Nikandros was so lost in his head, he didn’t seem to have heard Damen at all. Damen let out a breath of laughter, bumping their shoulders.

It was enough to pull Nikandros out of his trance, causing him to turn away quickly, towards a grinning Damen. “I’m sorry,” he said. Then, “what?”

“Nothing,” Damen said, still grinning. “You can go.”

“We’re discussing training,” Nikandros said.

“Not quite.”

“I’m sorry,” Nikandros repeated. “My mind was- forgive me. You have my full attention, Exalted.”

Damen fought the impulse to roll his eyes, or to sigh in exasperation. He admired Nikandros’ engrained respect, but at times, he just wanted them to be friends. “I can see that,” Damen said. “But the issue isn’t pressing.”

“Regardless,” Nikandros said.

“Regardless,” Damen muttered, his eyes falling back to the woman. She seemed around their age, perhaps a year or two younger, maybe closer to Laurent in age. Damen had seen her once or twice at dinner, she was one of the daughters of the kyros of Sicyon. “What is her name?” Damen asked, nudging his chin towards her direction.

Nikandros itched his cheek. “Sedona, I think,” he said, though it was clear to both of them that he knew her name with certainty.

“Sedona, I think,” he said, though it was clear to both of them that he knew her name with certainty.

“Well,” Damen said, his tone trailing off as he motioned towards her direction again, but Nikandros raised a hand and shook his head. Damen laughed. “Are you shy?” he asked, with honest curiosity and delight. Nikandros had never had any trouble approaching anyone who caught his eye.

Nikandros ignored that, and Damen found himself still smiling as he looked over to her again. She seemed entirely oblivious to the fact that her kyros and one of her kings were watching her. “She is
beautiful,” Damen observed.

Nikandros looked at him, his expression amused as well. “She is not exactly your type.”

She wasn’t. With her darker coloring and wild hair, she resembled that of the Vaskian women more than Akielon, though that did not take away from her obvious beauty. Damen raised a shoulder.

“Speaking of which,” Nikandros said, his expression shifting slightly. “He and I spoke the other day.”

Damen felt his heart beat in his chest at the thought of Laurent. “Where?” Damen asked.

“The training arena,” Nikandros replied. “I didn’t know he and Jord were training daily.” Damen nodded. “He was alone when I went in, but he didn’t dismiss me like I assumed he would when I saw him.”

“How was he?” Damen asked. He didn’t know what answer he expected. He didn’t know what to make of Laurent these days. He was hardly amorous towards Damen, but he was communicating with him, and when Damen spoke of practical matters, Laurent looked like he was actually absorbing what he said as apposed to appearing a second from walking away in the middle of Damen’s sentence.


Damen nodded. It was as good as he had hoped, and not as bad as he supposed it could have been. He remembered the tension between him and Nikandros when they had first met. Laurent had seemed intent on having Nikandros tear his hair out, and although some of that was still present in the way he regarded him now, he knew Laurent cared for Nikandros deeply as a friend, whether or not he would say in so many words.

Damen sighed, looking forward again. It was not so long ago that it was the three of them standing here, exchanging thoughts and ideas. Laurent’s absence was a noticeable ache.

A flurry of action caught Damen’s eye, and he focused his attention past a group of men in deep conversation on two men who had been sparring. One man’s sword had been knocked out of his hand, and as he was staggering back to retrieve it, his opponent wielded his hand to swing.

“You!” Damen called out, his voice carrying across the courtyard. The man stopped with his arm swung back, his entire body seizing up. He lowered his hand, turning around just as Damen neared him.

“Exalted,” the man said, his eyes lowered to Damen’s chin.

“What were you doing?” Damen demanded.

The other man had retrieved his fallen sword, and took his spot up beside the man Damen had directed his question to. “We were training,” he said.

“I can see that,” Damen replied. “He was disarmed,” Damen continued. “And you were planning to strike.”

The man blanched. Damen could see him swallow. “I would not have struck him,” he said, daringly. “I was simply-“

“Caught up,” Damen interrupted. The man said nothing. “This is not battle. You are comrades. If
your partner loses his weapon, you do not continue to advance on him. Your point has been made. You train as equals.”

“Yes, Exalted,” the man said. The redness in his cheeks could be seen despite his darker coloring.

Before Damen walked away he took the man’s arm. “You have good form, and fluent movements. It has not gone unnoticed.”

Damen turned away and made back for his spot beside Nikandros, surprise halting his movements when he saw Laurent there. Damen remained in his spot for a moment before going the rest of the way.

Laurent’s expression was solely on Damen as he approached them. Damen looked to Nikandros to see if his face gave away anything they may have spoken about in his absence, but it did not.

“Hello,” Damen said.

Laurent continued to look up at Damen before he spoke. “We were to go see the property for the school.”

Damen blinked multiple times before it came back to him. “I remember,” he said. “I thought- we were to meet by the stables. Did I confuse the times?”

“No,” Laurent said. “You can breathe. I finished my business earlier than I expected and came to find you.”

“Oh,” Damen said. He thought of Laurent circulating the palace with Damen in mind. He tried not to smile.

Nikandros sighed, and both he and Laurent looked over to see him looking between them. Damen looked at Laurent, who for some reason was grinning at Nikandros.

“Do you do that often?” Laurent asked.

“He does,” Damen confirmed. Nikandros looked at them flatly, and Damen waved his hand away. “Go speak with Sedona.”

Laurent looked to the direction Damen had gestured, his eyes lighting up with recognition. “I spoke with her this morning,” he said. “In the library. I asked her if she was enjoying her first time in the palace. She inquired about the kyros.”

Nikandros’ eyes narrowed. Laurent quirked a brow at his skeptical expression. “Her father is a kyros,” he said. “It is not unheard of for her to ask of another, considering your meetings with him.”

Nikandros looked back towards her direction. She had set her book aside, and was looking now at the men practicing their formation.

“Let’s go,” Laurent said. Damen nodded, clapping Nikandros on the shoulder in farewell before they headed towards the direction of the stables.

It was silent for a few minutes, only the sound of their footsteps before Damen spoke. “How was that conversation broached?” he asked.

“What conversation?”

“With the kyros’ daughter,” Damen specified.
Laurent looked at him oddly. “Why would I speak with the kyros’ daughter?” he asked. Damen looked at him blankly, just as they reached the outside of the stables.

“Bring me my horse,” Laurent said to the stable boy.

They had not taken any guards with them. Nikandros had in typical nature advised against it, but they were only going to oversee property, and Damen knew they could handle themselves. Besides, there was nothing wrong with wanting time alone.

Their destination was not nearly as far as the tavern they frequented was. That area was a much more dangerous part of the village, and was no place for a children’s school. This ride was somewhere between a half hour and an hour depending on how they paced their horses, and being that it was the middle of the day, it was much more pleasant.

Damen led the way, keeping towards the path as opposed to the bypass he and Laurent typically took when visiting the area. He didn’t think Laurent would appreciate detouring into the trees and stopping for time alone by the hills or the lake.

They rode at a regular pace, keeping it steady as to not exert the horses. They were in no rush, and there was no need to hurry. He knew Laurent loved to ride and had no objections to time away from the palace and in nature.

Eventually Damen saw it, the wide clearing of area that opened up before them. The grass was green, the blue sky absolutely clear of clouds. There were trees surrounding the acreage, blossoms hanging low and fruit freshly grown on the vine. All that was set thus far was the foundation, an appropriate enough outline for what was to come.

They swung off their horses, and Damen watched as Laurent tethered his to a tree mindlessly, his eyes barely on it as he looked at the lands before him. When he finished he stepped closer, a fist in front of his mouth as he looked around at everything. It wasn’t much yet, but it was still an idea. A vision.

Damen pulled the rolled up blueprints he had stashed in his saddlebags earlier that day, stepping up next to Laurent and handing them to him. Laurent looked down at Damen’s hands for a moment before taking them, pulling away the tied up string and unrolling them. He held the open scroll before him, looking up at the view, down at the image created, and back up.

Damen pointed to a certain part of the drawn image, motioning towards a general area on the far left of the property after. “That will be sectioned off for benches and table, so they can eat outside when the weather permits it.” Laurent nodded, and began walking towards the spot Damen pointed to, though there was nothing there yet. Damen walked with him, continuing to point out different spots and the ideas behind them.

Laurent trailed his fingers along the blueprints as Damen spoke, outlining the building with his index finger as he looked around. He listened to what Damen said, sometimes simply nodding, sometimes contributing a thought.

“I want to interview all of the tutors that will be teaching here,” Laurent said. “And review their lesson plans. I want nothing entering those doors without my knowledge of it.”

Damen nodded once. “You’ve mentioned that,” he said. “Before.”

Laurent sat on one of the lone benches on the side of the property, crossing his legs and setting the
paper down. Damen sat next to him, looking at Laurent as Laurent looked at the sketches. His lips were pursed, a thumb on his chin.

Damen said, “what?”

Laurent looked for a few more seconds before tapping a certain spot. “This section is made of stone,” he said. “I don’t like it.”

Damen looked over Laurent’s shoulder to see his eyes were on the top of the blueprints, signifying the back area of the estate. He was specifically pointing out the play area for the younger of the children, the benches, platforms and fountain.

“The architecture suggested it,” Damen said. “To offset the lighter coloring of the rest of the building. To offer dynamic.”

“This is not a fort in Chastillon,” Laurent said. “Or the ruins of Acquitart. I don’t want the children to be around anything with such a tone.”

Damen looked at the area for which it was intended, trying to imagine it. He understood, to a degree. In such an open and bright area, the excessive charcoal and gray of stone would be harsh. “What do you suggest?”

“Marble,” Laurent said. “It is pure and clean.” He said nothing else. He didn’t have to.

Damen nodded, feeling eager about the contribution. He had not brought anything with him to jot down notes, not having expected Laurent to provide any, but he would tell the men in charge of these things immediately, as soon as they returned.

“Is there anything else?” Damen asked.

Laurent stood up, leaving the blueprints behind him and approaching the rough foundation that had been set. Damen stayed where he was, watched the back of Laurent’s head as it turned left and right, looking around.

“It’s hard to picture something when you can’t see it before you,” Laurent said. “But… I like it here.”

He spoke softly, not turning back to Damen as he did. It was quiet here, entirely undisturbed from sounds, which was the only reason Damen could hear him.

“I like it too,” Damen said.

Laurent looked at Damen, staying where he was, only turning his head to face him. Damen looked back at him.

Eventually Laurent said, “You told me there was a marketplace the children could visit. I want to see it.”

The marketplace too was familiar to Damen. He and Laurent had come here before, more times than he could count. More times than they should have, probably. They had come here both as King Damianos and King Laurent, and as two nameless people who could be whoever they wanted. Tethering their horses to a post Damen watched as Laurent looked around all that could be viewed from where he stood and wondered if some small, inner part of Laurent could feel something here as
well, even if he didn’t realize it.

It was loud here. So close to the border it was mainly inhabited by Veretians and Akielons, but there was a fair amount of Patrans and Vaskians here as well. All four languages could be heard as one walked through the winding paths, different styles of clothing all around.

Damen liked it here, partially for that reason. The marketplace was a good place to see the cultures immersing, what with the people and all that they sold. It was almost like stepping into the tavern, but more extensive and boisterous. The foods, the jewelry, everything being sold. No one could walk through these streets and leave with the taste of only one culture.

“Would you like to look around?” Damen asked.

“I didn’t come to hide behind a tree,” Laurent replied, walking on ahead without Damen.

Damen followed Laurent, walking at an equal pace with him as he looked at all the different stands with a curious look on his face. Damen went through the logistics of timing in his head. If Laurent’s memory went back to before they had met, then his latest memories were likely of his twentieth year, when he was still in Arles. Damen doubted that he had spent much of his time exploring street markets.

They were walking through the clothing section, what was closest to the entrance. The market was a bit jumbled, but for the most part there was a certain order. There were clothes and jewelry, then home knickknacks and food. Past that, an open area with music and children.

They passed stands selling scarves and shawls, sheer gauzes of satin and silk trimmed in lace and dangling gems. Flowing dresses of all colors, chitons with intricate embroidery, jackets with elaborate laces and designs.

Laurent looked at the different stands of jewelry, though he knew it was with an objective eye. The rings, necklaces, earrings and bracelets. They were all beautiful, different cuts and sizes to adorn all different kinds of beauty, but Damen knew such things were of no personal interest to Laurent. Aside for his pierced ears which Laurent never made use of, the only form of jewelry Damen ever saw him wear was his golden circlet and occasionally, his crown.

They were not here in disguise. It was not as easy to be recognized here as it was directly outside of the palace, but it was close enough, and their twinned cuffs were on display. Everyone who noticed them bowed. Some gawked. Some spoke to them.

“Your Highness,” an older woman said, perking up significantly when Damen and Laurent passed her stand. They had ventured into the food section of the market. “Exalted.”

Damen and Laurent both smiled at her instinctively, turning their attention towards her. She had a small table in front of her, platters of nuts and dried fruits spread out around her.

“Can I help you to anything?” She asked, motioning towards a tray of almonds and cashews. “They are fresh.”

“No, thank you,” Laurent said. “We just ate, but your generosity is appreciated.”

The woman beamed as most people did when Laurent set his genuine attention on them, looking as if his smile had done wonders for their health. The woman stood straighter, running her hands down her clothes before her eyes widened slightly.

“A moment,” she said, turning around towards a smaller adjoining table. She rummaged around,
placing things Damen could not see from his vantage on a small plate before turning back. They were thick dates, stuffed tightly with candied nuts and glazed in honey and syrup.

“I remember how much you enjoyed these, Your Highness,” she said. “The last time the two of you had come here.” She held them out towards Laurent. “Please, it would honor me.”

Laurent’s easy smile was gone, replaced with what Damen could tell was a false, plastered one. He was gazing down at the sweetmeats in the woman’s hands, looking as if he had never seen sweets before. Damen knew what was going through his head, and he reached into his pouch for a handful of coin, likely far more than necessary.

“Oh, no,” the woman said, shaking her head profusely as Damen tried to pay her. “It is a gift.”

“We insist,” Laurent said, the plate now gripped in both of his hands. “Please.”

The woman smiled, shyly, finally accepting the handful of copper sols from Damen and dropping them into a pouch on the table.

“You grace us with your presence,” she said, bowing her head.

Damen smiled as he lifted his hand. Laurent appeared to be stuck in his place so Damen began to walk, knowing Laurent would find no choice but to follow.

They were silent, continuing to wind through the people and the vendors, Laurent’s fingers still in a white-knuckle grip around the platter.

“You should try one,” Damen tried. “You really do enjoy them.”

“I didn’t ask for your input,” Laurent said.

Damen took a deep breath, trying to tamper down his irritation. He understood signs of their past was hard for Laurent, but really. It was just candy.

“Just have one,” Damen said again, speaking in a carefully calm voice. “If you are repulsed, you can throw them away.”

“I’m already repulsed,” Laurent said, but he picked one up and took a large bite anyway. Damen watched as he chewed, and he saw the way he slowed down his chewing so he could savor the sweet flavors melting onto his tongue.

Still, unexpectedly, Laurent frowned. “It’s simply fruit and nuts, this is nothing special.” He swallowed. “We have plenty of these in the palace, I don’t see why you’re acting as if it’s so incremental that I try this specifically.” Finishing it off, “I’ve had better.”

Helplessly, Damen was grinning. He still found it charmingly amusing that Laurent talked more when he was uncomfortable.

Laurent finished his second date. “Why are you smiling?”

“I’m not smiling,” Damen said.

Laurent seemed torn between rolling his eyes and looking at Damen blankly. “You would think after being in close proximity to such a skilled liar for two years, you would acquire a better skill for it.” He said the words ‘two years’ like he was chewing on a lemon.

“You’re not a liar,” Damen said. “You’re a survivor.”
Laurent’s golden brows etched at that, and he looked at Damen with an unreadable expression before tearing his gaze away, tossing his half full plate into a waste bin.

“There are things that need to be done,” Laurent said. “It’s time to go back.”
This chapter is pretty short in comparison to others and relatively uneventful so I decided to update twice this week bc I love stressing myself out by depleting my backup chapters faster than necessary.

It was their third day at The Summer Palace. The days here felt long, lazy and languorous. Each one ended with them collapsing in bed together, both of them feeling blissfully sun-drenched and exhausted. They had only managed to steal a week for themselves, but Damen felt like it was never going to come to an end.

They were finally in the library. Damen had intended on showing it to Laurent the day before, but they had been late to get out of bed, and then he had taken Laurent to the stables, surprising him with the gift he had bought him. Damen thought he would remember Laurent’s smile when he had opened his eyes to see her for the rest of his life.

They had gone riding for some hours, and by the time they had gotten back and had a light dinner, they had been too tired to do anything but walk in the gardens and talk. This morning Damen had woken up to Laurent’s arms wrapped around him, Laurent already awake and watching him.

They had eaten breakfast on the balcony overlooking the ocean that morning, Laurent’s knees pulled up to his chest. They were just finishing, the platters nearly empty when Damen remembered what they had not been able to do the previous day.

“Can we go somewhere later?” Damen had asked.

Laurent looked at him oddly over his goblet, taking a long sip before setting it down. “Away from the palace?”

“No,” Damen shook his head. “I want to show you the library.”

Laurent blinked at him, looking as if a library was the last thing he had expected Damen to associate him with. “The palace has a library?”

“Of course,” Damen replied. “It’s not as large or extensive as the palace in Ios, but there is one.”

Laurent put a grape in his mouth, chewing slowly with his lips closed as he continued to look at Damen.

He swallowed, smiling slowly. “Alright.”

Now they were here, sitting side by side on one of the reclining couches on the side of the room, the entire wall made of glass to let the sunlight in. The room was made of marble and cream, everything very open and airy. Damen had never come here often. He had most often come to the palace with Kastor and Nikandros, and they had spent most of their times at the ocean or on the sawdust. However, the library was still built. Perhaps it was his mother who had a love for books. He would never know.
Laurent had gone off on his own the moment they entered, disappearing into the winding shelves without a word. Damen grinned as he wandered around slowly, content to let Laurent explore on his own.

He had been standing in front of a shelf, flipping through a book on Akielon lineage when Laurent reappeared, two books in his hands. Damen tilted them back to see the front, shrugging his shoulders when he couldn’t place them.

Laurent looked at the shelf where Damen had put his own book back, then at Damen’s empty hands before walking over to the couch. Damen followed him over, turning his body so he could face Laurent.

“You don’t enjoy reading,” Laurent said, not unkindly.

“No,” Damen admitted. “My nursemaids would read to me when I was young, and my tutors had me read certain books that they thought could prove valuable, but I never quite had the attention span for it. I’m a social creature by nature, and I preferred physical activities.”

“Wrestling,” Laurent said.

Damen smiled, his mind taken back to slippery limbs on the marble floor. “Wrestling.”

Damen looked at the books Laurent had chosen again that he had set between them, running his fingers along the cover. “Had anyone in your family shared your love for reading?”

Laurent’s eyes were on the book, his fingers trailing the spine as well, though he didn’t seem uncomfortable. “My mother did,” he said. “Auguste was more like you in that way, he would rather have a sword in his hand. Truthfully, I don’t know if my father enjoyed reading.”

The idea that he and Laurent could talk about Auguste was still so new, but the promise of it was like a weight off Damen’s chest. He thought of what else Laurent said, and what he understood if it. He knew from sparse conversations with Paschal that the King Aleron had gravitated more towards Auguste, the apple of any fathers eye, especially one with the expectations of a king. However, Damen couldn’t say the same for Laurent’s mother. They had never spoken of her.

“Were you and your mother close?” Damen asked, wanting to tread lightly, and not presume anything.

Laurent situated himself a bit more comfortably, extending a leg out. “More so than my father,” he said. “I know that Auguste and I had gotten our coloring from her, and I would assume some of my personality could be attributed to her, as she was the more involved parent in my life. If I was not alone, in the stables, or following Auguste around, I was likely at her side.”

The idea of Laurent following anyone around was still foreign to Damen, but the thought of him adoring someone was becoming more and more clear. “What would you do with her?” he asked.

Laurent lifted a shoulder. “She was sick for most of my life. Bedridden in her final years. She would often tell me stories of growing up in Kempt. Other times, she would read to me.”

Damen had never had that. He had never met his mother, and felt as if he was more shaped by her lack of presence in his life. Kastor had been there, but there was more than their age gap that had set them apart, in ways that Damen was still trying to reconcile in his head. Damen had loved his father, admired him, but at times he had felt more like his king than his kin, and that was fine with Damen. It was what was natural, and it was natural for Damen to be the son and prince that his father would be proud of. The lack of familial connections in Damen’s childhood was never
something he had felt, nor had he been aware of. It was different with Laurent.

He took up one of the books Laurent had selected, handing it to him. “Read to me.”

Laurent was in the library, putting back a selection of books that he had gone through that week. Some were in Veretian, but majority were Akielon. He had grown confident enough in his speaking that he hardly gave it any thought before opening his mouth, and he was working to implement the same comfortable fluency with his reading. Next, he would work on writing.

The servants who frequented Laurent’s rooms were aghast whenever Laurent returned his books himself, insisting time and time again that they would do so themselves, but Laurent liked doing small things like this. He had never let the stable boys tend to his horse when he was young, either.

It was the serenity of the library. The airiness of the high ceilings. The light that was let in from the glass openings. The quiet, and the comforting thump the books made as he placed them back in their spots. Laurent needed the reassuring quiet to settle the noise in his head.

He had had a dream that night, the same dream he had been having for the past few nights. He did not remember it with clarity, as he did not always remember his dreams so vividly, but Laurent had woken up that morning with a certain familiar tightness in his chest, and he knew.

He had been avoiding thinking about it. He quickly banished any thoughts that had come to his mind since that night. His subconscious seemed insistent enough on having his sleep be filled with thoughts about it; Laurent felt no need to give in to his waking conscious as well.

But it was there. Even when Laurent was actively not thinking about it, the thoughts were there.

The loud, thunderous pounding of horse hooves, nearly as loud as his pulse pounding in his ears. The immediate reaction, the survival based instinct of turning his body around, so that if he went down he would at least be looking his fate in the eye. The realization and the bitter understanding that it was finally happening, his inevitable untimely death. That helpless, childish panic.

And above all that, what was most familiar was the subsequent feeling of shocked relief. Of seeing his intended murderer taken down before his eyes, and the undeniable knowledge of who it was that had saved Laurent’s life.

And that was what was the worst. The feeling that he could not shake, the notion that was so familiar. The body seizing emotion, the undeniable hysteria that had been stifled the moment Laurent realized he was safe.

Safe.

Laurent had felt it then, the moment he saw the sword drive into the man’s chest. The moment Damianos had turned Laurent around desperately, touching his body daringly to be sure that he hadn’t been injured. Laurent had looked into Damianos’ panic filled eyes, saw the unmistakable relief on his face, and he knew: they had been there before.

Laurent didn’t know what it was, exactly. He couldn’t put his finger on it, couldn’t put words to it. The feeling of unparalleled familiarity, where you saw or did something and even though you couldn’t explain why or how, the accompanying sensation did not feel new.

The consistency was the worst part of it. The incessant nagging in Laurent’s head, the feeling in Laurent’s chest that came unexpectedly, unbidden. It made him feel as if his brain was thrumming inside his skull. The only thing Laurent could ever rely on was himself and his mind, but how could he do that if he felt like it was playing tricks on him? How did someone manage to go on naturally
when their mind was intent on making them feel as if their brain was creating things, taking them back to something that never happened.

But it did happen. That night in the woods after the tavern was not the first time something like that had occurred. Laurent had been told as much, had a story and facts to put to this unignorable sensation, and somehow that felt just as bad as everything else.

Laurent put a book back on the shelf, probably a bit too heavily he realized when he heard a gentle laugh. Of course.

Laurent put another book down, this one a Veretian story of fiction before turning around to see Damianos standing there, looking at him. He smiled at Laurent in greeting, and Laurent made sure to keep his mouth straight. He lifted his brows in question instead.

“Bad day?” Damianos asked.

He was being serious. He was genuinely asking if Laurent was having a bad day.

“Would you like me to dignify that with a response?” Laurent asked.

“That’s fine,” Damianos said. “I can guess.”

“I can be quite imaginative,” Laurent replied.

“I know,” Damianos said, and then had the gall to take the last book out of Laurent’s hands, entirely ignoring the astounded look on Laurent’s face. He flipped through the pages aimlessly, obviously having no intention of actually reading it before shutting it, looking down at the cover.

“You’ve read this before,” Damianos said, handing it back to Laurent.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” Laurent replied, taking it out of Damianos’ hand. “But I seemed to have forgotten a few things.” He crossed his arms loosely. “Did you want something?”

Damianos leaned his shoulder on the bookshelf, his stance casual. “Who said I was here for you?”

Laurent shoved the book back in its place, giving Damianos an unimpressed look as he leaned his shoulder next to his. “You told me you don’t read.”

“I have a sudden urge.”

Laurent rubbed his face with his palm, mumbling a few choice words before waving his hand in the dismissive way he did when a servant lingered too long. He pushed off the shelf and began to walk in the opposite direction, clicking his tongue when he heard Damianos walk with him.

“Are you busy?” Damianos asked.

“I might be,” Laurent said, which was true. There was no shortage of things he could find to do, should he want to. “It depends on why you’re asking.”

The edges of Damianos’ mouth lifted in a slow, lazy sort of way. “Perhaps I’m just bored.”

“Excellent words form a king,” Laurent deadpanned. “The kingdom is in great hands.”

His grin deepened. “I’m a fine ruler.”

“You’re like an animal,” Laurent said. “That requires praise and attention.”
“I have been called a lion, before.”

“A poodle, maybe,” Laurent replied, and the easy laugh it elicited from Damianos was enough to regain his focus.

“I have things to do,” Laurent said, more seriously now. “What do you want?”

Damianos straightened, holding himself to his proper height which quite frankly was unnatural. “I had the revised blueprints given to the architect,” he said. “Along with the notes you added. It’s turned out more expensive than originally planned.”

“We expected this,” Laurent said, waiting for the point.

“Herode has requested that we meet, to discuss things that can be cut back.”

Laurent straightened as well. “Nothing is being taken away from those children.”

“I know,” Damianos said. “The council won’t like it.”

“Then it’s a good thing they’re not the kings,” Laurent said, walking towards the doors.

The council didn’t like it.

Laurent was seated comfortably in his chair, his palms splayed on the table as he waited for their conversation to subdue. Damianos was leaning forward in his seat, his expression a bit more agitated and unnerved by their reactions.

“All I ask is that we discuss these things rationally,” Jeurre said. “A school can still be made without such high expenses.”

“A school can, yes,” Laurent said. “But not the school we’re making.”

“Your Highness,” Herode said, his hands clasped before him. “Consider the magnitude of the revenue this will require.”

“We have,” Laurent replied calmly. “Surprisingly, Damianos and I are capable of counting.”

“We are not suggesting otherwise,” Herod said wearily.

“And what is it you’re suggesting?” Damianos asked. His brows were pinched.

Herode rubbed the skin between his eyebrows with two fingers, breathing out slowly as if all this energy was being drained out of him. He was the eldest in the room by far, but Laurent knew not to discredit him for that, as he was also one of the wisest. However, that would do nothing in terms of making Laurent budge.

“Exalted,” Vannes said, here fingers laced together casually. “I understand your vision, and while it’s one I applaud, I don’t see how realistic it can be. The crown may not be able to carry the entirety of these expenses.”

“Do you know what else doesn’t seem realistic?” Laurent asked her. “Two enemy nations uniting into one prosperous one.” He motioned around the large table with a hand. “Does this not warm your heart as it does mine?”
“If you truly wish to provide these children with an education without them paying for it,” Chelaut cut in, “then taxes must be raised.”

“An excellent idea,” Laurent said, as if that wasn’t already part of the plan. “What a brilliant council I have selected.”

“But how will the kingdom react?” Jeurre asked, looking at Laurent like he was a child who simply would not understand a simple concept.

“Both Akielos and Vere have raised taxes in the past for far less important things,” Damianos said, glaring at Jeurre so sharply that the look came off his face the moment their eyes met. “They should feel honored that their money is going to such a worthy cause.”

“Exalted,” Audin said. “Please, be reasonable. I understand how things are for those children—”

“Do you?” Laurent interjected. “I had no idea. For some reason I was under the impression that your own children were being blissfully educated by highly paid palace tutors. My mistake. Please, tell me of the underprivileged children you’re involved with.”

Audin’s reddened cheeks were easily noticeable due to his Veretian coloring. “I only meant—”

“Believe me,” Laurent said. “I know what you meant.”

“Young Highness,” Jeurre spoke up again, trying and failing to control his tone. “If you would just think of something else for a moment—”

“Enough,” Damianos said, his voice cutting through the entire room before Laurent could tell Jeurre exactly what he was thinking. He had not stood up from his seat but from the look on his face and the set of his shoulders, he may as well have.

“You are all here to advise us,” he said, with pointed emphasis on the word advise. “Not to dictate us. We appreciate all you have to say, and strongly consider all that you tell us. However, we stand firm on this project. If you have comments or ideas we will willingly listen but we have been to the palace chamberlain. We have examined the blueprints and specifics of other schools of a similar scale. We know our capabilities, and our limitations. If giving these children an opportunity means sacrificing a banquet or two, then so be it.”

He looked at each of them. “We have all come from a position of privilege and have advanced, one way or another. You will never have to worry about what will come of your children, because money is no issue for them. We do not all,” Damianos said, jabbing his finger into the wooden surface of the table. “Have that benefit. Laurent and I will give them that, to the best of our ability.”

Damianos stopped then. He settled back in his chair, his body no longer singing with tension. He did not look around hopefully, eager to see if his words penetrated or if anyone agreed. He was sure enough in what he said that it did not matter to him, that much was apparent.

Herode looked increasingly exhausted. Audin looked perturbed. Vannes looked entirely too pleased for someone who had an exclusive taste for women. Laurent was not sure how he looked.

“Will there be anything else on the matter?” Laurent asked, after Damianos was met with silence.

After another beat of silence: “No,” Herode said. “For now.”

“Good,” Laurent said. “On to the wedding.”
“Yes,” Chelaut sighed, the mood in the room altering with the shift in topic. “Have the order of events been established?”

“They have,” Jeurre said, pulling a paper out from a stack of parchments. “It has been decided that the festivities will be sectioned off into three days, all organized to honor and satisfy both Veretian and Patran customs.” He touched a finger to a certain section. “The first day will consist of a Patran feast. The second will be the honorary Veretian masquerade. The third day will be the wedding.”

“I very much enjoyed last year’s masquerade,” Vannes remarked. “I am so looking forward to this one.”

The masquerade. Laurent could not remember the last one he had attended. It had been one of Auguste’s favorite traditions, and one of the first things his uncle had dispensed of. Laurent had been so young then, only staying around long enough until Auguste had whispered that he could retreat to his rooms if he wanted. Laurent did not know what to expect. He looked at Damianos, but he was busy looking down at the paper he took from Jeurre.

“Will that be all?” Laurent asked, when no one else spoke. A moment of nothing, followed by a sharp nod from Laurent, dismissing everyone. Everyone but the person he just set a hand on.

“Stay,” Laurent said.

Damianos blinked, remaining mute as he handed Jeurre the parchment, otherwise not moving. Neither of them said anything as the room slowly cleared out, the two of them eventually alone. Laurent brought his elbow to the armrest of his chair, propping his chin up on his fist.

Damianos looked at the door questioningly before setting his brown eyes on Laurent. “Did you,” he said, “wish to talk about something?”

Was that why Laurent told him to stay? He wasn’t so sure. He was trying to work things out in his head, but Damianos seemed incapable of sitting in silence.

“Torveld has written to me,” he said, an odd expression on his face. “He asked about you.”

“Did he,” Laurent said.

“Yes.”

Laurent leaned back in his seat, removing his hand. Torveld of Patras was not of interest right then.

“Vannes mentioned a masquerade from last year,” Laurent said.

“Yes,” Damianos repeated. “It was held on the first of the month to signify the new year.”

“I know the purpose of the customary masquerade,” Laurent said. “I’m Veretian.”

“Then what exactly are you asking?” Damianos said, but his expression changed as soon as he said it, realization dawning on his features. He nodded once.

“It had been immersed back into the kingdom,” he said, his voice lowering to a softer tone, indicating to something that Laurent did not care to think of. “At your suggestion.”

Laurent looked at him oddly. “I have not attended a masquerade since I was at least twelve. I don’t see why I would find any interest.”

“You said tradition is important,” Damianos explained. “To the kingdom. To the people. Akielos had
incorporated the Harvest Festival. You had wanted something that was Vere’s.”

Laurent thumbed his lip, nodding slowly. In all honesty, he was intrigued by the idea of bringing the masquerade back. He could see it as something that the people would enjoy. Look forward to.

“And do we have any traditions?” Laurent asked. There were still things he needed to know, and to be filled in on.

Damianos’ eyes widened, something about what Laurent had asked causing them to light up. He began to speak rapidly as if the words were rushing to leave his mouth. “Aside from the tavern,” he said, leaning forward, “we often cover our cuffs and go to other places, anywhere we want. Some nights we-“


“Oh,” Damianos said. And again, “oh.”

He was silent for a bit, blinking into the distance before refocusing his attention on Laurent.

“Traditions take time,” was all he said.

“Everything takes time,” Laurent replied. “I find it odd that in two years, we have not created something.”

“We created an empire,” Damianos disputed. “We brought an end to fighting. We are giving equal opportunities.” And then with an absent touch of his adorned wrist, “we ended slavery.”

Laurent looked down at his own wrist, slowly, still as reluctantly as he had the first time, though with not as much as gut churning horror as he had then. He looked at the gold and thought of how, despite all that he knew about Akielon practices, he had not seen this mark on anyone else. Wrists were clear, necks were bare. Their people were not property They were free.
Chapter 17

“And then what happened?” Laurent asked, his voice still carrying a hint of laughter as he pulled Damen by the hand through the gardens of Devos. The sky was purple and blue around then, late enough that the day’s warmth still lingered, coupled with the breeze from the night’s upcoming chill. Damen and Laurent walked hand in hand, through the path that took them down stone steps, leading to a fountain surrounded by the fresh scent of night blossom.

Damen let out a breath of laughter, the memory playing in his head as they stopped walking, turning to face each other. “And then he said, “Jazar! Dord! Go see if the prince needs your assistance!”

Laurent’s teeth that had been biting down on his bottom lip slipped, and his head fell back in a snap, helpless laughter bubbling out form his throat. Damen’s chest throbbed with happiness.

“Laurent!” Damen whispered, looking around exaggeratedly. “He’ll hear you.”

But Laurent was still laughing, his head now tipped forward so his laughter was hidden in Damen’s chest. “I’m sorry,” he said, his shoulders shaking. “What kind of name is Dord?”

“What kind of name Is Lamen?” Damen asked.

The question evoked another fit of laughter in Laurent, his head falling down again as he shook his head, the large feather from his hat bobbing.

“I need to contain myself each time he calls you that,” Laurent said through his smile. “I’m shocked you’ve managed this long.”

Damen brought a knuckle to Laurent’s chin, tilting his face up towards his. Laurent lifted his gaze just as slowly, the blue light despite the growing darkness surrounding them. Their eyes held, and Damen felt his heart knock against his ribcage as the final traces of laughter left Laurent’s face, nothing but fondness remaining.

They were kissing, slow, unhurried kisses. Laurent’s arms slid around Damen’s neck as they often did so that he could pull Damen closer, and the presses of their mouths grew deep and long as Damen wound his own arms around Laurent’s waist, pressing their chests together.

There was no concept of time when they were like this, everything surrounding them fading away as Damen focused on Laurent’s lips against his and their hearts beating together. Eventually they drew apart, and Laurent gave Damen a smile that was gentle, almost shy, and tenderness swelled inside Damen’s chest as he remembered the first time Laurent looked at him like that.

“You still kiss me like it’s our first,” Laurent murmured, his cheeks flushing a rosy pink as he did.

Damen lowered his head to Laurent’s shoulder, burying his face in the warmth of his neck, breathing him in. Laurent’s arms tightened around him, one hand on the back of his neck.

Damen was happy.

The palace was a flurry of activity. The Patran delegation would be arriving within the next two days, and there was much that needed to be done, both for the wedding festivities, and for preparation for the royal family. King Torgier had never been to Delpha, nor had any of his sons or daughter. Torveld had always come in his place, acting as ambassador.
Servants cleaned, readying the best rooms they had to offer, making sure that every possible luxury was available. The kitchen staff worked, preparing a mix of Akielon, Veretian and Patran cuisine, ensuring that there would be something to please everyone. They had many extensive meals ahead of them, and it was not often that they would be serving so many different royals at once.

Damen knew there were things he needed to do. Things he needed to oversee and to approve of, and he would, soon. Now he was in his rooms, sifting through piles of letters and lists, trying to organize all that was necessary for the upcoming days. He had never met any member of the Patran family aside from Torveld, nor had Laurent. This was no cause for anxiety, they could each hold themselves effortlessly with others, but Damen found it best to review all forms of Patran correspondence he had to best prepare himself.

Damen was not sure how long he sat there, but eventually his body began to feel heavy and he knew it was well past time for him to get up and begin moving. His limbs were feeling sluggish, his legs numb, and that was not a feeling he enjoyed. Damen always preferred to be active. He rose from his spot, arranged all the papers and documents into one pile and made for the door.

Damen was walking through the halls making his way for the training arena, hoping to find a group of guards he could go a round or two with. Just as he made the turn for the pathway that led to the courtyard and the several different training spots he saw a single door in his peripheral vision, deep mahogany with shallow engravings. The instant he recalled whose door it was, he stopped in his tracks.

It had been nearly two weeks since Damen had last spoken with Paschal, which as far as he was concerned were two weeks too long. He had been frequenting his rooms and stopping him in the halls, inquiring about Laurent’s health and how he seemed to be advancing. His answers were mostly the same, mostly unhelpful, but that never stopped Damen from checking in. However he had been so busy these past weeks that time had slipped away from him, and he figured that a visit was long overdue.

Damen stepped up to the door, knocking briskly and waiting until entry was called out through the thick wood. Kings did not need permission, but this was simply common courtesy. He pulled the door open and walked inside, seeing that Paschal was looking through papers at his desk, running his finger along a line. Paschal continued reading whatever it was for a moment before glancing up, immediately dropping the papers and rising when he saw Damen.

“Exalted,” he said.

Damen nodded in returned greeting, closing the door and looking around himself. He had been here before, more so since everything had begun than any other time since the palace had been built. The room was moderately sized, simply decorated despite Paschal’s eccentric Veretian roots. There was an archway that led into his bedchambers which was blocked off with sheer blue curtains, and in here was where everything regarding his practice took place. The palace has a separate infirmary for more severe cases, but this was Paschal’s preferred area.

“How are you?” Damen asked.

“I am well, Exalted,” Paschal replied. “And yourself?”

“Fine,” Damen said. He was not here to talk about himself. “How is he doing?”

Paschal looked at Damianos blankly as if unsure who Damen was referring to, though it was obvious that he was.
“You are with him more than I am,” Paschal said. “I believe you could answer that question just as efficiently as I can.”

Damen brought his fingertips to his forehead, rubbing slowly as he exhaled. “His health,” he said. “What can you tell me.”

“I know what you meant, Exalted,” Paschal said. “But unfortunately I have no new news for you. His memory remains the same for now, though he has not regressed, which I believe to be a positive sign. He no longer feels headaches or bodily pains, and though he is not yet remembering, he is not forgetting more either.”

“So, this is the best we can hope for?” Damen asked sharply. “For him to be stuck?”

“We can hope for the best,” Paschal replied. “But for now, all we can do is hope, and wait.”

Damen didn’t know why he had expected anything different, and why he continuously felt disappointment. Realistically he knew this was not Paschal’s fault, but that did nothing to ease the throbbing irritation he felt, slowly inching more towards anger.

“Of course,” Damen said. It was a good thing he was on his way to train. “Thank you.”

Damen closed the door rather heavily, and he hardly noticed where he was going, his legs simply taking him through the palace and towards the training arena, a route that was like second nature to him. He expected to hear clashing swords upon entering, or the grunts and mumbles that came with wrestling, dust being kicked up as men tumbled around. At the very least he expected to find a group of men training from which Damen could take his pick to spar with. Instead, he found Laurent.

Any irritation Damen felt melted away the moment they locked eyed. Damen lingered in the doorway, opening his mouth to say something, anything, when he noticed Lazar was standing across from Laurent. They were each sweating lightly, a sword in hand. Damen’s dispensed anger turned to wariness.

“Exalted,” Lazar said, wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

“Lazar,” Damen replied, though his eyes were only on Laurent. Laurent looked calm and at ease, and Damen told himself that it was not just for the sake of Lazar’s presence. Laurent was perfectly capable of hiding his hostility if he wanted, only having it show through to Damen in his eyes. For now, his eyes were clear.

“Is Jord sick?” Damen asked, knowing that he was Laurent’s regular sparring partner of choice.

“You offend me, Exalted,” Lazar said, spinning his sword in his hand by the hilt. “I’ve managed to hold you off for at least five minutes.”

“Five minutes is generous,” Damen replied.

Lazar gave him a crooked grin. “Pallas has never complained similarly.” He seemed entirely at ease with speaking crudely around his kings, and though Damen knew he should likely reprimand him, he also knew this was simply Lazar. Crass and overconfident, but capable and unswervingly loyal.

“I wasn’t aware there was an Akielon capable of lying,” Laurent said dryly.

Lazar’s grin deepened. “The two of you wound me.”

Damen leaned his shoulder on the wall. “Are the two of you finished?”
Lazar turned to Laurent a bit more seriously now. “Do you need me for anything else, Your Highness?” he asked earnestly.

“No,” Laurent said, tossing his now sheathed sword to Lazar, who caught it effortlessly. “I need to speak with Damen.”

Damen froze. He blinked, and blinked again. Lazar was nodding his head and hanging each of their swords up on the wall, and Laurent was watching him move about the room, but Damen could not focus on anything other than the way his pulse was suddenly pounding, the world around him feeling like it was slightly more in focus.

“Good match, Your Highness,” Lazar was saying. “I’d be honored to go another round the next time Jord is indisposed.” And then Damen and Laurent were alone.

Damen tried for a casual tone. “You wanted to speak with me?”

“Not particularly,” Laurent said. “Lazar gets annoying very fast.”

“I see,” Damen said. He shouldn’t call attention to it. It was better to act as if it was normal. He should act natural.

“You called me Damen,” he blurted.

Laurent took a drink of water from his canteen, eyeing Damen while he did, his throat rolling as he swallowed. “Perceptive,” he said. “Your ears must be as large as the rest of your body.”

“You haven’t,” Damen started, and then, “do you,” and then he stopped, because he wasn’t even sure what he was trying to say.

Laurent was leaning on the wall now, his arms crossed casually, just like his ankles.

“You told me,” Laurent said, “that the people know that that is how I call you. And I have been reading through my letters with Torveld, that is how I refer to you with him as well. He will be here in less than two days. I may as well become acclimated with it.”

“Oh,” Damen said. “Yes.” But all he was thinking about was what he could do to have Laurent say his name again.

Laurent sighed, setting his water down on the bench beside him. ”You are far too transparent for your own good,” Laurent said, making for the door. “I am going to the baths,” he continued over his shoulder. It was a dismissal.

Damen fell into step beside Laurent, his own training forgotten. He wouldn’t follow him in of course, but surely he could find somewhere else to go in that similar direction. They were just walking the same way.

“I’m working on it,” Damen said.

“Keep working on it,” Laurent replied. He was looking forward as he walked.

“I don’t see any reason to constantly hide my thoughts,” Damen said. “Anymore.”

They passed servants and a handful of courtiers as they walked, each person bowing gracefully or stating their honorific. Damen and Laurent responded respectfully to each person, but otherwise engaged no one else in conversation.
Eventually they reached the baths, Laurent stopping at the entrance with a hand on the doorframe. The look on his face was indecipherable.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” he said, and then he was inside the steam filled baths, Damen left alone in the halls.

Dinner that night felt as if it came quicker than usual. He had eventually returned to the training arena and sparred for well over an hour, and after bathing and returning to his work, it had become time to dine. He had been on his way to the hall, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts when he had run into Laurent, each of them crossing paths at a similar intersections between wings of the palace. His eyes scrolled Damen briefly before reluctantly falling into step with him. He did not speak as they walked.

Now they were sitting, each of them engaged in separate conversation. Laurent was speaking to some woman Damen did not recognize two seats over from Vannes, who very well could have been one of Vannes’ lovers, for all Damen knew. Damen’s attention was on the right side of the table, not necessarily seeking out conversation but responding to anyone who spoke to him first accordingly.

Eventually Damen felt a shift next to him, and he turned his head to see Laurent regarding him.

“Yes?” Damen said.

“Torveld has written to me,” Laurent said, lifting an olive to his lips. “I received the letter today.”

“Alright.”

Laurent had a spoon in his hand, and he was twisting it around so the curved end was on his palm, lightly turning on the soft skin.

“He mentioned the topic of slavery,” Laurent said. “He was subtle about it, and tied it into his other points, but the message was clear enough.”

Damen sighed. “We can’t exactly ban them from bringing slaves,” Damen said. “It would be discourteous. So long as they are respectful and there is no mistreatment, both alone or in front of us, it is something we will have to deal with.”

“I know that,” Laurent said. Damen wanted to ask why he had brought it up, almost conversationally if he already had the same thought process as Damen, but he spoke before Damen could. “He mentioned a certain name, more than once.”

“I know who you’re referring to,” Damen said. He thought of him, on occasion.

“Am I to know who Erasmus is?” Laurent asked. “Beyond just his name.”

“He was—” Damen said, trailing off for a beat. This was never something pleasant to think about. “Sent to Arles by Kastor, along with two dozen other slaves. Along with—me.”

Laurent’s face did not change. He waited.

“He was being treated very badly,” Damen said. “He was not well equipped, nor was he safe in Vere. You manipulated a situation and arranged for Torveld to take him, along with the rest of the Akielon slaves back to Bazal with him.”

Something in Laurent’s eyes flickered. “In exchange for his men, later on.”
“Yes.”

“How exactly did I manage that?”

Damen remembered. Of course he did. He thought of strategic placement at a dinner table, of orchestrating situations, of manipulation and subtle, secretive moves. Of playing into the inevitable cynicism of contemptuous adolescence.

“You planned this!” Nicaise had said, scornful and malicious. “You wanted him to see- you tricked me!”

Damen would not say that now.

“Cunning and determinacy,” he said instead. The answer seemed to be enough for Laurent, because he simply returned his attention to his food.

Damen leaned forward in his seat to reach for a sliver of meat, and the angle caused him to see the man approaching their table, his shoulders set, his walk steady and sure. Damen knew he would be coming for the wedding, but he was under the impression that he would be arriving tomorrow. Damen glanced to the side and saw that Laurent was gazing off into the distance blankly, unaware of the approaching person. He nudged him on the shoulder lightly, and Laurent turned his head in question.

“Makedon,” Damen whispered.

Laurent looked at him blankly like he was waiting for Damen to elaborate. When he didn’t he said, “What?”

“His name is Makedon,” Damen said, and that was all he managed to get out before Makedon was before their table.

“Laurent!” he said brightly, his voice warm in a way that Damen would never think to associate with him, unless Laurent was around.

“Exalted,” he added. “Nikandros.”

It did not slip Laurent’s attention that he had been referred to by his name, and Damen could see the way he was trying to gage the situation and how he should act. Had Damen known Makedon would be here, he would have told Laurent that Makedon thought of him as a favored nephew.

“Makedon,” Laurent said, evenly.

“It has been too long,” Makedon said, and then pulled a chair out for himself, quite presumptuously. Damen heard the soft sound of surprise Laurent made at the back of his throat.

“We were told you would be arriving tomorrow,” Damen said, signaling for a nearby servant to pour Makedon wine.

“My route was changed,” Makedon replied, taking a long draught, the goblet nearly drained in one sip. “My retinue arrived mid afternoon.”

“And how is Ravenel?”

“Well secured.” From the corner of his eye, Damen could see Nikandros murmuring something to Laurent, who was nodding minutely.
“Laurent,” Makedon said again, turning his gaze to Laurent. “Our correspondences dwindled, and I have been awaiting your reply. What news do you have?”

Laurent lifted a forkful of rice to his mouth, chewing slowly with his fingers tapping his knee.

“No news,” he said after swallowing. “There was no update, I figured it best to speak in person and not bother with useless letters.”

“It would have been no bother,” Makedon said, finishing his wine off and waiting for more to be poured.

“Should it comfort me to hear that one of my generals is sitting around reading letters instead of commanding his fort?”

Nikandros must have told him who Makedon was when they had been speaking, not seeing how else Laurent would have made that correct assumption. Makedon laughed shortly, another unnatural reaction as he lifted his goblet jovially.

“How are the troops?” he asked to no one in particular.

“Satisfactory,” Laurent said. “Nikandros could benefit from pointers when it comes to training them.”

“I am not even you captain,” Nikandros said in a dry tone that Damen had not heard him direct to Laurent in well over a month.

“I wonder why that is,” Laurent replied.

“I observed Enguerran,” Makedon said. “Earlier. He is Proficient.”

Damen could hear the unspoken words that no doubt would have been subsequently said two years ago, but now did not hold as much truth in Makedon’s mind. *He is proficient. For a Veretian.*

“He is,” Damen agreed.

They continued to eat, continued to converse, and Damen watched in pleased delight how Laurent continued to navigate his way through the conversation like a man walking through a forest, conscious of not stepping on traps. Really, it was unparalleled and continuously unbelievable how well Laurent adapted in these types of situations.

They were speaking Akielon, Laurent following Makedon’s lead without a moments pause. Pride swelled inside Damen as he watched the way Laurent spoke the language with a confidence that he had seen before, but it was no longer accompanied with surprise, because he now knew all that Laurent was capable of.

Eventually, the conversation was redirected to hunting.

“I was just telling Heiron of Aegina of our latest hunt,” Makedon was saying, wiping his fingers off on a napkin carelessly.

“Our hunt,” Laurent said.

“Yes,” Makedon said. “And of how you took down two stags before anyone else could find even one!” He hit the table hard with his palm. “We must go again soon. My men could use a little sport.”

After a stretch of blinking silence Laurent said, “Yes.”
Makedon nodded, prompting Laurent to tip his goblet of water in his direction. Makedon noticed the clear liquid inside, frowning slightly.

“Water?” He said, in a tone that suggested personal offense. He waved his hand, rising from the table. “We have many banquets ahead of us,” he added. “Come the wedding, I will bring out the griva.”

Damen looked at Laurent, who looked at Makedon as if he had switched languages in the middle of his sentence. He only allowed a second to pass before nodding, his fingers on the rim of his goblet.

“I look forward to it,” he said.

Makedon grinned and said a proper goodbye to him and Damen before turning on his heel, returning to his original seat.

Damen turned in his own seat, his elbow resting comfortably on the table as he looked at Laurent, watching as he gazed blankly at Makedon’s retreating back.


“That,” Damen said. “Was your good friend Makedon.”

Laurent had his elbow balanced on the table as well, his fingertips on his temple.

“I can’t even-” he stopped, instead saying, “what in the world is griva?”

“It is a drink from his own region,” Damen said. “A potent blend of alcohol. It’s very strong.”

“Why does he think I would touch that?”

Damen remembered the first time Laurent had griva all too well. His heart felt like it lodged in his throat as memories from the rest of that night unfolded, things said that weren’t meant to be, cementing themselves in Damen’s mind.

“You drink with him,” Damen said, pushing the memories down. “Each time he comes to Delpha.”

The expression on Laurent’s face was a cross between disbelief and displeasure.

“What would he and I correspond about?” Laurent asked, but Damen just shrugged because he honestly didn’t know.

“He didn’t speak to you,” Laurent said. “Much. He doesn’t like you.”

“He likes me just fine,” Damen replied. “There is simply no turning his head when you are around.”

Laurent’s face altered slowly, his expression souring, eyes narrowed, and Damen spoke quickly before Laurent’s mind went away from him.

“He admires your character,” Damen explained. “Your strength of will. You have long since earned his respect.”

Laurent looked back at Damen, his gaze slightly unfocused as he thought something over. He glanced back at the largely packed room full of people before looking down at his plate, his face twisted in a very troubled, amusing sort of way. His lips were pressed together.

“What are you thinking?” Damen said.
“I am trying to understand what compelled me to befriend the entirety of Akielos.”

“Two years is a long time,” Damen replied. “And you are not nearly as prickly as you like for people to believe.”

“That is debatable,” Nikandros—who Damen had forgotten was there—said.

“Your Highness,” he added when Laurent turned to look at him. To Damen’s surprise, the comment did not seem to irritate Laurent. He reached for his goblet of water, eyeing Nikandros over the rim as he sipped.

“How is the kyros’ daughter?” Laurent asked, setting the cup down unhurriedly. “Or have you still only managed to gawk at her breasts.”

Nikandros mouth fell into a straight line, and Damen felt his own pulse begin to accelerate when he saw the side of Laurent’s lip curve upwards. There was nothing false or cynical about it, and for a moment Damen felt breathless.
They were strolling in the gardens, that night’s dinner having just finished. Moonlight glowed above then, cutting a jagged line down the grass. A low murmur could be heard from the small groups of people who were walking the paths, and torches were lit, an orange glow coming from each direction. Torveld had set his linen napkin aside and suggested that they all step out for air, his eyes exclusively on Laurent as he spoke. Damen had stood up before anyone else had.

They were passing a stone fountain, designs etched in and curved into the ground. Water trickled down and lapped around the lily pads when Torveld took a seat on the edge. Following suit, Laurent sat beside him, and Damen next to Laurent.

“I cannot believe the two of you have still not been to Bazal,” Torveld said. “After having me stay in your palace so graciously.”

“We would love to,” Damen said. “In time. Hopefully soon, when things are more stable here in Delpha.”

“Have you ever been anywhere in Patras?” Torveld asked, his body turned entirely so that his gaze was solely on Laurent. Before Laurent could respond Torveld’s honorific was called, and the three of them turned to see someone from his retinue waiting for him, a few paces away.

Torveld sighed. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, after lingering in his same position. Damen looked as he stood from his spot, making for the man waiting patiently.

Damen felt fingers touch his shoulder, and he turned to see Laurent looking at him with a glint in his eyes.

“Stop scowling at him,” Laurent said.

Damen’s frown deepened. “I’m not scowling.”

“You are.”

Damen consciously softened his features, looking at Torveld from the corner of his eye, seeing him in deep conversation, his hands moving as he spoke.

“He’s not even being discreet,” Damen muttered.

Laurent grinned. “Neither are you.”

Damen felt his brows pinch again, and he fought the childish impulse to cross his arms.

“Torveld is a good man,” Laurent reminded him. “It is in our best interest to remain on good terms with him.”

“I know that,” Damen said. “And I know that he is, but he looks at you like you are something to be ogled at, with little more to offer. Its not respectful towards you.”

“I don’t care how he looks at me,” Laurent said.

“I do,” Damen said. “You deserve courtesy and grace.”

Damen watched as Laurent’s smile altered, his gaze turning from amusement to fondness. His eyes
lowered for a moment before he reached a hand out, resting his fingers on Damen’s wrist.

“Everyone knows we wear each other’s cuff,” he said gently. “That’s the only thing that matters.”

Damen’s eyes lowered as well, falling on their wrists and the symbol they created that bound them together. He covered Laurent’s hand with his, and Laurent turned his palm around so their fingers entwined. Laurent leaned forward and kissed Damen once on the cheek, causing Damen to smile without even meaning to. Laurent smiled back at him, leaning in to kiss him again.

It was a beautiful day, the weather perfect for greeting guests. It was warm out, the sun strong enough to fill the palace halls with gleaming light without beating into someone’s skin, making them uncomfortable. There was not a cloud in the sky, the breeze light enough to gently tousle Laurent’s hair. The red cape Damianos wore swayed against his thighs.

They were on the steps, side by side with their hands clasped behind them. They were here to personally greet the Patran royal family, as was protocol. Some guests were taken directly to their rooms by servants, some came to Damianos and Laurent in the throne room, depending on their status. Now, Damianos and Laurent would come to them.

Their arriving retinue could be seen from Laurent’s vantage. There was no sea between Patras and Delfeur and therefore they would be arriving on horseback, the sounds of hooves and the sight of kicked up dust nearing them, the closer they came. Laurent glanced at Damianos, seeing that his gaze was straight ahead.

Minutes of silence passed and then as if one cue, servants streamed out from around Damianos and Laurent, down the white steps and into the cluster of people. To offer a hand, to take the horses and to help women out of carriages. Damianos and Laurent took the final steps down, walking forward to the men in front.

“Welcome,” Damianos said, his loud voice booming across the large group of people. They stood before Torgier and his wife, their three princes and princess and right behind them, Torveld.

“King Torgier,” Laurent said, bowing his head once, though his own rank did not require it. “Your Highness,” he said to his wife. “It is an honor to have you in our palace.”

“Your Highness,” Torgier echoed. “Exalted. The honor is ours. May I present to you our children,” he said, motioning to each one of their possible heirs, following each gesture with a name and title. Damianos and Laurent nodded as each one was named.

“And of course,” Torgier continued. “You know my brother, Prince Torveld.”

Laurent directed his eyes to the middle-aged man now stepping around the group. He had a neatly trimmed beard, closely cropped to his chin and light brown hair to match his eyes. Eyes that were light and warm as he approached Laurent.

“It’s so good to see you, Laurent,” he said. “Damianos,” he added, dipping his head respectfully, as he was below them both in status. Damianos smiled at him, the closed lipped smile that Laurent knew was insincere because it was not large enough for his dimple to show.

Around them, everyone was assembling. Refreshments were being offered to the royal family, slaves and personal servants being removed from the litters. Ahead of them, the Patran groom was dismounting from his horse, large groups gathering.

“Exalted,” the groom said. “Your Highness. I thank you for your hospitality.”
“It is our pleasure,” Damianos said, his smile lighter now. “We look forward to the celebrations.”

“Come,” Laurent said, loud enough for his voice to carry. “Damen and I will show you all to your rooms, where you can rest from your long journey. We have an eventful few days ahead of us.”

Damianos and Laurent were walking through the main quarter of the palace, doing the final rounds and sanctioning everything themselves. Laurent’s chambers were the first stop on their way back after they had personally taken the Patran families to their individual rooms, and Damianos had stopped Laurent from entering with a hand on his arm.

“There are a few last details we need to go over for the banquet tonight,” he had said. Laurent nodded, waiting for Damianos to remove his hand before looking over his shoulder, into his rooms.

“There’s something I need to do first,” he said. “I’ll get you from your rooms later.”

Damianos had nodded in return, but otherwise just stood there. Laurent lingered for a second longer before entering his chambers, the doors closing behind him.

Now they were here, walking below the high arches and through the wide pillars, making their way into the Great Hall in which they would dine that night, though it did not look exactly as it did each time they dined here. It was set up extravagantly, the servants decking everything out in decorative silks, Patran yellow draping the walls and archways. The Patran banner hung above the high table aside the Veretian and Akielon banner of the lion protruding through the starburst. A tapestry of an intricately carved spear run through a sanglier hung on the far end of the room, one that Damianos mentioned that Torveld pointed out each time he came to the palace.

Laurent and Damianos had approved of everything thus far. The food courses, the entertainments, the timing of each specific event. They had been to the kitchens, had viewed any performance in advance to be sure that they would not offend the Patran sensibilities, (though as Damianos told him, it had been years since they had allowed any such thing).

Now, all that was left for them to deal with were the seating arrangements for the banquet that evening. Their customary dinners each night were a more relaxed affair, and though there were no assigned places, people typically ended up in the same spot, amongst the same people. The banquet however would be much more extensive, with far many more people that specific seating was imperative.

“I have already gone through the placements with one of the servants,” Damianos said, leading Laurent towards a smaller table on the side with a large parchment on it. He picked it up, handing it to Laurent. “I’ve rearranged only a few minor things.”

Laurent looked down at the chart, taking in all the different spots, and glancing up at the room, trying to imagine it with each person in place when the room would be alive with noise and wine. In the center of the room was a table holding each person of high status. Laurent and Damianos. King Torgier and his wife. Their four children, three sons and a daughter. His brother Torveld. Not too far off was a table seating the honored family. Chelaut with his wife and niece that was to be wed, the Patran nobleman and his family that would be in attendance. Another table held their guard, and another the kyroi, along with certain generals. The council. The rest of the room was a scatter of different people.

It was not the attendants that caught Laurent’s eye. What gave him pause and caused him to look closer was the list of servants scrawled on the side, running down the page. They were not only
meant to serve the food from the kitchens, but to serve each person individually, as was indicated. Laurent found that he recognized each name.

He glanced up at Damianos, who was watching him carefully. “They are to serve our table as well?” Laurent asked, running a finger along the palace servants.

“Yes.”

Laurent glanced at the parchment again, lifting a brow.

“What?” Damianos said.

“Patras still keeps slaves,” Laurent said. They had spoken about this just yesterday. “I’m sure the royal family would prefer for their personal slaves at the high table, as they are likely accustomed to.”

“Well, we no longer do,” Damianos replied stiffly. “We are respecting their traditions by allowing them to bring slaves into our home. They will respect ours in this.”

After a moment of silence Laurent said, with growing clarity, “you altered the arrangement so that the slaves would not have to serve here, before us, in foreign territory.”

Damianos held his eyes. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

Laurent gazed at Damianos, at the proud lift of his chin and the irrefutable look in his eyes, he looked nowhere else as he spoke.

“I didn’t think it would bother you,” Laurent admitted.

“Well, you don’t exactly know me,” Damianos said. “Anymore.”

There was a pronounced pause. Laurent gazed up at Damianos. Pressed his lips together. Opened them.

“Exalted.”

Laurent clamped his mouth shut. They each turned to see the soldier Pallas standing a few feet away, hand at the hilt of his sword.

“You are needed,” he said, unaware that he had interrupted something, “In the training arena.”

Damianos looked at Pallas, then at Laurent before nodding once, resolute. He turned to go, following behind Pallas without a backwards glance. Laurent stayed where he was, watching Damianos go, taking anything Laurent might have said with him.

The banquet commenced as soon as the sun began to set, the orange and pink glow of sunset coating the great hall through the open loggias and archways. The room was loud, booming with voices and cheers and song, the mass amounts of people making the room feel larger. It was not so often that it was this filled, people from so many provinces flooding each end of the room.

Laurent had come for Damianos in his rooms, knowing it was imperative for them to walk in
together. Damianos had not questioned it when he opened the door to Laurent, he simply held up a
finger as he reached for his golden laurels, placing them carefully atop his head. A stray curl had
fallen loose and hung down his forehead, which Laurent did not point out.

They stood close enough for their arms to touch as they walked through the halls, each part of the
palace thronged with groups of different people. Men women and children, friends and lovers, all
basking at the presence of their kings. Damianos and Laurent smiled brightly at everyone as they
passed, stopping to indulge the children who approached them, and to exchange polite words with
the noblemen and women who spoke with them.

When they had finally reached the entrance to the hall, the royal Patran family happened to arrive at
the same time from the opposite hall, and they all greeted each other with warm smiles and clasped
arms as they made their way inside and towards their table.

It was nothing short of a feast. The finest cloths covered each long table, rows of sheer golden satin
rolled out down the center of each. An endless selection of wine lined each table, and men and
women in flowing skirts circled the room, goblets hanging between loose fingers as exchanges were
made. At the front of the room, an elderly woman sat on a high stool with a large golden harp,
strumming with a peaceful look on her face as a melodic rhythm filled the room.

The table had been laden with light starters when they had taken their seats, platters of roasted
vegetables, a multitude of different salads, sugared almonds and breads. Glass and crystal sparkled
on the table surface, wine flowing around, filling every cup but one. Now the servants began to exit
the kitchen and swarm the tables, two different options of fish held out to each person. One was
tilapia in a spiced tomato sauce, the other a glazed salmon. Damianos took the tilapia. Laurent waved
both away.

“This is very good, Exalted,” Torgier’s daughter Tryphena remarked, lifting another forkful of
salmon to her mouth. It was not Damianos nor Laurent who had cooked the fish, kings had no
involvement in such tasks, but Damianos responded with a pleased smile as if he had caught it
himself.

“Thank you,” Damianos said. “Our fishermen caught them fresh today, I’ve been told.”

“Do you not like fish, Laurent?” Torveld asked.

“I don’t have much of a taste for seafood,” he replied.

“Odd,” Tryphena said. “Considering how often you are around it, now.”

“Tryphena,” Freya, her mother, chided.

“I have grown used to other things,” Laurent remarked.

“What do you recommend?” Torgier asked. He had finished his own dish and was helping himself to
what was left on his wife’s plate.

“Yes,” Torveld said. “I would love to try new things.”

“I recommend the lamb stew,” Damianos said, as soup options began to be brought around. Laurent
typically opted for heartier, sweeter soups, but he found himself motioning to the lamb. It might look
odd if he ignored Damianos’ recommendation in front of others, surely. Everyone else made their
selection, and the conversation lulled as the first bites were taken.

It was good, the meat well seasoned, the vegetables warming his stomach. By the end of the bowl
Laurent found himself lapping the liquid up with a piece of bread. Damianos’ eyes were on him as he did.

“Laurent,” Torgier said, setting his goblet of wine down. “Damianos. Have either of you been to Patras before?”

“We have not had the pleasure,” Damianos replied. He had finished his soup, and was moving aside to make it easier on the servant who was trying to remove his empty dish while still being inconspicuous.

“I keep trying to sway them,” Torveld said. “But they cannot seem to pull themselves away form the palace.”

“It’s a beautiful palace,” Freya commented, giving a respectful look around the room. “I cannot blame either of you.”

“Thank you,” Damianos said. “It was so much of Laurent’s vision.”

“It was a joint effort,” Laurent said, which of course he didn’t remember, but could only assume to be true.

“You two really must arrange a visit,” Torveld was saying. “The fields are vast, and the tracks are excellent for riding.”

“That does sound nice,” Laurent said.

“Do you enjoy riding, Your Highness?” Freya asked.

“I do.”

“And you, Exalted?” Tryphena asked.

“I am not nearly as good as Laurent,” Damianos said. “But I do.”

“I have met very few people who are as good at horse-riding as Laurent,” Torveld said, smiling politely as he lifted a forkful of salad to his mouth. Damianos smiled in return, lifting his wine to his lips.

Laurent looked at Damianos for a moment, waiting for him to meet Laurent’s gaze before raising a brow. Damianos looked at him questioningly, and Laurent shook his head slightly, the edges of his lips beginning to curl.

The noise in the room grew louder, the atmosphere becoming rowdier as drink flowed more generously. Some man Laurent could not see from his vantage called out a song request, and the woman at the harp changed her pace without pause, falling into the new melody easily. A smatter of applause rung out before everyone turned back to their conversation, the requested song already forgotten.

The servants were bringing out the main courses. Platters of rice tossed in different spices. Thinly sliced slivers of meet, drizzled in oil on top of flat breads. Roasted pheasant stuffed with raisins and cooked in milk. Placed in the center of the table, a slow roasted boar, glazed and surrounded by figs and dates. The servants began to dish out the food onto everybody’s plates, putting the best cuts for Damianos and Laurent, then Torgier and his wife, then the rest.

“Exalted,” one of Torgier’s sons said as the servants made themselves scarce, after refilling
everyone’s goblets. Torin, Laurent thought his name was. “How is the game in this region?”

“Exceptional,” Damianos said, lifting a bite of meat to his mouth with his fingers. “It is such a shame your time here is so short. We would love to take you out on a hunt.”

Laurent had been cutting into his pheasant, gathering some of the sauce on his plate when Torveld returned his attention to him. “Do you remember our first hunt together?” Torveld asked, in that way someone did when they were not really asking if you recalled an event, and were simply reminiscing.

“Of course,” Laurent lied.

Torveld’s grin became all teeth as he turned his attention to the rest of the table. “I had never seen anything like it,” he said. “The fortitude. The determination!” He lifted his knife into his air enthusiastically as he spoke. “Have you ever seen someone so adamant on winning that they rode their horse to their death, just to beat you to the mark?”

The table murmured in agreement of awe and shock, just as Laurent’s fork froze halfway to his mouth. He felt as if his arm was stuck in it’s position, the room slightly blurring out of focus as the rumble of the room took on the quality of the way words sounded from underwater. Carefully, Laurent took air into his lungs as he set his fork down and reached for his napkin, or his water, whatever came first. Distantly, he felt a hand touch his knee.

“That is something,” Torgier remarked.

Laurent knew he should reply. Words were on his tongue, but all that was on his mind were the hours of riding he had done since he could walk, and properly mount a horse. If there was one thing Laurent could do, it was navigate a harsh ride without compromising his horse’s life. He smiled thinly, and tried again to form words.

“Torveld,” Damianos said, taking Torveld’s attention away from Laurent. It was only after Torveld turned away that Laurent felt the light hand on his knee lift. “Have you been to Vask, recently?”

The conversation turned, all traces of the previous discussion gone as the table turned its attention to Vask, and the status of their relations with Patras. Torveld spoke of his most recent meetings with Halvik, and Laurent felt like he could breathe again.

“Have the two of you been to Vask?” One of Torgier’s sons asked, whose name Laurent could not differentiate between the remaining two.

“Many times,” Damianos said.

“What do you think of their traditions?” Tryphena asked. Her eyes, Laurent noticed, tended to linger on Damianos.

The side of Laurent’s mouth lifted. He glanced at Damianos and saw a similar look of surprised amusement on his face.

“What do you mean?” Damianos asked.

“My uncle tells me they claim from the dominant male,” she explained.

“Tryphena,” Freya admonished.

It was not what Damianos expected. Or rather, he had not expected her to be so direct with her curiosity. He choked on his wine, setting the goblet down and covering his mouth, attempting to
clear his throat. Laurent set a hand on his back, trying and failing to bite back his smile.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Your Highness,” Torgier said. “I apologize for my daughters crassness. She can be a bit outspoken.”

“No apologies are necessary,” Laurent replied, his mood having significantly improved. Damianos seemed to have noticed this, because as soon as the conversation was diverted he was leaning in Laurent’s direction.

“Of all things to make you smile,” he said quietly.

Laurent was still smiling. He wasn’t even sure what had amused him so much. “She is very funny.”

“That wasn’t funny,” Damianos muttered. “What was she trying to prove?”

“What are you trying to prove with all of your glares at Torveld?” Laurent asked. The rest of the table was deep in political discussions, and paid no mind to Damianos and Laurent’s whispering.

Damianos frowned. “Why do you always say that?”

Laurent let out a breath of amusement at that. “Does that alone not tell you something?”

Damianos’ frowned deepened.

Conversation continued around them, Damianos and Laurent allowing themselves to be pulled back in. Plates were loaded and reloaded, bottles drained until eventually the platters were nearly empty. Servants approached their table carefully the instant it was clear that no one else was eating, clearing everything immediately.

Shallow bowls of water and cloths were placed out by each person to wash off their fingers, just as a fresh wave of servants came out with desserts. Slices of pears, peaches and apple, drizzled in honey. Bowls of fresh berries mixed with nuts. Pastries, sweetmeats and different slices of cake, strewn out all across the table.

“Laurent,” Torveld said jovially, motioning towards one of the platters. “You enjoyed these, if memory serves.”

“Your memory is impeccable,” Damianos said. Laurent had to fight the urge to roll his eyes, or to quite literally shove Damianos in exasperation. Laurent wondered if he had ever once managed to hide how he felt.

“What else can we expect?” Torgier asked. “In the upcoming days.”

“Tomorrow,” said Laurent. “The masquerade, a traditional Veretian custom. The day after, the wedding.”

“Hopefully we will find time to show you around the palace,” Damianos said.

“That would be lovely,” Freya said. “I have so enjoyed myself so far.”

The noise in the room turned to a dull murmur as the center of the room cleared out, and as everyone turned in their seats for the beginning entertainments, Laurent found that surprising, he too was enjoying himself.
“It is freezing.”

Damen’s breath fogged out of his mouth as he spoke, curling between them in the chilly air.

“You’re being dramatic,” Laurent said, pulling Damen’s cloak tighter around his shoulders in an attempt to warm him up. “And you’re the size of a mammoth. All that extra muscle and flesh should be good for something.”

They were walking in the gardens behind the palace. No one else was around them, everyone hidden away inside for the festivities. It was so loud that a muffled wave of noise could be heard, even from Damen and Laurent’s distance.

“I’m surprised it’s not snowing,” Damen continued.

“Now you’re really being dramatic,” Laurent said. “It’s not nearly cold enough to snow.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Damen replied. “I’ve never seen it.”

“I know,” Laurent looked up at him. “You will soon.”

They stopped walking, Laurent pulling Damen down onto a nearby bench. Damen sat beside him and they both turned their bodies inwards so they were facing each other. There were not nearly as many torches lit as there generally were at night, being that everyone was meant to be inside, and the darkness cast them completely in shadows. Laurent’s mask looked almost black against his light coloring, only the golden trimmings of it glistening when it caught the moon’s light.

“Are you warmer?” Laurent asked, rubbing a hand on Damen’s thigh.

“Not yet,” Damen said. “You could sit on my lap, if you like.”

Laurent grinned. “Thank you for the permission,” he said, instead leaning his body so his weight was slightly supported on Damen’s shoulder. Damen went to remove his own mask, but Laurent caught his arm at the last moment.

“Don’t,” he said. “I like it.”

Damen removed his hand from his face, instead bringing it around Laurent and pulling their bodies closer. They sat quietly, looking out onto the vast expanse of the yard, the arches and the windows of the palace illuminated in light like the soft glowing globes of Vaskian tents. It was a few moments of comfortable silence before Laurent spoke.

“Auguste used to love the masquerade.”
Damen rubbed at Laurent’s hip lightly, circling his fingers. “Did he?”

“Yes,” Laurent said. “He looked forward to it all year.”

“What did he like most about it?” Damen asked, always eager to know more about Auguste.

Laurent nestled his head comfortably in the space between Damen’s arm and chest. His fingers were still trailing Damen’s thigh. “He said he liked the ambiguity of it. The mystery of dancing and conversing without knowing who you were speaking to.” Laurent laughed softly. “I think he just relished the opportunity to speak to women freely.”

Damen laughed with him, thinking of the cluster of masked people inside and how easy it could be to approach the wrong person. He thought of what that must have been like, to want to badly to speak to someone who pulled at your heart, but to not be allowed to because of a stigma. He couldn’t imagine not being able to be with Laurent freely. Not being able to speak with him, or to hold him.

“He really thought no one knew who he was,” Laurent continued, a lingering grin evident in his voice. “I think he was less inconspicuous than you are. As if he could really speak with anyone and not have it painfully clear who they were talking to.” he trailed off, and Damen allowed the moment to turn to the silence that Laurent needed.

“He would point some out to me,” Laurent said, after a stretch. “Women of the court, noblemen’s daughters. He would say things he liked about them, things he admired that set them apart in his mind. I was dumfounded.”

Damen laughed harder now, the pressure in his chest feeling a bit lighter. Laurent always knew what to say.

“Did he often speak to you about women?” Damen asked.

“I was very young,” Laurent said. “And he always tried to keep me sheltered, so naturally he filtered everything, but I could read between the lines.”

Damen grinned, thinking of what Laurent told him years ago. “I remember,” Damen said, “that you told him he would have heirs and you would books. How old were you?”

Laurent let out a breath of nostalgic amusement. “Ten.”

Damen tightened his arm around Laurent. “I feel honored that I beat out a pile of books.”

“Yes, well,” Laurent said, looking up at Damen. “You’re not like any man I’ve ever read about.”

Damen’s heart felt too big for his chest as he pulled Laurent in, kissing him long and slow, his arms winding around his waist and pulling him in even closer, if possible.

“Did you like the masquerades?” Damen asked, after they eventually pulled away.

“I was very young,” Laurent repeated. “I was mainly overwhelmed, but I found them enchanting. They were like something I would read about in my stories. I usually spent them sneaking around, spying on nobility.”

Damen tried to think of that, a prepubescent Laurent in a mask hiding his features, crouching behind tables, listening in on conversations and hiding away information. It was something he could see him doing.
He took Laurent’s hand, standing up from his bench. “Should we go spy on the council?”

Laurent chuckled as he allowed himself to be pulled up from his spot. “Your size is not meant for subtlety. I thought you understood as much at this point.”

Damen adjusted Laurent’s mask, letting Laurent’s fix his as well after. “I’m sure you’ll manage to find something entertaining for us to do.”

Laurent grinned, pulling on Damen’s arm. “You are learning.”

The evening would be held in the palace ballroom. It was slightly different than the Great Hall, the décor unlike that of a regular feast. The curtains were all drawn, deep blue cloths of satin falling down from the ceiling and pooling against the floor, dark like the midnight sky. All lighter decorations had been removed, and the glow of the candles dancing against its dark surroundings gave the room a deep, warm ambiance.

The tables had all been pushed aside so they lined the perimeter of the room. There were still seats for the meal, but the largest portion of the room had been sectioned off for mingling, and for dancing. The outfits Damen saw were particularly eccentric that night, fashionable jackets with detailed lacing up the arms, dresses that flowed down the ankles with different colored layers of silk, overlapping one another like flower petals.

Everyone Damen looked, he saw masks. Different colors, sizes and shapes, some held up to the face by a stick, some tied around the back of the head by a simple thread. Damen saw a man with a white mask that concealed an entire half of his face, and a woman with a larger jewel encrusted mask, a burst of color lining the eyes with bright feathers protruding from the top.

Damen’s own mask was simple in color, its intricacy showing through in its details. Golden, of a similar tone to the cuff on his left wrist. The cuts for his eyes were sharp and pointed, the sides of the mask curving inwards. The top outer edges elongated into a delicate curl, it’s ends shot through with streaks of red. Laurent had chosen it for him the previous masquerade, saying he liked the way the gold looked against his skin, the way the coloring balanced his red cape and laurels. Damen didn’t care much for the ostentatious splendor of it all, but he knew Laurent enjoyed these sorts of events, especially things that could feel like a game.

Damen had come alone. A knock sounded at the door as he had been pinning his chiton in place, calling his attention. He had opened it with some small semblance of hope, and felt it immediately quell when he saw a servant.

“His Highness says that something has come up,” the servant said, doing a remarkable job of not acknowledging the fact that the kings were in separate rooms. “He says he will see you in the ballroom.”

Damen had nodded, and with a final adjusting of his mask, made his way to the party.

Despite his features being masked, a large number of people still approached Damen with the use of his honorific. It didn’t surprise him, really. It couldn’t bee too hard to mistake who he was, considering his size. That, and the golden cuff on his wrist that only one other person wore. He exchanged all the proper pleasantries, greeting everyone he needed to and saying hello to the right people, but with every polite nod and clasped hand, his eyes were circling around the entire room until finally, he saw him.

He was in a crowd of about five people, though Damen could not tell who any of them were. One of the woman he was speaking to had her hair piled high, tendrils falling down around her light pink
mask, but Damen could tell from the darker shade of her skin that it could not be Vannes. Damen made straight for their side of the room, his eyes determinedly on their group as he moved around anyone who got in his way, feeling like he was being pulled by a string. When he was a few feet away the woman noticed his approach, and it was when her eyes cut away and towards Damen that their conversation halted, prompting Laurent to turn around.

He was breathtaking. He was wearing one of his fancier jackets with laces winding down the back, so that all the attention was focused on the designs of the front, but Damen could look at nowhere but his eyes.

His mask was far more extravagant than Damen’s, as everything with Laurent was. Made of velvet, a deep blue nearly as dark as his jacket with golden embroidery running throughout it, bringing everything to life. It stood out against his ivory skin, a strand of hair falling out from behind his ear and brushing his cheek. They were gazing at each other.

“You look…” Damen said, but his voice only trailed off. Partly because he didn’t want to make Laurent uncomfortable, mainly because there were not enough words to properly finish his sentence.

Laurent continued to look at him wordlessly before he remembered that people were around them. It was their presence that made him say, “so do you.”

Damen took in a slow breath that pushed against his chest. He wanted to take Laurent’s hand and bring his fingers to his lips. He wanted pull him onto the floor where everyone was dancing. He wanted to sneak away, out to the gardens like they always did at these events.

“Exalted.”

Damen pulled his eyes away and looked up to see Nikandros approaching, two goblets of wine in his hands. His mask was one of the most simple ones here, never quite being able to fully acclimate himself to Vere’s excessiveness.

Nikandros held one of the goblets out to Damen which he took gratefully, lifting it slightly in thanks. Nikandros turned to Laurent after, tilting the second cup in his direction.

“Wine, Your Highness?”

“No. Thank you.”

Nikandros nodded, instead clanking the goblet against Damen’s and taking a sip of his own. One of the men in the group made a comment about the upcoming wedding, pulling everyone into the conversation. Questions were asked, thoughts and opinions put in. Some joined the conversation, some left. The noise in the room increased as more people entered.

Around them, servants were circling the room with platters elegantly placed on one hand, goblets of wine and water balanced on a tray. Another wave of servants were carrying patters of appetizers, stuffed grape leaves and cinnamon coated strips of chicken. Damen was reaching out to set his empty goblet down and replace it with a full one when he saw Torveld and his niece Tryphena, making their way towards their group.

“Exalted,” Tryphena said, curtsying once. “Your Highness.”

Laurent was in the middle of a conversation with someone who Damen could not place by the voice. “Your Highness,” Damen said in reply. “Torveld.”

“Tryphena, please,” she said. Damen smiled politely, lifting his wine to his lips.
“Torveld,” Laurent said, extracting himself from his conversation graciously and stepping up next to Damen “Your Highness.” Tryphena nodded her head in greeting.

“This is truly something,” Torveld said, looking around with slightly widened eyes, his lips pursed appreciatively.

“Thank you,” Damen said. “Is it your first masquerade?”

“It is,” Torveld said. “Festivities in Patras are not quite this… grandiose.”

“Nor were Akielon ones,” Damen said. “It still feels new for me, sometimes.”

“Are your brothers here?” Laurent asked Tryphena.

“They are,” she replied. “Somewhere chasing women, I’m sure.”

“And not you?” Damen asked, in the spirit of carrying the conversation.

“I like to be chased,” she said. “And I prefer men.”

“Laurent,” they heard, and Damen turned to see Makedon approaching them. To Damen’s utter surprise, he was wearing a mask himself, though simple like Nikandros’. Damen watched as he stalked over, completely dumfounded. Never in his life would he believe Makedon to entertain such things.

“There’s a discussion that requires your input,” he said, lifting a hand around Laurent’s shoulder, a palm on his back. “Come.”

Laurent half looked like the idea intrigued him, half like he was being coaxed into stepping off of a precipice. He raised an eyebrow before handing off his empty water goblet to Damen, turning to Torveld and Tryphena

“Excuse me,” he said before allowing Makedon to lead him away, towards a group of awaiting Akielon men.

Damen set both goblets down on a passing tray, catching Nikandros’ eye across the room and nudging his head to the side.

“Enjoy the evening,” Damen said to Torveld and Tryphena.

“Those two are lovers,” Damen said under his breath, tilting his head to Nikandros’. He was looking at someone from his guard, speaking to a woman with a red dress that matched her lips. She was holding a thinner goblet, dangling loosely from heavily ringed fingers.

Nikandros snorted. “He has a singular taste for men.”

They were up on one of the balconies, one of the few that the stairwells at the sides of the room led up to. Damen and Nikandros were the only two people up here, the group of women who had been here dispensing quickly when their king and kyros stepped in. They were leaning on the marble beam now, a wide view of the room offered to them.

Damen looked around the room. Men and women held each other’s arms, clinging to each other as they spun one another in circles, the combination of the harp and the kithara creating a quick, fast paced melody.
“Them, then,” Damen said, nudging his chin forward.

Nikandros followed the direction with his eyes. “Perhaps,” he said. “But since when do you care about other peoples affairs?”

Damen didn’t care. Who other people chose to bed was none of his business, but that wasn’t the point. It was stupid to try, though. This was more his and Laurent’s thing, to joke and speculate in crowded events. Of course it wouldn’t be the same with Nikandros.

Damen drained his cup. He looked across the ballroom to where he saw Torgier and Freya, their fingers linked as they swayed slowly. He only recognized them because he had seen Freya before she slipped her mask on and recognized her dress. He saw the Patran groom speaking with Chelaut by the pillar close to the stairwell. Damen had managed to speak with him that morning, and he seemed to be a fine young man.

“She has been eyeing you since they arrived to Delpha,” Nikandros said, and Damen looked out to see Tryphena eyeing them from her seat, her legs crossed.

Damen rubbed his forehead. “Yes.”

Nikandros laughed beside him. “You used to handle potential prospects better,” he mused, sipping his wine. “Warranted or not.”

Damen frowned. “She’s not a potential prospect,” he said. “And I’m not the same man I used to be.”

“I know that,” Nikandros replied. “She doesn’t seem to.”

“Everyone knows I am with Laurent,” Damen said, ignoring the incongruity of the statement.

“Yes,” Nikandros muttered, and Damen turned to see what Nikandros was looking at over his shoulder. By a small table in a comfortable stance, Laurent was in conversation with who seemed to be Herode, but very well could have been any elderly man.

“He seems…” Nikandros began. Damen steeled himself as his mind wandered with all the words Nikandros might use. “Peaceful.”

Damen blinked once, looking at him. “Peaceful.”

“I would say so.”

Damen was looking between Nikandros and Laurent, who was now looking at the two of them.

Damen forced his eyes away. It had grown increasingly loud in the room. It felt too hot. Crowded. He pushed away form the edge and adjusted his mask that constantly felt like it was going to slip off. He still couldn’t get used to the feeling of something constantly on his face.

“You should be with him,” Nikandros was saying. “People will question why you are not glued to each others side.”

“Yes,” Damen agreed. I want to. “I should go to him.” I can’t stand the distance.

Damen looked again across the room, past the people and towards the table holding flowers and drinks. Laurent was gone.

“Excuse me,” Damen muttered, setting his goblet down on the mantel.
Damen had swept the ballroom, making the rounds a few times, keeping an eye out for the familiar head of golden hair. He had tried to move fluidly through the groups of people and keep his head lowered, but it seemed impossible for himself to go unnoticed. Time and time again he was stopped, intercepted, everyone suddenly having the driving need to converse with their king. Damen tolerated it until he no longer could, and eventually began extracting himself as politely as possible, moving on to the next section of the room.

It was the masks. He kept seeing the same ones, and similar jackets and outerwear which was starting to play with his mind. Damen felt as if he was simply seeing the same people over and over, and through the halls and the balconies, never the one he was looking for.

Damen needed air. The continuous circling was getting to his head and the multiple cups of wine he had drank were making him overheated, his mask feeling as if it was plastered to his face. Damen stuck to one of the walls as he walked, keeping a sharp eye on all those he passed without actually holding any contact until he walked through one of the open archways, the cooling night air a welcome relief on his skin.

Damen breathed in, looking around at the benches, the fountains and the flowers. He always ended to end up in the gardens, but never like this, alone.

He began to walk again, simply enjoying the breeze and the quiet solitude. He only stopped when he reached a tall pillar that was a solid, welcome weight at his back. From the corner of Damen’s eye he saw two men standing a ways off, and he set his shoulders comfortably against the cool stone and let his eyes linger on them lazily. One of their backs was to him, and the other man seemed to loom over him, his black mask making his noticeable features blend in with the darkness. He spoke animatedly with his hands, his companion’s body seeming lax, if not a bit bored.

Damen just needed a moment to himself. He could not be seen from his vantage, and his eyes began to roam the rest of the gardens, the buds that were in full bloom, the sound of crickets and music. From somewhere out of sight, children’s laughter.

“-Have had my eyes on you all evening,” Damen heard, and he lifted his head in surprise. He had thought he was too far away to hear their private conversation, and indeed he could not hear the shorter man’s reply, but apparently the masked man had a gruff enough voice that it could occasionally carry. Damen missed the next few exchanges, but he managed to latch on to a few scarce words. Wine. Eyes. Mask. Followed.

Damen turned his body slightly. He could not see the shorter man from his position, just the straight line of his back and an outstretched hand, unadorned fingers tight around the rim of a goblet. Whatever he said made the opposing man raise his voice, making it easier for Damen to overhear.

“I don’t need to know who you are,” he said, and Damen could now hear the slur in his voice that came with a night of overindulging in wine. “Your name is not what I’m interested in.”

Damen frowned, straightening himself to his full height. That was no way to speak to someone.

“We can keep the masks on, if that’s what you prefer.” And as Damen’s irritation began to form into something more concrete: “The indifferent ones are usually the best at sucking cock.”

Damen was moving before the sentence was even complete. He would not stand for that kind of behavior, nor would he allow anyone to be subjected to such disgrace. He was a few steps away, his anger simmering.
Damen was still unnoticed despite his steady closing of the distance when the man with his back to Damen lifted a hand to grab the wrist of the masked suitor, who had been a moment away from touching his chest. That was when Damen saw it, peeking out of the long, tightly laced sleeve. A glimmer of gold that Damen personally knew the weight, look and touch of.

Anger. Burning, white-hot anger was the only thing that was processing in his mind. It was not his legs but pure instinct that pushed Damen forward, all of his faculties temporarily blinded by rage. Some distant part of his mind registered that he had his hands on someone, but it was only after a strangled noise that the fog cleared, and he saw the masked man with his back to the wall, one of his hands gripping at Damen’s wrists.

Damen didn’t let go, only loosened his grip enough to allow the man to breathe while still keeping him there. Apparently not loose enough, because the man was still grappling at Damen’s hands.

Damen let go, and watched as the man slumped slightly, grasping for purchase at the wall behind him as he coughed unevenly. His breaths were roughened, the sound like nails scratching at a harsh surface, and Damen felt nothing but boiling fury.

Damen was aware of Laurent beside him, not saying anything but just standing there. Damen wanted to turn to him, wanted to do something, but he could not yet tare his eyes away. He felt as if his veins were throbbing inside him.

Eventually, the man’s vision cleared enough that he could look at Damen properly, and Damen saw the instant recognition fell, his eyes widening with it. First, he noticed who it was that had thrown his body onto the wall. Next, he connected why it was that Damen had reacted as such. His body jerked like an animal, the moment it felt the first signs of your approach.

“Exalted,” he said, his voice hoarse from something other than a lack of oxygen. “Your Highness, I didn’t-“


The man pushed himself up, trying to regain his breath as he stepped towards Laurent.

“Do not,” Damen spat, clenching his fists as he stepped into the man’s field of vision. “Get out of my face this second, or you will not like my riposte.”

The man seemed to still have enough of his wits about him that he did as he was told, nodding his head vigorously as his body closed in on itself, extracting himself from Damen and walking away, as rapidly as he could without undignifying himself further by sprinting. Damen stayed how he was, his nails biting into his palms as he watched the man disappear into the darkness. He closed his eyes. Inhaled. Exhaled. Opened them.

When the urge to follow after the man and give him what he deserved did not subdue, he did the only think he could think of that would bring him back to himself, and bring him some semblance of peace. He turned around.

Laurent was there. Laurent was standing there, not watching Damen but looking at him. He was whole. He was all right, and Damen’s heart thudded against his chest in an entirely different way.

When it was apparent that Laurent wasn’t going to speak, Damen lifted his hand slightly, towards the direction of the palace. “We should go inside,” Damen said, feeling that any string of words would be inadequate in that moment. “People will wonder where we are.”

“Yes,” Laurent said, after a moment of silence.
Damen didn’t know what to make of his voice, but it was all he could focus on as they walked back inside, anyone in their way either smiling or clearing away from them. As they stepped into the ballroom, the colors and the noise surrounding them, Damen found that this crowded room was the last place he wanted to be.

“Would you like to eat something?” Damen asked Laurent, because he needed to talk.

“No,” Laurent said. He was looking at a portrait at the other end of the hall.

“We should make rounds,” Damen said and Laurent nodded, staying close to Damen as they began to circulate the room. Exchanging pleasantries, entering conversations, allowing themselves to be pulled into others. They presented themselves as a golden image, and gave their people what they wanted. What Damen wanted.


They each turned to see Torgier and Freya approaching, Freya’s hands wrapped around Torgier’s arm. “This has been a lovely evening,” Freya said. “I’ve never experienced something quite like it.”

“We’re thrilled to hear that,” Laurent replied.

“And it seems the night has not yet ended,” Freya said, looking over Laurent’s shoulder. Damen turned just as he heard it. The quick, trilling sounds of the instruments changing, the feeling in the room altering as the harp was strung, creating a hypnotically slow rhythm that spread across the room like oil on skin.

Couples were pairing off, tugging on hands, pulling each other into their arms. Damen saw one women spin another below an outstretched arm, two men with their arms around each other as if they were embracing, rather dancing. He saw Torgier lead Freya out onto the floor, and he felt his heart begin to accelerate as awareness began to dawn on him.

Damen felt like he was being torn into two, the understanding of what was unfolding around him almost painful to grasp. He remembered so many other times like this, when Damen and Laurent had spent a better portion of their night like each and every other couple, holding each other as closely as possible. He knew what they should do. He knew what he wanted to do. He knew what Laurent would not do.

But then Laurent’s hand was on Damen’s arm. His fingers were curling around his bicep, and a path was clearing, and Laurent’s eyes were on Damen’s.

“Come,” Laurent said.

Damen was conscious of every step he took as they made their way to the center, Laurent’s fingers like sparks of fire on his skin. He thought that if the music were not so loud, surely everyone would hear the pounding of his heart. He was surprised the building was not vibrating with it.

They reached the middle. Turned to each other. Damen’s body felt warm from the wine he had drunk, his head light from the way Laurent looked that night. The way Laurent was looking at him then.

Damen stepped closer. He lifted a hand, palm out, and Laurent lifted his as well. Mirror images.

Their palms touched, fingers slowly interlacing. It was Laurent who brought his other hand around Damen’s shoulder, and the fire spread through Damen’s bloodstream as he wrapped an arm around Laurent’s waist. He wanted to put distance so Laurent wouldn’t feel him shaking. He wanted to pull
him in closer than he had ever been.

Their steps were slow, everything around them fading into a blur of shades and movements, the music nothing but a distant sound. Their chests were touching, and Damen could feel Laurent’s hair, soft against his neck.

Damen could feel each single, tender beat of his heart. He was aware of the tension in his body, everything he was feeling strapped down as best as he could. He could feel it in Laurent too, just as he felt him breathing against Damen’s skin. Slow. Uneven.

“Laurent-“

“Don’t speak,” Laurent said. “We’re dancing.”

His voice was a murmur, and it was so low that Damen might have imagined it, had he not felt the outline of each word, brushing against his skin softly like a whisper. For all of Damen’s strength, he couldn’t have felt weaker in that moment. He felt as if the only thing holding him together were Laurent’s hands against him.

They continued to dance. They moved fluidly as if they had done this countless times before, which they had. Laurent was too graceful to be anything but elegant, and Damen was too captivated by a moment that he knew would be snatched away before he was ready to let go.

The song continued, and Laurent’s arm remained around him, his fingers clutching Damen’s, even as it reached its final notes. Damen’s eyes were closed, because in those final moments he just wanted to feel Laurent against him.

Damen was strong, but he was so weak.

Chapter End Notes

  tw: not sure if i would say attempted assault but one person coming on to someone insistently and quite rudely
“Damen.”

Damen pressed his face into the pillow further, rubbing his cheek until he found a comfortable spot. He let out a sigh, breathing out slowly as he reveled in the way his limbs felt heavy against the bed, sinking into the sheets as his breathing evened out again.

“Damen.”

Damen made a small sound of protest, keeping his eyes closed as he brought a hand up to the side of his pillow, blocking his head. A few seconds of silence passed and he grinned lazily into the pillow, feeling sleep pull at him again.

“I’ve been waiting for you to wake for a while,” he heard. “You’re not going back to sleep.”

Damen grunted in response, and he heard a small, breathy laugh before Laurent was nudging at his side.

“Raise your arm,” Laurent said.

“You’re waking me up,” Damen mumbled into the bedding. “You can lift me.”

“You weight more than a ton of bricks,” Laurent replied. “Move.”

Damen huffed in exasperation, burrowing further into the bedding until he felt Laurent kick at him. Damen smiled, rolling onto his side and lifting his arm invitingly. Damen felt the bedding shift as Laurent moved closer, fitting himself against Damen properly so their bodies lined up. Damen lowered his arm after, wrapping it around Laurent’s waist.

The entire length of their bodies were touching, Laurent’s thighs in between Damen’s, his own arm on Damen’s side. They were sharing the same pillow now, Laurent’s hair fanned out far enough that it was brushing Damen’s cheek. His face was very close, his eyes looking particularly blue in the early morning light.

Laurent’s hand was cupping Damen’s cheek, his thumb sweeping his cheekbone, along his jaw. He had lines on his face from how he had slept on his pillow, his hair a bit unkempt and his eyes still squinty from sleep. He looked disheveled, and his beauty was heart stopping.

“Did you disturb my sleep for a particular reason?” Damen asked.

“Do I always have a reason?”

“Yes.”

Laurent smiled, moving his hand to the back of Damen’s head so he was cupping his neck, and he used to hold to pull Damen into him.

Laurent’s lips were soft, his kisses slow and deliberate and he traced the line of Damen’s lip with his tongue. Damen wrapped both arms around Laurent’s waist, his grip tightening when he felt Laurent arch against him, pressing his chest into Damen’s. Laurent made a small sound into Damen’s mouth, tightening a hand in his hair.

“You woke up in a good mood,” Damen said against his mouth.
Laurent brought one hand down Damen’s back, his fingers spanning against his shoulder blades. His other hand lifted back to Damen’s face, running a finger down the side of his face.

“What?” Damen smiled.

Laurent smiled back, leaning his head in and pressing his lips back to Damen’s, the kiss more chaste this time.

“Happy birthday, Damen,” he whispered.

Damen’s smile spread against Laurent’s lips, feeling helpless to it. Happiness spread in his chest, warming his entire body as he brought both of his own hands to Laurent’s cheeks, holding him tightly as he kissed him soundly.

They held each other, their bodies shifting even closer as Damen pushed his hands into Laurent’s hair. It was soft under his fingers.

“Thank you,” Damen said when they eventually pulled away.

Laurent nuzzled his face against Damen’s neck, causing Damen’s heart to flutter in his chest like wings of a bird. He dragged a hand across Laurent’s chest, tracing it with his fingers.

“What would you like to do today?” Laurent asked.

Damen lifted a shoulder, not having anything particular in mind. He was never one for birthday sentimentalities. “Stay in bed with you,” he murmured, running a pleased knuckle along the flush of Laurent’s cheek.

“That is nothing special,” Laurent said.

“I beg to differ.”

Laurent looked at him wryly. “That is nothing new,” he corrected.

Damen’s mouth twisted in amusement. “Perhaps we can train later,” he shrugged.

Laurent frowned at that. “You will be training rigorously, even when you’re sixty.”

It was silent for a moment. With each passing second, Damen felt his grin spreading until it stretched at his cheeks.

Laurent’s frown deepened. “What?”

Damen nudged at Laurent’s head with his, pressing their foreheads together. “Do you think of us when we’re old often?”

Laurent blinked twice before his flush returned, spreading evenly across his face. “I never mentioned myself in that statement,” he said.

Damen pushed at Laurent so he was on his back, rolling over him easily so he was balanced on one elbow, hovering over him. Laurent gave him an exasperated look, but went with the change in position easily.

“What else do you think about?” Damen asked.

“Nothing at all.”
“I think about it,” Damen offered, putting his other hand by Laurent’s head so he was closing him in.

“Do you,” Laurent replied dryly.

“I think about you,” Damen continued. “Us.”

“I’m sure you do,” Laurent replied.

“Be nice to me,” Damen said. “It’s my birthday.”

Laurent pressed his lips together, his touch feather light on Damen’s neck, tracing his collarbone. His fingers swept along him like he might break skin if he pressed too hard, a blade moving along a thin layer of ice. Laurent looked up at Damen with lightness in his eyes, nothing on his face but serenity and happiness.

“Alright,” Laurent mused, rubbing a stray curl between two fingers. “I will indulge you today. What else do you think about?”

Laurent had never been to many weddings. Growing up as the prince of Vere he had had to attend weddings of nobility and high birth, but none that stuck out in his mind, and none that were close to him in a personal manner. Despite his personal lack of familiarity with them, Laurent knew extravagance when he saw it.

No expenses were being spared. Whether that be the clothing, the décor or the food for the banquets, the efforts that had been put into this celebrations left no room to doubt, and it was proven clear how special and imperative this union was.

A dais had been set up in the Great Hall, steps leading up to the center where the altar was built. Four high beams surrounded the dais, a golden canopy hanging over and falling down in rivulets. Stems of leaves ran up the length of each wooden beam, wrapping around and covering every inch. Flower petals were strewn along the floor, leading from the wooden doors and down the path that would be walked, separating two sections of chairs.

On the dais was a small table holding multiple different things: a tall candle, a jug of wine and an empty goblet, gold and ornate. A shallow bowl of water and a crimson ribbon. Laurent had not been present for any of the rehearsals, nor had Damianos, though he knew they had taken place over the past few days. This afternoon the groom had attended a pre marital Patran tradition that Laurent was not privy to, as the stock of Patran scriptures were limited in their library.

He did know, however, that the bride had spent the day with her female companions and relatives, going through the rituals that were customary of the Veretian bride. Following this, her servants would have her bathed, dressed, and prepared for the ceremony.

The Great Hall was full, each seat taken by the palace occupants. Veretian, Patran and Akielon. The setting sun coupled with the harmonious sounds of the harp filled the room, giving the atmosphere a dreamlike setting. Laurent stood on the dais, Damianos at his side. Opposite him were Torgier and Freya, their children taking the first row in the crowd. In the center of the dais was the officiate, and in front of him, the groom.

It was customary for kings and queens to occupy the dais when anyone highborn was to be wed, a sign of respect and well wishes for the union. As a child Laurent had taken a seat in the crowd with Auguste at his side, the knowledge in mind that one day, it would be Auguste in the center instead of their father. Whether Laurent had attended any weddings as king in the previous year or not, to
Laurent’s knowledge, this was his first.

The wedding was to be a mix of Patran and Veretian customs, the traditions blended to suit both. The groom stood straight and poised, facing the front as the doors opened, pulled opened by the guards on either side, the bride entering.

She was beautiful, from an objective standpoint. Her hair was piled high, her dress simple in tones but Veretian in its extravagance, delicate designed woven into her sleeves, spiraling down the front. She was covered in jewels, gifts from her family and her future groom. Gems woven into her hair and diamonds hanging down her ears. Both of her wrists were adorned in layers of bracelets, some extending down in chains that wrapped around her fingers.

On Laurent’s own head was his crown, as opposed to the circlet which he typically wore, unless the occasion called for otherwise. It was heavy on Laurent’s head, foreign, a feeling he was not yet acclimated to. Damianos wore his own crown like he was born to balance the weight on his head.

The bride held a candle between two hands, holding it against her chest as she walked the length of the room gracefully. The candle illuminated her features, flickering against her eyes that did not stray from the dais. The room was quiet as she ascended the steps, stopping only when she faced her betrothed.

They stood before each other, their eyes still locked as the bride tipped her candle forward, the flame catching on the wick of the groom’s own candle, lighting his as well. Neither said anything for a moment, nothing between them but the small sparks of fire.

The groom was pouring wine into the goblet, holding it out to the bride to drink before taking a sip of his own. Laurent watched the way the bride drank slowly, her eyes never lowering as their hands brushed, the groom looking at her in a similar way, everyone else a minor inconvenience, an afterthought.

They were a political arrangement, this much Laurent knew. One of interest and personal gain. However, their uninterrupted glances said otherwise. Their letters had been monitored, their interactions chaperoned, but Laurent knew it was more than his simple intuition that was picking up on something else.

It was something Laurent had never understood, and never cared to ponder. Marriages were political and logical. Laurent remembered the conversations about this, his deep-rooted memories that were not often visited, and never shared.

“I don’t understand it.”

“Don’t understand what?” Auguste asked. He looked up from the chessboard, entirely abandoning whatever strategy was passing through his mind when he saw the way Laurent was sitting in his chair, rolling the queen between his palms.

“Marriages,” Laurent said.

“You don’t understand why people get married?” Auguste asked.

“Of course I understand that, Auguste,” Laurent said dryly, setting his piece back. “People get married to secure alliances.”

Auguste let out a breath of laughter which Laurent didn’t understand, because nothing he said was funny. “That’s not the only reason, Laurent.”
“And heirs,” Laurent added.

“Well, yes,” Auguste said. “But there is more to it than that. Some people fall in love. They meet someone they want to share the rest of their lives with. Someone they can share their hearts with.”

Laurent wrinkled his nose. That sounded like something out of his fiction stories, which was both unrealistic and unappealing.

Auguste laughed freely now. “You don’t agree?”

“You do?”

“I suppose I do.”

Laurent pulled his knee up to his chest, wrapping his arms around it and leaning his weight forward, their chess game entirely forgotten. “Do you... want to get married?”

Auguste smiled at Laurent softly. “One day, yes,” he said. “To the right person.”

Laurent nibbled at his lip. “Father would have to approve.”

“Father is the king,” Auguste said. “Of course he would. But your approval would matter most to me.”

Laurent shrugged, which he knew wasn’t an appropriate response.

Auguste leaned forward, touching Laurent’s chin with his knuckle “Perhaps you will get married one day as well,” he said.

Laurent looked at him flatly. “No, thank you.”

Auguste pulled his knee up to his chest, mirroring Laurent’s position. It was very un-princely, but they did not have to be princes when they were together. “And if I will have heirs, what will you have?”

Laurent lifted his shoulders. “Books.”

Auguste laughed again, nodding his head as he straightened himself, returning his attention to the chessboard before them.

“If that is what you want,” he said. “But one day you might meet someone who makes you happy, who you want to share your life with.”

Laurent watched as the bride and groom dipped their fingers into the bowl of water, touching each other on the temples so that the water trickled down their faces slowly. No portion of the wedding had any significant Akielon traditions, but Damianos was looking on respectfully as if he was watching rituals from his own culture.

The officiate stepped forward, producing the deep, satin ribbon from the table and lifting a palm, indicating for them to lift their hands.

“Please,” he said. “Take each other’s hands.”

Laurent watched as they lifted their palms and clasped each other, one on top of the other so that anyone at a far distance could not tell them apart. The officiate brought the ribbon below theirs hands and crossed the ends over the top, tying it together deftly so that they were bound together, unable to
pull apart. Laurent remembered this as well, watching from the crowd in wide-eyed curiosity as men and women willingly gave their hands to be tethered together. Laurent glanced aside, and out of the corner of his eye saw Damianos watching carefully, his own hands clasped as if bound by ribbon.

“In the presence of friends and families,” said the officiate. “Our kings and queens. I now bind your hands together, to symbolize your new union of love, trust and friendship.” He made the final loop, pulling tightly before removing his own hands. “Please look upon one another and pledge your vows to seal your union.”

The entire room was as silent as ever. Laurent glanced off the dais to see all the couples in the crowds. Friends. Mothers with children on their laps, people with their arms around each other. Everyone was quiet, straining to hear the traditional vows.

The bride went first, looking up at the groom over their hands.

“You found me in a chasm of darkness, tethering me together with flesh and blood.”

The groom said, “let us walk together through this path so that our shadows will be one, our souls forever bound.”

“I will know no solitude and fear no unknown, for you will light my way in darkness.”

“May we always need one another, not to fill emptiness but to know our fullness.”

The bride said, “your cup will never empty, for I will be your wine.”

The last part was spoken in unison, their eyes locked as securely as their fingers as they said the final line, their words ringing out in the long hall.

“One heart, beating between two hands.”

There was no applause, no reactions, the moment of solidarity persisting as the intimacy of their words and eyes lingered in everyone’s minds.

“Let it be known that Aline of Vere and Odin of Patras are one heart, one flesh, one soul, for all eternity.”

The feast was in full swing. If the Patrans thought the first banquet had been impressive, they had seen nothing yet. Every table was covered in platters of all food imaginable, barrels upon barrels of wine broken out. There was the loud, boisterous sound of talking and laughing, groups of people grabbing each other by the hands and pulling one another out to dance. People were banging on the table with their palms and fists, drunkenly singing along to songs that did not even have words, all the while more food and drink being passed around.

The feast had started off calm, for the most part. The newly wed bride and groom and been served the customary pie to their elevated table, larger than any that would be served at a regular banquet. They had sat on two lifted seats as gifts had been offered to them, and they had performed the traditional dance in the center of the room before everyone. Once they had finished and sat back down, an already drunk Patran called out a song, and from then on the room had been thrown into spirits so high, you would think a fort had just been taken.

Laurent was outside, alone, seated on a bench with his hands clasped in his lap. It had been too hot, the music too loud. Torveld was growing irritating, and truth be told, Laurent needed to step away
and just breathe.

He needed to think.

He looked out to the large stretch of grass and trees, inhaling the soothing scent of roses around him. The air was a welcome chill on his heated skin, the silence calming him significantly. He pushed his hair out of his eyes, running his fingers along the stone of the bench, tapping them mindlessly against his knee.

Laurent heard the sounds of footsteps then. Not the heavy crunch against leaves that his own boots made. The soft, weightless steps that could only come from bare feet, or sandals. Laurent felt an odd, foreign pressure in his chest. He didn’t understand it, and assumed it was not dissimilar to having a horse step on his ribcage.

“Oh,” he said, looking over his shoulder to where Damianos was standing, looking at him. “You.”

Damianos had stopped in his place, looking from Laurent to the palace, and back to Laurent. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know you were out here.”

Laurent raised a brow.

“I didn’t,” he repeated. “I wasn’t sure where you were, but I needed air.” He looked around their surroundings before adding, “I like the gardens at night.”

So did Laurent. He looked at Damianos blankly, taking in the way he seemed to be holding himself carefully, ready to turn back and leave if Laurent wanted him to.

“You can stay,” Laurent said, turning back so he was looking forward.

Damianos did nothing at first. Laurent heard only silence for a moment, then another, but then Damianos was stepping forward and around the bench, sitting beside Laurent a few inches away from him. Neither of them said anything, simply looking out over the flowerbeds of jasmine and magnolia, twisting around trees and creating paths for couples to stroll down in arms. Laurent took in a mouthful of air, letting it fill his lungs.

Eventually Damianos asked, “you weren’t enjoying the festivities?”

“I was enjoying them just fine,” Laurent said. “I just wanted a moment to myself.”

“I can leave,” Damianos said. “If you want.”

“I told you to stay.”

It was quiet again. This time, it was Laurent who broke the silence.

“I showed Torgier and Freya’s children around the palace,” he said. “Earlier today. They had been asking about it at the masquerade, wondering if someone could take them for a tour of the grounds. I figured it best that one of us showed them around.”

“That was the best way,” Damianos agreed, nodding. “I would have gone with you, had I known.”

“Tryphena inquired about your whereabouts,” Laurent said, leaning his weight back on his hands. “Multiple times.”

Damianos was gazing at Laurent, looking at him in that way that meant he had something on his mind, and was trying desperately not to let his emotions show on his face.
“Did she,” Damianos said.

“Yes.”

Damianos hummed, but said nothing else on the matter.

“She is very pretty,” Laurent said listlessly. At least he thought she was, if you enjoyed that sort of company.

“Is she?” Damianos asked. “I haven’t noticed.”

“Yes, you have.”

“Believe me,” Damianos said. “She is the last person on my mind.”

Laurent tilted his head. “Because she is not blond?”

Damianos looked at him in a similar fashion.

“No,” he said.

Damianos’ eyes were on Laurent, boring into him in a way that no one else dared to try. Laurent felt that same unwelcome weight, pushing against his chest. Rather analyze it like he tended to, he put his eyes elsewhere.

“When did you go?” Damianos asked, after a beat where Laurent stayed mute.

“Midmorning,” Laurent replied, watching as a bird flew from one branch to the next, its dark wings barely visible against the night sky. “I came to collect you from your rooms, before. You weren’t there.”

After a pause, “I didn’t know,” Damianos said. “I must have been training with Nikandros.”

Laurent gave him a sidelong glance. “Do you do anything else?”


Laurent let out a breath of laughter, looking up at the sky. It was past midnight, and they were blanketed in stars.

“It’s become a routine for us,” Damianos continued. “When we were kids, we would sneak away from our lessons and go wrestle, or practice spear throwing in the training arena. He was always better at me than that,” he added, a little bashfully.

“Auguste would do the same thing,” Laurent said. “Abandoning his tutors in favor of sports.”

There was a low, sharp inhale, but otherwise no reply. Laurent looked to Damianos, expecting him to be looking up at the stars as well but instead found a pair of brown eyes on him, large and unblinking. In some distant, periphery part of his mind, he heard the sound of crickets.

Laurent opened his mouth, unsure what he planned to say but knowing one of them had to speak. Before he could, he heard another sound of footsteps. It was different than the first. Loud. Obtrusive.

They both looked over their shoulder to see a servant Laurent did not recognize, clasping his hands together and trying very hard not to appear out of breath.
“Exalted,” he said. “Your Highness. My apologies for interrupting, but you are wanted.”

“We’re speaking,” Laurent said.

The servant flushed. “Commander Makedon has sent me, Your Highness. He said you would be enthusiastic to come.”

Damianos sighed, but there was a bit of amusement there as well. “Thank you,” he said to the servant, motioning with his hand that he could take his leave. The servant bowed briefly before turning back for the palace. Laurent looked at him questioningly.

“He has broken out the griva,” Damianos explained.

“Lovely,” Laurent replied. “I have been waiting for this delight.”

“You don’t have to drink,” Damianos said.

Laurent quirked a brow at him. “Do you think I do anything I don’t want to?” he asked.

Damianos seemed to consider this for a second before lifting a shoulder slowly. “Well, if you think you can handle it…”

Laurent stood from the bench. “Let’s go.”

They were back inside the hall, the noise hitting Laurent all at once like a solid wall. Laurent already felt reluctance stirring, thinking of many different things he would rather be doing that drinking with a rowdy group of Akielons, but trudged forward nonetheless. He and Damianos walked around the clusters of people, and it only took about a minute before they were spotted.

“Laurent!”

Laurent looked to the direction of the voice and saw Makedon sitting at a long table, beckoning him and Damianos over with his hand. Laurent contained his sigh as he made for their direction, Damianos on his heels.

Makedon appeared to be the pinnacle of all of Laurent’s expectations of Akielons prior to becoming acquainted with any of them, and in many ways he did measure up. He was gruff and brutish. He was loud, and always seemed to be minutes away from instigating an argument with someone, just so he could have an excuse to fight.

But then around Laurent, he was oddly calm, and even jovial. Laurent would go as far as to say that he treated Laurent with genuine respect. While Damianos had told him that they had some form of comradery between them, it had been impossible for Laurent to wrap his mind around. Looking at that bull of a man now, Laurent had absolutely no idea what they could have possibly bonded over, much like with Nikandros.

Makedon clapped Laurent on the shoulder as he lowered himself in the chair beside him, which Laurent weathered. Apparently, slapping someone on the back was how grown Akielon men showed their affection.

Laurent sat with Makedon and Damianos on either side of him, and found that Jord, Pallas and Lazar were also seated at the table, though Laurent wasn’t quite sure how this group had formed. There were other people sitting with them, men from Makedon’s retinue that Laurent didn’t know, but he
did recognize some of them from the previous night.

There were goblets all around them, some empty and some used, some scattered across the table. There were half empty pitchers of wine, and multiple clear-glassed pitchers holding an oddly colored liquid that Laurent had yet to see. Makedon poured himself first, which amused Laurent more than anything, and Laurent took the pitcher from him after, filling his own goblet to the rim. The men around the table reached for the pitchers and filled their own goblets, and eventually they were all holding a drink, lifting it in the same general direction.

“To the alliance,” Pallas said, and there was a chorus of murmured responses as everyone tipped their goblets forward. *To the alliance.*

Laurent brought the goblet to his lips, steeled himself, and took the entire contents down his throat in one large, determined gulp.

There was a brief moment where Laurent seriously considered that he had just drunk poison, and he put all of his efforts into schooling his features as he set the goblet down on the table heavily. He glanced around without turning his head to see if anyone’s expression mirrored the revulsion he felt, but everyone looked entirely fine, if not satisfied.

Makedon was grinning, and Laurent knew he was in for a long night. He reached forward for the pitcher of swill and topped off both his and Laurent’s goblets, pushing Laurent’s towards him after.

“Again.”
“It tastes vile,” Laurent said, his hand thrown above his head.

“You already knew this,” Damen said, settling against the headboard and looking down at Laurent who was on his back, one of his legs stretched out on his side. “I don’t know why you continue to drink it.”

Laurent lowered his hand, his head lolling to the side so he could look up at Damen. His gaze suggested that Damen’s words were absurd.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Damen said. “Makedon would favor you even if you banned griva from the entire kingdom.”

“There’s an idea,” Laurent replied, bringing his arm over his head. He shifted his body on the bed, rubbing his back into the soft mattress. “He is all bravado and show,” Laurent continued, muttering into his sleeve. “All it takes to win a proud Akielon over is to drink recklessly like the youth.”

Damen smiled down at him, thumbing his cheek which Laurent swatted away gracelessly. “I think you forget how young you are.”

“There are merely five years between us, Damen,” he said. “Don’t be pompous.” And then as he rubbed his temple, “stop talking so loudly.”

Damen, who was not speaking even remotely above his usual tone felt his smile grow. “Sorry,” he said, sweeping the hair off of Laurent’s forehead. Laurent leaned his face into Damen’s hand like a cat, which Damen thought he would not appreciate, even in his inebriated state. “Why don’t you undress and lay down properly?”

Laurent made a low sound, groaning impatiently before pushing himself up, sitting back on his knees. He blinked multiple times, looking around the room and then at Damen like he forgot why he had sat up. Damen lifted a brow, motioning to his jacket.

Laurent lifted his arm and glared down at his wrist, frowning at all the laces that crossed over one another, spanning up until his elbow. His expression pinched as he tugged at one aimlessly.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

Damen laughed as Laurent turned his arm around, looking to the back of it like the solution would be there. He waited a few seconds to see where this would progressive, and motioned forward when it did not.

“Come here,” he said. “I’ll help you.”

Expecting Laurent to extend his arm outward, Damen let out a surprised noise when Laurent climbed into his lap, dropping his weight down heavily. He lifted his wrist to Damen’s face, far too close for him to be able to maneuver anything. Damen took his arm in his hands and moved him away slightly, and then set to pulling them apart with ease, long ago becoming accustomed to this.

“Why are there so many laces,” Laurent said.

“An excellent question,” Damen replied as he switched to the other arm. “We can discuss it seriously when you’re sober. I would love to hear your thoughts on the matter.” He set Laurent’s
hand down when he finished, unlacing the front of his jacket next. Laurent rested his hand on Damen’s thigh.

Damen opened the jacket and pushed it off his shoulders, tossing it aside onto one of the couches in their room. He looked at Laurent pointedly.

“You’ll need to get off for me to remove the rest.”

“I’m comfortable,” Laurent said. He felt Laurent’s hand inch upwards. “I’m glad you don’t wear Veretian clothing.”


“Chitons are ridiculous,” Laurent continued as if Damen hadn’t spoken. “There’s so much skin. It’s shameless.”

“You don’t like it?” Damen asked.

“It’s much easier to remove than Veretian clothing,” Laurent said, fiddling now with the pin on Damen’s shoulder. Damen intercepted his hand, pulling it away gently.

“You are very drunk,” Damen said.

“There was a lot of griva,” Laurent nodded in agreement.

“Perhaps you should sleep,” Damen suggested.

“I’m not tired,” Laurent said. “I don’t want to sleep.” He shifted thoughtlessly in Damen’s lap, his mind too muddled from alcohol to notice Damen’s reaction.

“Your head will likely hurt soon,” Damen tried. “You’ll feel better with sleep.”

“I feel fine now,” Laurent said. He tried for Damen’s pin again.

Damen sighed, reminding himself of how uninhibited Laurent could get when he was intoxicated. He brought his hands to Laurent’s waist and pushed, taking him off of his lap and turning him onto his back gently but firmly. Laurent gazed up at him, his leg pushed up a bit to the side, the laces on his undershirt trailing.

“Not tonight,” Damen said.

Laurent quirked his brow, which he somehow managed effortlessly even after a night of drinking. “Why?”

“You know why.”

Laurent rolled his eyes back, letting out a huff. “Don’t be a bore.”

Damen reclined his body next to Laurent’s, holding himself up on an elbow. He stretched his legs out, pushing his hand into his hair. He said nothing.

“Next time,” Laurent said. “Would you like a full description on how I would like the night to end before I touch my goblet?”

“Preferably.”
Laurent-who somehow managed sarcasm in his state- leveled Damen with a side-glance, his gaze unamused. Damen couldn’t help the way the side of his lip curved upwards, and eventually, saw Laurent’s lips curve as well. It was only a minute before the two of them were laughing at each other like it was the most natural thing in the world.

The night was turning out to be far longer than Damen had expected.

Damen wasn’t sure how long they had sat there at that table, cups continuously being passed around, jokes being made, the pitchers of griva somehow proving bottomless. Damen had taken the initial cup offered to him, drinking more out of politeness rather anything, to give the men the satisfaction of comradery, of sharing a drink with their king. But Damen was a large man with a high tolerance for alcohol. He was hardly at all affected by what he had drunk.

Laurent, on the other hand.

The entire ordeal had started out as Damen had assumed it would. Some time over the past two years of Laurent and Makedon’s drinking ventures, Makedon had begun to skip the wine altogether and go straight to the griva. Just as he had the first time he had tasted it, Laurent had drank it effortlessly, tossing the drink down like it was water, his expression giving nothing away. Damen knew Laurent’s aversion to it, and he watched carefully as Laurent took it back, setting his goblet down wordlessly for Makedon to refill him.

Laurent didn’t have to drink. He was well past the point of trying to prove himself to these men, having long ago garnered their respect. While Laurent may have not remembered it, he was an intelligent person. Surely he had observed their open approval of him and deduced that he had won them over. If he was drinking now, it was because he wanted to. Or because he was curious. Or because he was Laurent, and therefore liked to do things that made sense to no one but him.

Two cups had led to three. By that point the men had lost all sense of composure around their kings and were speaking freely, all sense of inhibitions and filtering long forgotten. One of Makedon’s men Eros had commented on the slender legs of the bride’s handmaiden. Pallas had countered that a man’s muscular legs were far more preferable, using his hands to mime the action of grabbing hold of something. Lazar had grinned lazily, slinging his arm around the back of Pallas’ chair. Laurent had drained his goblet, his legs stretching out in front of him.

The fourth cup was poured, cheers to the bride and groom and their marital bed all around. One of Torgier’s sons joined the table then, peering into the pitchers with a skeptical look.

“What is it?” he had asked.

“Liquid waste,” Laurent replied seriously, which caused Makedon to laugh boisterously with a hand slapping the table, and then refill Laurent’s goblet before he had finished it. By the end of that round, Laurent was slightly more reclined in his seat.

It was then the fifth cup of the night. By that point some of the men had left, others joining. More food had been brought to the table, everyone entirely abandoning cutlery and lifting chicken legs to their mouths with their hands, scooping rice and vegetables up between fingers. Someone across the table called out for Makedon, momentarily diverting his attention and leaving Laurent to gaze off into the distance, blinking heavily as if each one took thought and concentration.

Damen knew it was likely that no one else was aware of Laurent’s intoxicated state, being that it was not nearly as noticeable as it was in everyone else. While most people tended to grow increasingly louder the more alcohol they consumed, Laurent was quite the opposite. It was the way he became subdued, still holding himself poised but with more languor. It was the slight flush to his cheeks that
some would accredit to the hot, overstuffed room. The slightly unfocused look in his eyes that could easily be due to the late hour.

It could be. It was not.

Laurent’s tolerance level had increased significantly over the years. While Damen was fairly sure he could stand on his own now, he knew he was far from a clear head. Damen found himself with his wrist on the table’s edge, fingers dangling, waiting to see how the events plaid out.

Laurent’s eyes occasionally swung to Damen’s direction, settling there for a moment with a slight gaze, but he put them elsewhere each time he found Damen already looking at him.

It happened quite often. Damen looked nowhere else the entire night.

Eventually Makedon slammed his goblet down, slapping both hands to his knees. He rose from his chair, nodding his head to everyone still present, which was his sign of departure.

Damen looked around the rest of the table, taking in the groups of people remaining. Some people were speaking wildly and animatedly, some were still drinking, mixing the griva with the wine, a mistake they would regret come morning. As Damen’s eyes roamed the room, he felt a hand rest on his shoulder, rather heavily.

Damen started, turning his head quickly, surprise temporarily overwhelming him when he came face to face with Laurent who did not look away when his and Damen’s eyes met.

“Let’s go,” Laurent said.

“Go?” Damen echoed, only realizing after that it was probably the wrong thing to say around others.

Rather respond, Laurent tightened his grip on Damen’s shoulder and used the hold as leverage to push his body from his chair. As Damen assumed he could stand on his own, though he only let go after a few seconds.

“Come, Damen.”

Damen stood without any further thought, following behind Laurent like he was being tugged by a string. He knew they should probably acknowledge the men in some way before they departed, but Laurent was not paying anyone else any attention, and Damen couldn’t force himself to either.

They exited the room slowly, Laurent not exactly unsteady on his feet but not walking with his usual easy stride and grace either. Damen stood close to him in case he reached a point where he needed Damen to support his weight. Their sides were touching. Laurent didn’t seem to notice.

They made their way through the halls, no words between them as they passed through the archways. Laurent did nothing to fill the silence, and Damen was too focused on the warmth emitting from Laurent’s body to care.

Eventually they made their way through the portion of the palace thronged with people, entering the more private wing of the palace that only a limited amount of people were allowed entry unless given explicit permission. Their respective rooms were both in this wing, Damen’s coming first before Laurent’s, further down.

It was chillingly quiet as they entered the long, narrow corridor, the candles lining the walls illuminating the marble and making it feel longer. It was odd how the deafening noise of the banquet disappeared once they passed a barrier, everything else drowning out but the sound of Laurent’s
boots against the floor, Damen’s pulse as loud and rhythmic as their joined steps.

“You were wrong.”

It came suddenly, unprompted. Damen turned his head and saw that Laurent had stopped walking. He was standing beside him in the hall, the lanterns flickering gold around them.

“Or perhaps, I was wrong.” Laurent continued, before Damen could speak. He was looking at Damen, but he was not seeing him. He was frowning, his brows pinched as if something was confusing him. His words, or something else entirely.

“Sometimes I think I know you,” Laurent said, as if he was continuing a conversation that they had previously been having. Damen gazed at him wordlessly, at the shallow movements of his chest and his slow breaths, and his heart stuttered in his own body when he understood. “I think I know everything, and then you-“

He stopped. He looked up at Damen, who felt as if the entire hall would quake if he breathed too loud. It was too quiet in this section of the palace, and the only movements around them were the flickering of shadows that the flames cast on their faces.

“Laurent,” Damen pushed out, but he found that he didn’t know what to say.

Laurent’s eyes were unfocused as he took a step forward, and it took all the strength that Damen possessed to force himself to take a step back. He closed his eyes. Swallowed. Forced them open.

“Laurent,” Damen said again. “You should- sleep.”

“We’re speaking,” Laurent said.

“No now,“ Damen said. He felt every breath push against his chest.

His words seemed to amuse Laurent, who’s mouth quirked up a little crookedly. “Why not?” he said. “We’re alone.”

Damen thought of multiple cups of griva, of Laurent’s tight grip as he lifted the cup to his lips. He thought of interrupted conversations, of masks and gardens. Above all, he thought of how Laurent never said anything he didn’t want to when he was in possession of a clear head.

Damen made himself put more space between them, a movement that did not slip Laurent’s muddled attention but was the right thing to do.

“Not- like this,” Damen said.

“This?”

“You’ve had too much to drink,” Damen said. “I only want you to say what you want me to know.”

The flames wavered, darkening the space between them for a moment. Laurent’s amused gaze dissolved, and his features took shape in the form of something new that Damen could not understand. He looked at Damen for several breathless moments before blinking once, and that single flicker acted to wipe away all emotion from his face.

“I know the way from here,” he said. “Goodnight.”
The morning started slow. For once, Damen kept himself in solitude to allow the events of the previous night to settle in his mind.

Walking away form Laurent at the end of the night had almost felt like their parting at the masquerade, after their dance had come to an end, their few precious moments. Damen remembered the way Laurent had been the first to pull away, any vulnerability between them disintegrating as Laurent took control over himself. Damen had still felt the warmth in his body from the press of their chests, and he had held on to the look in Laurent’s gaze for as long as he could before Laurent looked away, his defenses being rebuilt like preparations for a siege.

But unlike that night, Damen felt something else as he left Laurent in the hall, unsteady and unblinking. Despite the poignant ache he felt, there was something else there, taking up a spot in Damen’s chest. Half muddled words and glazed blue eyes, looking at Damen for an answer that Damen could not give, only feel. It had blanketed him as he slept and woke him up with something new, threatening to over brim inside him.

Damen heard three loud knocks on the door as he was dabbing his chest dry. He reached for a towel and wrapped it loosely around his waist, walking out of the antechamber and into the main room, pulling the door open to see Nikandros, his hands clasped behind his back. Damen took a step into the room, waving him in.

“It’s early,” Nikandros said as he covered the handle with his hand, shutting the door before Damen could himself. He looked at the water dripping down Damen’s body. “Have you already been to train?”

“No,” Damen replied, unraveling the towel in one pull. He used it to swipe at his skin as he walked into his bedchambers, along his arms and down his abdomen. “We have to see the Patran family off soon. I figured it best I bathe first.”

Nikandros hummed, following Damen through the alcove and perching himself down on one of the reclining couches by the vanity. He pressed his elbows to his knees, leaning his weight forward as he watched as Damen dried his body off before opening one of his drawers, pulling out a chiton.

“Why are you grinning?” Nikandros asked.

Damen closed the drawer, looking at Nikandros in the mirror above him. “I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Allright,” Damen said, pulling the chiton on. He fastened the hidden pin at his waist before clasping the material at his shoulder, reaching for his red cape. “Would you prefer I be stoic?”

“Of course not,” Nikandros frowned. “I just find it odd that you’re in such good spirits when nothing has happened.”

“My greatest friend has come to see me,” Damen replied, clapping Nikandros on the shoulder. “How could I not be thrilled?”

Nikandros looked at Damen in a way that suggested that he would have either rolled his eyes or pushed Damen’s hand off in mock exasperation, had he not been his king. Not that Damen would have minded, with Nikandros.

Damen removed his hand, bringing his hands around his back and fastening the cape over his shoulders, clasping it in place with his lion’s pin. He began to look for his laurels which one of the servants had put away for him when he opted for his crown for the wedding ceremony.
“How is Laurent?” Nikandros asked, the casual tone of his voice too noticeable to be natural. It was something Laurent always pointed out that Damen did as well, and one of the clues of falsity he had tried to teach Damen over the years.

“Good,” Damen replied. He could hear the smile in his voice.

“Damen,” Nikandros muttered, rubbing his face.

“What?” Damen said, setting the laurels atop his head, arranging his hair around it. He looked at Nikandros as he did, who was looking at Damen with an undecipherable look.

“Come,” Damen’s said, clapping him on the shoulder again. “I am meeting him at his rooms. You can walk with me.”

Nikandros didn’t reply as he gave Damen another one of his signature stares, putting his hands on his knees and pushing himself up. Together they left the room and stepped out, walking through the hall in comfortable silence as they made for Laurent’s chambers which no more than a few minutes away. When they arrived it was Damen who knocked, leaning his shoulder on the doorframe.

It took a few minutes for Laurent to arrive, as if he was in the middle of something when they knocked. Eventually his steps rung out, wood creaking as the door came open and then he was there, looking forward with a wordless stare.

“Good morning,” Damen said.

Laurent paused as if deciphering the words, or a hidden meaning behind them. His hand was on the door handle, his fingers curved. Instead of answering his eyes moved slowly, landing on Nikandros.

“Why are you here?”

“I don’t know,” Nikandros said, looking to Damen.

Damen was only looking at Laurent. “Are you ready?”

Laurent looked down at his immaculately laced clothing, from the tips of his boots to the circlet on his head. “No,” he replied. “Let me get dressed.” He stepped forward and shut the door, stepping between Damen and Nikandros and walking before either of them could fall into step beside him. Damen’s lips twitched, looking to Nikandros to see if he felt equally jovial.

Nikandros looked at him flatly. “I will never understand you,” he muttered, walking after Laurent. Damen walked after them, stepping in between Laurent and Nikandros. Neither of them spoke and rather than try to fill the silence, Damen let his mind wander. He had seen Laurent drink and experienced the aftermath of it enough times that he knew the way Laurent’s body tended to react to alcohol. Comparatively, he had drunk far more in the past and his tolerance had only increased. Damen felt it safe to assume that he had a clear memory of the entire night. That only seemed to please Damen more.

“Did you enjoy the festivities, Your Highness?” Nikandros asked, taking it upon himself to offer conversation.

“They were eventful,” Laurent replied.

“I was preoccupied towards the end,” Nikandros said, speaking to no one in particular now. “How was the griva? It’s been quite I while since I drank with Makedon.”
Damen felt like he was holding his breath as he waited to hear Laurent’s response. He chanced a glance at Laurent’s direction at his left and saw him looking forward, unwaveringly. It took a second before Damen realized he had not answered because he did not plan to.

“The same as always,” Damen said.

“And how did your night end?” Nikandros asked Damen, looking at him playfully. “It is a shame I was not there to watch anyone attempt to support your weight.”

“I did not drink,” Damen replied. “Much.”

“And you, Your Highness?” Nikandros asked. Damen wasn’t sure if it was to be inclusive, or if he was attempting to implement what had become typical conversation between them in a natural way.

“You Akielons have poor taste,” was all Laurent said. He made the sharp turn into the next hall before either of them reached the corner. Damen and Nikandros followed and at that, they made it to the center of the palace.

The three of them had arrived there first, as it was protocol to greet your guests and to see them off. The timing amounted to Damen, Laurent and Nikandros standing by a pillar, everyone looking at a different direction. Damen was grateful that no one was around, as the nearly awkward silence was a large contrast to the ease that had been between them.

Typically, Laurent would be picking on Nikandros, Damen would be halfheartedly chastising him and Nikandros would be seeking out the nearest escape route. Now, Nikandros gazed off into the distance, Damen tried not to gaze into blue eyes and Laurent found the marble particularly interesting.

They heard footsteps, and Damen looked up to see the family approaching through the hall, their shadows following them as they walked in unison. Torgier and Freya at the front, Torveld a step behind, and their children trailing behind them. Servants followed, bags in hand.

“Torgier,” Damen said, stepping towards them, Laurent at his side. “Freya.”

“Damianos,” Torgier said, clasping Damen’s hand. He set his attentions on Laurent next, and they all exchanged the required niceties.

“Kyros,” Freya said, dipping once when she saw Nikandros.

“Your Highness,” Nikandros said. It was not necessary for anyone else to see the royal family off, but Nikandros was high enough in status that it would not be seen as disrespectful. “It is a shame to see your family go.”

“We have so enjoyed the palace,” Freya said. She motioned forward with her hand, her children lining up beside her. Torveld stepped up on Torgier’s other side.

“That is very pleasing to hear,” Damen smiled. “Your presence will be very much missed.”

“The bride and groom left for Patras early this morning,” Laurent said, which Damen wasn’t sure how he knew. “We look forward to the new possibilities their union will bring us.”

“And we look forward to your long awaited arrival in Patras,” Torveld said.

“Yes,” Torgier agreed. “It would bring us great honor to repay your hospitality.”
“The honor was all ours,” Damen said. “But we look forward to the next time we will meet.”

“Your Highness,” One of Torgier’s sons said, looking at Laurent. “If you don’t mind, I had a few questions about the hunt we discussed yesterday, before the ceremony.” Laurent shook his head, extending a hand to the end of the hall. The two of them stepped aside and began to speak between them.

Torgier and Freya had stepped away as well, his arm around her waist as they discussed something in hushed tones. Torveld initiated conversation with his two nephews about the previous few days, and Damen and Nikandros were left with Torgier’s daughter Tryphena.

“Have the two of you been acquainted long?” Tryphena asked, looking between Damen and Nikandros. She had seen them together multiple times since the Patrans had arrived to Delpha.

“We have been friends since we were boys,” Damen replied.

“How lovely,” she said, her expression seemingly genuine. “It must be so nice to grow up with someone you can trust.”

“We are very fortunate,” Damen agreed.

“And king Laurent?” Tryphena asked, looking to Nikandros. “Have the two of you become acquainted as well?”

Damen let out a small breath of laughter, though it was mostly accredited to her brazenness. He looked at Nikandros with an amused lift of his brows, watching the contemplation play out on his face.

“His Highness is an excellent ruler,” Nikandros said, after a stretch of hesitation. “And a fine man. I would not presume to level myself with a king.”

“You wound me, Nikandros,” Laurent said, surprising Damen by suddenly being at their side. “And here I thought we were friends.”

Nikandros opened his mouth to speak, closing it like it was better to not try and outwit Laurent, which was likely the smart decision.

“Do you look forward to your return to your kingdom?” Damen asked, in an attempt to divert the conversation.

“I suppose,” Tryphena said, her dark eyes peering up at Damen. “But I will miss this palace. The men in Patras are not the same as here on the border.”

“No,” Laurent said, which caused Nikandros to sputter before masking it with a cough, looking in the opposite direction. Damen felt something in his stomach tighten, his mind turning hazy for a moment as he willed his gaze to remain neutral. He tried to remind himself of a time where Laurent climbed into his lap for nothing more than verisimilitude, but instead found himself thinking of Laurent’s open gaze from the previous night, in a spot not too far from here.


“Laurent,” Torveld said, stepping towards them. “Damianos. It was a pleasure to see the two of you again. I hope the next time is not so far off, and perhaps in my kingdom.”

“Hopefully,” Laurent replied.
Outside the palace, the horses were saddled and the wagons were prepared. Damen and Laurent said the final goodbyes and well wishes, and then the Patrans were departing, leaving nothing behind them but a cloud of dust, leaving the three of them alone once again.

It was Nikandros who spoke first, turning to face them both. “I am going to the training arena,” he said. “Would either of you like to join me?”

“No,” Laurent said.

“Perhaps I will join you later,” Damen said. Nikandros nodded once before turning down the hall, leaving the two of them alone in the long corridor.

Damen wasn’t sure why he didn’t join Nikandros, as he did wish to implement some form of exercise that day. Instead of following him, he found himself turning to face Laurent. Laurent was watching him like an animal might when approaching a forest trap.

“Will you be training with Jord today?”

After a moment, “no.”

Damen found himself grinning again, causing Laurent’s features to pinch in displeasure. He tried to tamper it down, to no avail.

“You should have a servant fetch you iron tea,” Damen said.

“What.” Dryly.

“Iron tea,” Damen repeated. “You always drink it when you are hungover. It soothes your headache.”

Laurent narrowed his eyes. It was clear to Damen that any reference to the previous night was unwelcome, but Damen could admit to himself that he was not above the slight teasing, though he would not make any comments that would outwardly make Laurent uncomfortable.

“My head is fine,” he said.

“Allright,” Damen said. He had made the suggestion, what Laurent chose to do with it behind Damen’s back was up to him.

Laurent’s eyes settled on Damen for a wordless few seconds, and Damen held himself still as he waited for Laurent to run through whatever thought process he was having. Eventually Laurent broke his gaze, taking a step away.

“I have things to see to,” Laurent said. “But Herode had brought me documents for the schooling center, earlier today. We need to look them over together.”

“I’ll come to your chambers before dinner,” Damen said.

Laurent considered him for another moment before nodding with finality. He had not yet moved, and Damen looked down at him, feeling helpless.

I was wrong.

Sometimes I think I know you. I think I know everything-

“I’ll see you then,” Laurent said.
And then he was gone, and Damen was left in the hall, smiling.

Damen was sitting across from Laurent’s, stacks of papers between them. Old documents and revised ones, certain lines and paragraphs circled and underlined, annotations written beside many. They each had different sections in their hands, looking them over and discussing what had changed. What could still possibly change.

Damen listened to the sweep of papers along the table’s surface, the scribble of the quill against the parchment. His fingers were tapping against the table as he read, his fist pressed to his mouth as he read of the architects outlines and plans.

“Let me see your stack,” Laurent said. Damen looked up as he handed him his pile wordlessly, watching as Laurent sifted though them, his eyes scrolling down the paper until he found whatever it was that he was looking for.

“What are you reading about?” Damen asked, accepting the papers back. He set them down in front of him and folded his forearms, leaning on the table.

“Nothing riveting,” Laurent responded. “Color patterns, tiling and such. I just needed to find the continuation.”

Damen nodded, reaching for an orange in the nearby bowl and extending it to Laurent in invitation. Laurent paused with his quill poised on the paper, looking pointedly at Damen’s hand like he was offering him something he had never seen before. Seconds passed, longer than an action this simple required, and Damen felt his pulse quicken when Laurent took it from him, his eyes on Damen as their fingers touched.

“You never have any,” Laurent said, as he dug his nail into the peel.

“No,” Damen replied, his vision momentarily compromised as Laurent lifted his finger with dripping liquid to his lips. “I don’t have much of a taste for oranges.”

Laurent pulled a segment apart, pushing the peals he had removed aside. “If you’re craving fruit as well,” he said. “Should I have a servant call for apricots?”

And then he paused, the segment halfway to his mouth, his lips already parting for the first bite. He closed his mouth slowly, and Damen’s entire perception became obscure as he watched the frown form on Laurent’s face, his eyes clouding in uncertain confusion.

“I- don’t know why I said that,” Laurent said.

Each heartbeat felt heavy against Damen’s chest, like it was knocking around inside him, trying to come out.

“Apricots are my favorite fruit,” he heard himself say.

Laurent looked at Damen with the same unsettled expression, the orange still in his hand. Damen thought, had it been something solid, his fingers would have been tight around it.

“I didn’t know that,” Laurent said. “The word just came out.”

Damen felt like his entire body was buzzing with something new, and it took all of his strength to keep himself from doing something drastic, like sprinting from the room and searching the entire
You do know that, Damen thought, his throat tight. That fact was already in your mind.

“No,” Damen said, forcing his eyes down and back onto the words in front of him that had lost all appeal. “I’m not hungry.” He felt the heavy gaze still on him, and made himself start reading from the top. If not, he would surely bombard Laurent with a hundred inane questions about miniscule things like produce.

It took Damen three tries before the words started to absorb. He chewed at his lip mindlessly as his eyes scanned the page slowly, taking in the restructured version and trying to recall how it was done originally, and what aspects had been tweaked. He reached for the quill without looking and made a small mark next to one of the points, making a note for himself to discuss it the next time he spoke to the contractors.

It was getting late. They had been here for a while, and had made their way through most of the documents. Dinner should be starting soon, the first one without all of the Patran guests, and surely it would be an odd adjustment, to scale things back again. Damen pulled another parchment in front of himself as he calculated how many less people there would be. He pulled the paper close, lowering his head and beginning to read.

“You should have someone cut your hair.”

It took Damen a moment to realize he had been spoken to, and he felt in his neck the way his head snapped up as soon as the words registered.

Laurent was looking at him over his papers, and it was with unexpected delight that Damen saw the flush that had spread on his cheeks, and the way he looked as if the words had let him without thought.

“What?” Damen said, and it was only then that he realized one of his larger curls had fallen down his forehead and over his eye. He pushed his hands through his hair, but it just fell back right into place.

A muscle in Laurent’s jaw tightened, and his shoulders set as he returned his gaze to his work.

“You look unkempt,” he said, his voice neutral. “It’s unbecoming for a king.”

“Would you like it better shorter?” Damen couldn’t help asking.

Laurent ignored his question, and Damen found himself leaning back in his chair comfortably, dinner long forgotten.
They were in the valley that they enjoyed frequenting, often taking a detour when on their way to the grounds for their new school. It was wide and open, the sky blue and cloudless, plush field of greenery around them. Behind them were rows of trees offering shade and a reprieve from the hot sun. Before them was the lake, long and deep, glistening in the midmorning light. They had not gone there that day as a bypass from their journey. They had simply wanted time alone, and Damen had suggested this very spot.

It was sweltering out, hotter than any day they had endured in those previous weeks. As they sat at the edge of the riverbank, facing the water that would surely feel cool and fresh on heated skin, Damen could feel the sweat trickling down the back of his neck, even in his minimally clothed state. The scorching rays of sun on them were the only reason why Laurent was in equal state of dress.

Damen could not stop looking at him. Balanced on his hands, leaning his weight back, Damen found himself breaking off in the middle of his sentence multiple times, opting to glance beside him rather the view of nature that Laurent was focusing on.

The amount of times that Laurent actively chose to wear a chiton were still so minimal that Damen felt momentarily speechless each time it happened, like a rug had been yanked out from beneath his feet and Damen was seconds away from falling on his back. Laurent continued to act nonchalant about it, simply walking past Damen’s gaping stare and swinging up onto his horse. In his chiton.

“We could swim,” Damen suggested now, nudging his head towards the water.

“We didn’t bring any other clothing,” Laurent said.

“The idea would be to enjoy the relief from clothing,” Damen said. “Or you could go in like that, if you prefer.”

“I’d rather not ride a horse in soaking wet cloth.”

“I’m sure the sun would dry it.”

Laurent turned his head to the side, his gaze amused. “Surely you can be more persuasive than that,” he said. “I’ve seen it in many meetings.”

Damen grinned back at him, his eyes trailing from Laurent’s smile to the exposed line of his neck, down the curve of his bare shoulder. His skin would pink soon, becoming even more sensitive to Damen’s touch.

Laurent’s legs were stretched out in front of him, one flat on the grass, the other slightly bent at the knee. The edge of his skirt hit mid thigh, and the breeze would occasionally disturb it, moving the thin material up even further.

“Damen.”
“What?” Damen said, glancing up.

Laurent shook his head as he faced forward again, stretching both legs evenly. “You act as if you’ve never seen my skin before.” He traced the edge of the cloth with his finger, letting his palm linger on his leg after, moving it down to his knee, his thumb moving in slow, sweeping circles.

Damen pulled his eyes away, focusing instead on the lake. He bent himself forward and scooped up a handful of cool water, leaning his body back and pouring it on his face, immediately feeling some slight relief from the heat. He ran his wet hands through his hair after, pushing it away from his forehead.

“What?” Damen asked Laurent, turning to look at him. He could feel the water moving down his cheeks, dripping off the tip of his chin. Laurent’s eyes were on the trail of water going down his neck. “You’ll feel better.”

Laurent’s eyes moved to the lake before focusing back on Damen, nodding.

Damen hunched his body forward again, scooping up as much of the water as he could in his hands. He turned back to Laurent and moved his body forward slightly, his pulse quickened. It had been well over a year since they had joined the kingdoms, and Damen still felt a thrill of delight from the fact that he could do these small, simple things for Laurent.

Laurent closed his eyes, tipping his head back so that Damen could slowly drip the water on his face, watching as it wet his forehead, down his nose and jaw. He sighed sweetly as the water cooled his face, his lashes wet as his eyes fluttered open. His lips were wet.

Damen reclined his body on the grass comfortably, turning on his side so his head was on Laurent’s lap, looking up at him. Laurent smiled softly as he smoothed Damen’s brow down with his thumb, trailing down the side of his face after. Damen could feel the tips of his hair dripping water on Laurent’s legs.

Damen turned his head just so, pressing his lips to the expanse of Laurent’s thigh, the muscle strong and taught. He brushed his lips slightly higher, grazing the skin right below the edge of his chiton, the slightest nosing.

He felt Laurent’s hand move, his fingers light on the back of his neck.

“We’re out in the open,” Laurent said. His tone was neutral, but Damen felt the way his muscle clenched as Damen ghosted it with another press of his lips.

“It’s never bothered you before,” Damen said, and his voice was all breath as his eyes locked with Laurent’s, his face inching a little bit higher. He felt Laurent’s fingers tighten on his neck, pushed into the shorter hairs there.

“I didn’t say it bothered me,” Laurent said, sending a shock of thrill through Damen’s body as his fingers found their way to the hem of his chiton.

Laurent lost track of how long he had been awake in bed.

The muddled, languorous feeling that came when waking up was long gone, and Laurent had lain there with his face pressed into his pillow for far longer than he was willing to admit. There were things that needed to be done. People he needed to see. Servants waiting to enter his room and do their work, collecting discarded clothing and opening the windows. And Laurent was here, not having moved from the position he had woken up in, long minutes ago.
Laurent rolled himself onto his back, pushing the heel of his hands into his eyes. He had begun to make a habit out of lounging in bed, something that was very unlike him. That, among other things, was starting to become a problem.

It was time to get up. Laurent threw the covers aside and pushed himself up, lifting himself from the bed. The marble was cool against his bare feet as he made his way to one of the large closets, pulling an armful of clothing out. He selected a jacket with lacing in the front so he would not have to bother with calling a servant in to help him dress. He pulled his pants on first, doing the laces up unceremoniously before removing his nightgown and tossing it to the bed. He pulled on a thin undershirt that hung slightly off his body before pushing his hands into the jacket sleeves, tying the laces as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Laurent looked up when he was finished, seeing the mirror that happened to be in front of him. Laurent never spent much time gazing in mirrors, he saw no reason to. Now he allowed himself to look, for no particular reason other than the fact that it was there.

The only notable difference in Laurent’s mind was the length of his hair. The last his memory served, it reached somewhere around his chin. Now, the tips reached just below his shoulders. It was not long, necessarily, but longer than what he had been used to on himself, before everything. The last time Laurent had worn his hair long, he had been a boy, trying to mimic another.

Laurent stepped away from the mirror, finishing with the laces on the inside of each wrist before pulling on his boots. He straightened himself after and gave his bedchambers one sweeping look before walking out into the main room.

Laurent needed to go riding. He would have one of his guards send for breakfast, he would attend to all of his business, and then he would clear his head.

‘And when do you leave for Vask?’ Laurent asked, his eyes continuing the skim the documents in his hands as he and Vannes walked through the corridor.

“Two days hence, Your Highness.”

Laurent nodded his head, flipping to the next page. He had already read these when they were brought to him this morning, and was only giving them a final courtesy glance now.

“These are to my satisfaction,” Laurent said, handing them off to her as they neared one of the passageways to the gardens. “You may add on the revisions you mentioned and bring them to me tonight. Damianos and I will sign them and have them given to you with our seal.”

Vannes accepted the papers from him, folding them over once and slipping them into one of the pockets of her dress. “And where is Exalted?” she asked.

“I haven’t seen him since morning,” Laurent said, though he had yet to see Damianos at all that day. “Perhaps he is with Nikandros.”

Vannes grinned, one eyebrow lifting. She glanced at Laurent in that brazen way she tended to as they strolled through the low hanging vines, the air sweet and light. “He seems to be spending much of his time with the kyros, lately,” she said, her tone inferring to the rest.

Rather mask it like he tended to, Laurent let the amusement he felt show on his face. “Lady Vannes, if you’re enquiring about if I’m feeling uncertainty over where Damen’s interest lies, I can assure you that is not the case.”
Her grin deepened as the stables came into view, and Laurent flicked his fingers in dismissal. Vannes dipped once in acknowledgment before turning for the opposite end of the garden, making her way towards a bench where multiple other women were already seated, entering their circle of palace gossip. Laurent continued down the path until he was met with the familiar sounds and smells that he had not been around in days.

“Your Highness,” the stable boy said, coming into view when he saw Laurent enter. “Shall I saddle up your horse?”

“No,” Laurent replied. “I’ll do it.”

The stable boy nodded. “Of course,” he said. He had been mucking out one of the stalls when he spotted Laurent, and before he turned away he added, “he only arrived a few minutes ago.”

Laurent looked after the retreating back of the stable boy in confusion, squinting slightly when he heard the sound of footsteps on straw. Laurent glanced towards the source of the sound, blinking once when he saw him.

“I’m sorry,” Damianos said, his hand on the back of his neck. “I didn’t realize you were planning to come here.”

“I wanted to ride,” Laurent replied.

“So did I,” Damianos said. He looked back over his shoulder towards his already saddled horse before looking back at Laurent. “Where did you plan on going? I can take a separate route, if you like.”

Laurent gazed up at Damianos, having already become familiar with the way he had to slightly bend his neck back to properly look at him. His eyes flicked over to his own horse that was multiple stalls away, lingering on her before looking forward again.

“It’s fine,” Laurent said. “You can ride with me.”

Damianos blinked twice, rapidly, before he did his best to school his features and reign in any of the blatant emotion that was on his face. “Are you sure?”

Laurent didn’t answer, just made his way down the line of stalls, opening his own and approaching his horse with a gentle hand. He was aware of Damianos standing behind him, his eyes on Laurent’s back as he prepared his horse effortlessly, taking her by the bridle and leading her out, Damianos close behind him.

It was not long before they arrived, reigning in beside each other next to a low tree. Laurent said nothing as he swung off the saddle, keeping his gaze focused and averted as he tethered the bridle to a branch that was jutting out. Laurent knew Damianos had not yet come off his horse because he had not heard the impact of his body on the ground, and he rested a shoulder on the bark, arranging himself in a casual stance. He did not turn his head until he heard Damianos dismount.

“Have you come here before?” Damianos asked, securing his horse beside Laurent’s.

“Yes,” Laurent said, offering no other explanation. He had come here on the few occasions that he needed to get away and clear his mind. In Arles he would have a usual route that he would take, certain places around the palace that he sought comfort and clarity in. the palace in Delfeur had been new to him, and one of the first things he had done was seek out a new place of salvation.
Laurent had been to this stretch of land multiple times now. He enjoyed the seclusion of it, the constant feeling of summer, and the wide, clear view of the lake in front of them. Something about it offered a certain level of serenity that could not be found in the constant bustle of the palace. Laurent inhaled the clean air now, straightening his body when he heard footsteps approach him that made him feel like something unfamiliar was lodged in his throat.

“Do you come often?” Damianos asked, resting a shoulder next to Laurent so that he was facing him, rather the lake. The muscle in his bicep flexed as he crossed his arms loosely. “When I want to.”

Damianos turned his head slightly to gaze at the sweep of green and yellow; his eyes distant with something Laurent could not place. The sun was strong on them, shining down onto the spot they were standing in. Damianos’ eyes were squinted as he looked up at the sky.

“You’ve always liked it here,” he said. “Which surprises me, considering your Veretian roots.”

“Did you know,” Laurent said, “that reptiles actually prefer the warmer weather.”

He surprised himself when hearing that his words held no bite or cynicism. Damianos noticed as well, because he looked back at Laurent with a crooked smile. “So do kittens.”

Laurent felt the way his features flattened in displeasure, his mouth becoming a straight line, his face blank. He consciously made them remain that way when a proper smile spread on Damianos’ face, his dimple deepening in his cheek. He looked down at Laurent with a certain lightness in his eyes, and Laurent allowed himself to linger for a few more seconds before pushing off the tree, walking down the line of grass near the lake.

“I spoke with Vannes,” Laurent said, watching the way the water lapped against the edge of the ground. “She will bring the revised documents to us later tonight.”

“Alright,” Damianos said. He had stepped up beside Laurent and glanced around them again, seeming to be considering something. He glanced at Laurent from the corner of his eye, and then he was bending down, sitting himself down on the grass in a comfortable sprawl, his legs stretched out in front of him, his thighs nearly on display. Laurent felt himself blanch at the sight, and he took an instinctive step back, confusion evident on his face.

“What are you doing?”

Damianos seemed intrigued by his reaction. “Sitting down,” he replied.

Laurent scrunched his nose. “You are on the ground like a toddler. That’s undignified for a king.”

“No one is around.”

Laurent felt his mouth twist. “Are you expecting me to sit as well?”

“You can do whatever you like,” Damianos said, spreading his palms on either side of himself and leaning his weight back. “I’m not forcing you to sit. We can continue to speak with me looking up at you, if you prefer.”

Laurent set his jaw, looking at him flatly. His eyes lowered to the grass again, feeling something odd stir inside stomach. He couldn’t remember the last time he had sat in the grass like a careless child. Truth be told, he most likely had been a child.
His apprehension was ridiculous. It was grass. Laurent kept his face placid as he lowered himself slowly, aware that he was seating himself cautiously like there were shards of broken glass beneath him. Damianos watched as Laurent arranged his limbs carefully, consciously, his lips pursed as he contemplated what to do with his legs.

“I must be having a fever dream,” Damianos said.

“Shut up,” Laurent said, putting his hands in his lap. His pose felt very unnatural.

“Why aren’t you wearing gloves?”

“What?” Laurent said, looking at him.

“Your gloves,” Damianos said, motioning to his thighs where his hands were one atop another. “You never ride without gloves on.”

“Oh,” Laurent said, after a moment. He looked down at his bare fingers before glancing back at him. “The leather is too worn. They’ve become mainly useless.”

“Ah,” Damianos said, facing forward again. He smiled, tilting his head back so the sun hit his exposed neck. “Isn’t this nice?”

“Yes,” Laurent replied. “I love when I can feel dirt staining my pants.”

Damianos lolled his head to the side so he was looking at Laurent. He lifted a shoulder. “Wearing chitons would negate that problem,” he said.

Laurent looked at him, letting the silence stretch out for a few moments before speaking slowly. “Was that meant to be casual?” he asked. He felt his lips twitch.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Damianos said.

“The glaze in your eyes certainly didn’t help your case.”

Damianos very purposely kept his eyes on Laurent’s face as he spoke. “I used to be much worse.”

“I can’t imagine how.”

Damianos lifted himself from his recline, which shifted his body slightly. “I don’t think I could ever fully hide how I feel,” he said, his tone making it sound like it was an admission and not a simple statement of fact. “It is not in my nature.”

“I know,” Laurent said.

“There are worse things that honesty,” Damianos said.

“I know,” Laurent repeated.

That seemed to silence Damianos, who closed his mouth, looking down at the sliver of grass between them. He tapped his fingers on his knees, his brows pinched in the way they tended to when he was thinking seriously of something.

“What?” Laurent asked.

Damianos looked up at him, and Laurent saw the moment he dismissed whatever the thought was from his mind. “Nothing,” he said. He shifted his features into something lighter. “Makedon departed
for Ravenel this morning. He left his regards, and a case of griva.”

“How thoughtful,” Laurent said. “The servants can clean the floors with it.”

Damianos laughed, a low, rich sound. “Don’t be so discordant,” he said. “You seemed to enjoy it the other night.”

“Shut up,” Laurent said again.

Damianos was still smiling at him. It could be seen not only from his mouth, but from the way his eyes crinkled, his entire face unfolding with the easy pleasure. Laurent put his eyes on a cloud above them, focusing on that as he pulled one of his knees up to his chest, setting his chin down on it.

“We’re close to the school grounds,” Laurent remarked. “I recognize the route.”

“Yes,” Damianos confirmed. “It’s around a twenty minute ride, west of here.”

“The architects have advanced in setting the foundation,” Laurent said. “I would like for us to go see their progress, soon.”

“Would you like to go now?”

Laurent pressed his lips together, his eyes following a lily pad, not too far from them. “No,” he said. “Not today.”

“Ohay,” Damianos said softly.

Laurent drew in a tight breath, focusing on that as he turned his body faintly so he was better facing Damianos who had been slightly behind him. He took in his easy sprawl, the way he was sitting there without a care in the world. Comfortably. Contentedly, like this was normal for him.

“What do you do when you come here alone?” Damianos asked.

“Think,” Laurent said. But Damianos already knew that, like he seemed to know many things about Laurent. Things no one else knew, because Laurent did not let them know. Did not want them to know.

It felt as if Laurent’s need for seclusion and a clear mind had been increasing lately, because something inside the palace was compromising his ability to think. Sometimes the solitude helped. Sometimes it made things worse.

Damianos’ eyes were steadily on Laurent’s, holding his gaze with what felt like tangibility. His face was wiped of any of its lingering amusement, replaced with something Laurent had only seen directed at him from the person facing him.

They were siting closer than Laurent initially realized. If either of them moved another inch their knees would be touching, Laurent’s clothed leg against Damianos’ bare skin. A breeze picked up, causing a leaf to move along the grass, brushing against both of their fingers.

The sun was exceptionally bright that day, enough for their cuffs to glimmer out of the corner of Laurent’s eye. Behind him was the lake, where the sun must have been glistening across the surface in a similar way, like a diamond caught in the light. In front of him was Damianos, looking down at him with an expression that said what his words would not.

Laurent was afraid of heights as a child. He had memories of standing in the tallest tower in Arles,
remembering all that Auguste had told him about facing his fears. *They will not go away on their own*, he had said. *You must conquer them yourself.* Laurent would stand at the window, looking down at the people who looked like ants, willing his heart to stop beating so hard.

“Laurent,” Damianos said, gently, like the wind that was tousling his hair.

*I’m not afraid of heights anymore* Laurent wanted to say. Because he was there, and it had been years since he had felt that fear, but somehow, he had found himself back in that tower.

“Laurent,” he said again, his voice softer than before. Part of Laurent wanted him to stop talking, but another part of him needed a voice to pull him out of—this.

Laurent looked at Damianos, and it was the helpless expression he saw reflected back at him that told him this needed to stop.

“We need to get back,” Laurent said, his voice stronger than his resolve. Damianos closed his eyes briefly, and Laurent took the opportunity to pull himself up and away. He faced the water, giving it one last look before turning away and making for the horses, Damianos still seated on the ground, his eyes on his lap.

Laurent untethered his horse in thoughtless yanks, unwinding it from the branch and leading her a few steps away. He set his hand on his horse’s flank, feeling the pounding beneath his palm. He closed his eyes for a moment, focusing on the rhythmic thrumming before opening them, swinging up onto the saddle.

It was time to go.
Damen was walking by the training arena, heading towards the Great Hall to verify a list of things for the banquet that night when he heard a noise. He stopped in his spot, backtracking a few steps and listened for the sound of impact against the ground, followed by a grunt of frustration. Damen grinned, taking the few steps into the large room and leaning his shoulder on the wall, adjusting himself comfortably. It was primarily empty, all benches and props pushed away, lining the walls so as not to get in the way of the two people rolling around in the center of the floor.

“How is it going?” Damen asked.

He did not receive a reply, as Laurent was too busy trying to get out from under Nikandros, and Nikandros was too busy keeping Laurent’s wrists pinned above his head. Damen sauntered into the room, watching in delight as they continued to grapple, Laurent muttering something in unintelligible Veretian.

“You should try the double set move Nikandros showed you the other day,” Damen offered.

“He already did,” Nikandros said, his voice only slightly strained. “Twice.”

That earned Nikandros a boot clad kick to the shin, but it was not enough to get him off, nor did it disturb his footing. Laurent grunted again in frustration, eventually relaxing his muscles and dropping his head back.

“Alright,” he said. “Get off of me.”

Nikandros rolled off of him with ease, and Damen smiled to himself when Nikandros offered Laurent a hand, pulling him up. Laurent righted his jacket and ran his hands through his hair, trying to straighten out his appearance. Damen didn’t understand why, disarray suited him.

Nikandros walked off to one of the benches, lifting a canteen of water to his mouth and taking a long sip. He lowered the bottle after, letting it dangle from loose fingers between his knees.

“Did you go to the banquet hall yet?” Laurent asked, his labored in that way when he tried seeming unaffected.

“Not yet,” Damen said. “I was on my way there when I heard your efforts.”

“Let me bathe,” Laurent said. “We’re done here. I’ll come with you.”

“Already, Your Highness?” Nikandros asked. “You almost had me on my back, that last time.”

“Fuck off,” Laurent said in Akielon.

Damen felt ridiculous by how pleased this entire sceneries made him. Laurent and Nikandros had been training together for weeks, it shouldn’t have felt this wonderful to see them making their own efforts to get along.

“Why didn’t you try that move I taught you where you use your thighs?” Damen asked. “It usually works in pinning someone down.”

“He did,” Nikandros said.

Damen frowned slightly. “It worked on me last night.”
Laurent grinned, tapping Damen’s chest like he thought what Damen said was charming. “I don’t think your mind was on wrestling moves last night.”

Nikandros sputtered on his water, setting down his canteen loudly.

“Are you alright?” Laurent asked.

“Will you be joining Laurent in the baths?” Damen asked.

“No need,” Nikandros replied, lifting himself from the bench. “I don’t see why I would need one, considering I hardly touched the ground.”

Laurent’s eyes narrowed, looking at Nikandros the way that tended to make people shift in their places. He unwound Damen’s arm from around his shoulder, stepping out of his hold.

“Don’t bother waiting for me,” Laurent said, stepping back into the center of the arena. “We’re not done for the day yet.”

Dinner was dwindling down, most of the table’s occupants having left, servants bustling to clear away everything without drawing attention to themselves. Damen and Laurent had been deep in conversation with a handful of courtiers who had sat with them that night, debating different issues that had been circulating throughout the palace. The conversation was both forward and light, so that valid points were made while still maintaining a jovial atmosphere.

Damen and Laurent had happened to agree on most topics, often feeding off of each other’s statements and drawing on points one had made to prove their stance. It was sharp and progressive, and the easy, intuitive back and fourth was so like them that it made Damen’s throat feel tight.

Like that evening’s dinner, the conversation eventually fizzled down. One by one excuses were made, chairs pushed back, and Damen and Laurent were left alone at the table aside from a scant few who had not been involved in the discussion to begin with.

Damen had been reclined comfortably in his seat, his arm on the backrest of his chair so that his fingers were dangling. He could feel beneath the table that Laurent had taken up his usual position, one leg extended outwards. His eyes were following one of the men that had sat with them, now exiting the hall.

“For all of his exuberance, you would think he was on the council,” Laurent said.

“Someone really should take Audin’s place,” Damen said.

Laurent grinned, looking back at Damen. Damen felt his own lips curve as he took a sip of wine.

“Do you want to continue your practice of Akielon tonight?” Damen asked. By this point Laurent’s Akielon was as good as it had once been, but they were speaking Veretian now, and Damen was looking for any excuse to spend more time with him, before the day ended.

The tips of Laurent’s fingers were plying with the rim of his goblet, circling the edge slowly. His lips were in a straight line as he flicked his eyes towards the exit they would take to enter the halls that would lead to Laurent’s chambers. He looked back to Damen.

“It has been around a month.”

Blinking, “what?”
“You said that you and I visited that old tavern once a month,” Laurent elaborated. “In disguise.”

Damen blinked again, waiting for words to catch up with his mind that already felt miles past this conversation. “You want to go back?”

“I said that I did.”

_Not exactly_, Damen thought. Instead he said, “Tonight? Now?”

Laurent lifted a berry to his lips. “I don’t see why not.”

Damen didn’t know where to look, what to do with his hands. He felt like his heart rate was accelerating so fast that it might pound out of his chest. His internal reaction may have been a bit much, but all rational was trumped out by the gnawing thought that Laurent was actively choosing a night outside of the palace with Damen, in favor of spending the night on his own doing whatever he wanted.

This was what he wanted. This escapade would be his own suggestion. His own idea.

“It might be a bit late to leave for the tavern,” Damen said. “It’s a few hours ride away, and we lingered tonight longer than usual.”

Laurent nodded once, and Damen spoke quickly. “There is a festival tonight, not too far from here. It’s by the marketplace we visited near the school grounds, done every few months to celebrate a new season. We have gone there before, as well. We can go there, if you like.”

Laurent said nothing at first, his lips pursed as he considered Damen’s words.

“There are always hundreds of people there,” Damen added, anticipation thrumming inside him. “Of all cultures. It’s a good opportunity to keep an eye on the commoners.”

Laurent’s chin was on his palm, his fingers tapping his cheek. His eyes swept around the room and throughout the people left, glancing back after what may have been a full minute. His expression was unintelligible as he pushed away from the table, standing up from his chair.

“Alright.”

They had decided to meet at the stables again, breaking off so that Damen could change into Veretian clothing, something with sleeves long enough to conceal his cuff. Despite some of the warmer days they had been having, autumn was approaching and it could be felt most at nights, the crisp chill and bite in the air. Soon the leaves around the palace would change, the gardens turning orange and yellow rather the bright colors of summer.

Damen was grateful for his jacket and boots as he made his way through the stalls in the stable, approaching his stallion. He unlocked the door, reaching for the saddlebag when he heard the crunch of footsteps behind him. Damen turned, looking over his shoulder to see Laurent already at his stall, looking back at Damen as he unlocked the door without looking, the routine already a familiarity for him.

“I’m surprised you’ve managed to fit into something concealing without ripping the seams apart,” he said, turning back towards his horse.

“It was custom made,” Damen replied. Laurent said nothing as he saddled up his horse, leading her
out into the cool, open air. Damen followed behind him, swinging up into the saddle after Laurent did, tugging on the reins towards the direction of the path that led out of the back gates.

Being that Laurent had apparently gone to the valley multiple times on his own, the general route was familiar enough to him that he didn’t have to follow behind Damen and they could go at an equal distance. It was no more than a half an hour ride and they kept the pace steady, following the light of the lanterns on the road, keeping to the most direct route possible.

Their surroundings grew louder the closer they got to the village, groups of people walking around the streets, smaller markets still open, people leaning down balconies and out of windows, calling out to others on the other side of the road. Laurent slowed down minutely as they neared the area, allowing Damen to take the lead and direct them towards the section of the town in which the festival was taking place.

“It’s not much farther,” Damen said, just as the glow of the boisterous sight came into view.

They had been here two or three times before, bringing in a different season. There was a different range of things to do and see, and it was an exciting atmosphere that Damen felt everyone should experience at least once. The two of them had very fond memories, and while it was a good opportunity to keep an eye on the people, this of all of their undercover escapades really was more on the side of pleasure. Damen was honest enough with himself that he was not above exploiting the situation and indulging.

Damen swung off his horse, directing it to a nearby post, the one of many that were set up for this very purpose. He transferred all the coin he had brought from the saddlebags to his pockets as Laurent swung off his own horse, binding her to a nearby one. When he finished he took a few steps away, taking in the view from where he stood as Damen finished taking care of his own horse.

“I’m not calling you Lamen,” Laurent said, his tone limpid as he approached Damen.

Damen finished with the final knot, turning to Laurent and leaning on the pole. “Can I at least still call you Charls?”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Laurent said.

“He is a Veretian cloth merchant,” Damen explained. “He is quite renowned. You began using his name for these undercover endeavors.”

Laurent frowned. “Why would I use the name of a cloth merchant?” His frown deepened. “Why was I in close contact with a cloth merchant?”

“Well,” Damen began, pushing off the post and following Laurent who began to walk towards the entrance. “We were traveling through Akielos, which was an extreme risk, and nearly impossible. Falsities had been spread that I had killed my own father, and Kastor had men patrolling for me.” Damen’s breath hitched for a moment, and he heard the way he trailed off as he stopped walking, his eyes roaming the trees around them. There were still things he chose not to ponder on.

Laurent glanced at Damen out of the corner of his eye when he noticed that Damen had stopped speaking, stopping in his tracks as well. His eyes scanned Damen’s face, something unreadable flashing as he pressed his lips together for an instant, nodding his head after.

“Well?” he echoed. “What happened next?”

Damen drew in a tight breath, speaking around the pressure in his chest. “We needed to pass through, deep into Ios. Our wagon had broken down, just when a patrol of officers neared us. Rather
be inconspicuous, you waved them over and stated that you were Charls, the cloth merchant who ended up being very well known in Vere. You told him that I was your assistant Lamen,” he couldn’t help adding, grinning at Laurent with a sideways glance. Laurent’s lips twisted, but he nodded in the same way he had previously.

“You said that we had a certain amount of bolts of cloth to deliver in Argos, I believe it was, and that our wagon was defective.”

“Who came with us?”

“Most of our current guard,” Damen replied. “Paschal.”

“And who were we hiding in the wagons?”

“Guion,” Damen said, earning a look of satisfaction from Laurent. “His wife, Loyse.” His thoughts trailed again, this time from uncertainty. Laurent had no recollection of Jokaste, nor did he remember the part she played.

“An Akielon woman, who had ties to both Kastor and I,” Damen said, keeping this memory below the surface as well, though it had been a long time since memories of her affected him. “She was used as leverage of sorts.”

Laurent nodded his head slowly. “And this worked?” they had reached the entrance into the festival, the path a few feet away. Rather go straight in, Laurent sat on a nearby bench, ignoring the two men stationed at the front who had straightened themselves when they had approached. Damen blinked at the empty spot behind him, and Laurent rolled his eyes as he motioned forward.

“The officer insisted on accompanying us to the nearest inn,” Damen said, sitting carefully, conscious of every inch between them, which was not many. “We could tell he was suspicious of us, but our hands were tied. When we arrived he introduced you to the innkeeper as Charls, only to hear that Charls was already there.”

Laurent quirked a brow.

“He was called out to us,” Damen said, his chest feeling lighter now. The close proximity helped. “Fortunately for us, we had met him months prior at an inn at Nesson. He recognized us, and he played along easily in our favor.”

“And how did we explain the names?”

Damen rubbed his hands on his thighs, the memory alone threatening to give him a headache. “Charls helpfully explained to everyone that he was Charls, cousin to you, Charls, the two of you named after your grandfather, Charls.”

Laurent looked at Damen blankly for a stretched out second before letting out a breath of what may have been laughter. The cold air caused it to puff out between them.

“The delights of kingship,” Laurent said.

Damen smiled in agreement, lifting himself from the bench. “Come,” he said, holding his hand out instinctively.

He froze, looking down at his outstretched hand. Laurent was looking at it as well, controlled, like he had never seen one before. Damen’s heard thudded harder with each additional second that passed, and as Damen debated pulling his hand away and enduring the awkwardness, Laurent placed his
“Are you going to make yourself useful, or did you just feel like holding hands?” Laurent said, when Damen continued to stare at their clasped fingers.

Damen pulled Laurent up, possibly a bit too tightly to be natural, releasing his hand immediately so as not to do something stupid like pull him closer. He turned around, focusing only on Laurent’s accompanying footsteps, reminding himself that an overthink would gain him nothing.

Damen reached into his pocket and pulled out the appropriate amount of coin, handing it off to one of the men who sifted through it quickly, nodding his head as he stepped aside.

“Enjoy,” he said.

Damen felt Laurent’s eyes on him as they walked through, and he turned his head to meet his blue gaze.

“You knew to bring money,” Laurent said.

“We’ve been here before,” Damen reminded him.

Laurent continued to look at him as if waiting for Damen to continue the statement, eventually removing his gaze and setting it on everything around them.

It was very loud, almost like some invisible barrier had broken the instant they stepped through and entered the chaos. By this point the sky was at its darkest, the stars brightly blanketing them. The path went down farther than the two of them could see from their vantage at the start, but it was illuminated in rows upon rows of lanterns and torches, giving the entirety of the area an ethereal glow.

Booths lined each side of the path, tables scattered around everywhere they looked. Everything was decorated in streamers and trinkets, pillars and poles wrapped in garlands. Music came from every direction, providing an energetic, animated feeling in the air that some people danced to, and some simply took in.

They were walking down the path, Laurent’s hand on his chin as he observed the different stands serving all kinds of food. Occasionally the wind would increase, hitting them with a waft of different aromas and spices. Some were set up in the form of a buffet, people wrapping slivers of meats in flat breads and eating as they walked. Some people took seats around the table, opting for a proper meal while they conversed with all those around them, discussing anything from politics to town gossip.

They continued down the line, and Damen observed the different games that were set up. Some on the younger side for the children, prizes being offered that ranged from books, stuffed dolls or clothing items. There were a few other games available suited for adults, drinking more than likely involved.

“This is,” Laurent said, his voice stalling like he was searching for the appropriate word.

“A lot,” Damen offered.

Laurent made a soft sound in his throat as they walked together slowly, his eyes on a man who was juggling what looked like balls of fire. He was standing on a low dais, a crowd of children and multiple adults surrounding him, claps ringing out every few minutes when one object was tossed higher than the others.
Damen only watched Laurent. The way the fire reflected off his face, lighting up certain features, his eyes bright as they switched between the juggling man and the little boy whose hands were on his mouth, sounds of excited shock leaking out between his fingers.

Damen’s eyes scanned the different crowds, landing on a row of women who were standing together in a line, swathed in different colored silks. The hem of the material was tied at each of their waists, bells swinging off the edge so that it lined the exposed part of their stomachs. Some were holding each other, others had their hand clasped above the head as they danced simultaneously, moving rhythmically and sultrily to the music.

“Well?” Damen heard, and he turned to see Laurent’s arm balanced on the table beside him, his eyebrow arched.

“Well, what?”

“We’re here,” Laurent said. “You clearly know more than I about what we used to do here. Enlighten me.”

“We don’t have to follow a script,” Damen said. “We can go anywhere you like.”

Laurent remained in his relaxed position, his eyes roaming around everything around them before he nodded his head towards a general direction. “Show me the rest.”

“Alright,” Damen said, after a moment of the two of them holding each other’s gaze. Damen began to walk down the path, Laurent a few paces away. The music changed as they ventured in deeper, alternating to fit whatever section they were in.

“Over there is a puppet show for children,” Damen said, pointing off towards the left where crowds of young boys and girls were gathering, some sitting on each other’s lap rather the floor. “And there are multiple magicians scattered through the entire place, performing a range of different things.”

Laurent nodded, pointing to a separate section where a few women sat at a small table, filled bags between them. “And that?”

“They are Vaskian,” Damen said, moving slightly closer to Laurent so the group of kids running between their legs wouldn’t bump into them. “I believe they offer to do people’s makeup, or face paint for kids.”

Laurent’s eyes lingered on one of the women with deep, crimson lips, her hair pulled back tightly from her face before he fell back into step with Damen. They were nearing one of the rowdier portions of the area, tables set out around them filled with barrels and cases of different forms of liquor. There were men drinking straight from bottles, some chugging in what seemed to be a competition of tolerance and endurance. A few were even sprawled out on the ground, mugs clutched in their hands as they spoke at levels too loud to fit sobriety.

Damen took in all the different options, just as another gust of wind hit, chilling his neck and face. He glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw Laurent’s eyes the table as well. The apples of his cheeks were pINKED from the cold, his lips between his teeth.

“Would you like something?” Damen asked.

Laurent’s eyes rolled to Damen’s direction slowly, looking at him blankly, his lips a flat line.

Damen laughed, nudging his head forwards. “Nothing strong,” he said, approaching the table and reaching into his pocket again. It took a few seconds before Laurent joined him. He motioned
towards a name that was scrawled on the list of beverage options, turning to Laurent.

“You’ll enjoy it,” Damen said. When Laurent’s flat stare did not alter, Damen raised his brows. “You said you wanted to experience what you used to.”

“Not quite,” Laurent replied.

Damen ignored that, handing the woman over a handful of coin and accepting the two mugs from her outstretched hands. Damen was not acting on a whim. He knew Laurent enjoyed the drink, they purchased it any time they had come here. Damen turned towards him, offering him the mug of mulled wine, the liquid warm and sweet. There was enough liquor in it to warm the body, but not enough to have much affect on the senses, if any. In addition to the syrupy drink, it also held a cinnamon stick and a slice of an orange wedge, floating on the surface.

“Trust me,” Damen said, when Laurent resisted.

Laurent lifted his gaze from the drink to Damen’s eyes, and held them as he took the mug from his hand, wrapping his fingers around the edge as he lifted it to his lips, taking a long, slow draught. Damen drank as well, the two of them looking at each other over the rim.

Damen felt the warmth of the drink spread throughout his body, the heat of it pooling low in his stomach. He felt like his veins were simmering from it.

“So?” Damen asked, licking the drink off his mouth. He could feel the excess liquid glistening off his lips.

Rather reply, Laurent took another long mouthful, and somehow that felt better than anything he could have said. Damen didn’t hide his grin, nudging his head to the side and beginning to walk down the road, Laurent at his right. They continued down the straight trail, separating for a moment to make room for two Veretian men who were crossing paths with them, their hands clasped. Laurent made a turn at the left and Damen followed close behind.

They came across a square table, benches on every side of it, each one filled with at least four men. Most were Veretian, a few were Akielon. Damen could pick out two or three that may have been Patran. There was a deep pitcher of some liquor in the center, scattered cups all around. One of the men was shuffling a deck of cards.

Damen’s eyes immediately swung to Laurent, who was watching them with a calculated look that Damen knew meant everyone around should hold onto their money tightly.

Laurent barely spared Damen a glance as he handed his mug off to him, thrusting it at his chest without looking.

“I’m playing,” he said. Damen lifted his shoulder and walked after Laurent, waiting for him to sit down first. Laurent swung his legs into the space between the bench and the table and slid in, resting his elbows on the wooden surface and tilting his chin up, looking as if this was his spot and everyone else were the ones who had disturbed.

The atmosphere changed, shifting slightly as it always did when Laurent entered conversation, or a room. Everyone suddenly feeling over aware of themselves and their surroundings. Laurent was like a beacon of light, a bright presence that could not be ignored, only draw you in further, stealing all of your attention. The man holding the cards looked up at the sound of Laurent taking his seat, his eyes scrolling his body as he continued to fan through the cards.

“This is a tough game,” the man said.
“Good,” Laurent replied.

Another man leaned forward slightly, his weight resting on his forearms. “The buy in is not low.”

“Better,” Laurent said, tapping the spot beside him wordlessly which was a clear message to Damen: sit.

The spot between Laurent and the man next to him was the only available one, and was not much of a spot. The bench was tightly packed as it was, and Damen’s size was something to consider. Damen stared at the back of Laurent’s head blankly, questioningly. Laurent turned to look back at him, and all it took was one glance for Damen to be setting the mugs on the ground, swinging his own legs over and squeezing himself in.

It was a tight fit. Damen did not have much wiggle room to move his arms, and it was either he keep them in his lap or on the table’s surface. His body felt restrained and uncomfortable, and Damen couldn’t have been more pleased.

“This is quite a close fit,” Damen murmured into Laurent’s ear. Their thighs were touching.

“It is freezing,” Laurent replied, watching the man sift through the cards as he spoke. “All that extra muscle and skin should be good for something.”

“Well?” The man with the cards asked before Damen could reply.

“Deal me in,” Laurent said. The man beside Damen told him the buy in and Damen sifted through the coin, picking out the appropriate amount and dropping it in the pile in the middle that was slowly filling.

“Just him,” Damen said when the man tilted a handful of cards in Damen’s direction questioningly. He tossed them to the man on Damen’s left, stating the name of the game as he finished distributing everyone’s hand.

Laurent’s cards were tossed in front of him, and he picked them up and immediately began arranging them in some order that seemed to make sense to him.

“Do you even know how to play?” Damen asked, quieter than before.

“Yes,” Laurent said.

Everyone took a few minutes to collect their thoughts and plan out whatever strategy was necessary to them. There were six cards in each person’s hand, some keeping them as they received them, some rearranging like Laurent had. Damen watched Laurent carefully, trying to gage how this would play out, knowing it could go one of two ways. Either Laurent would save everyone the time and simply take their money from the start, or he would stretch things out and give a group of grown men hope and amusement before snatching all of their coin without using even a fraction of his mind.

An Akielon man across from Damen was the first to go, tossing in two copper sols, looking around the table as he did. Everyone followed suit, and the man with the deck of cards set down two from the pile face up, distributing an extra card to everyone around the table. Everyone took their card and looked, slipping it in somewhere in their hand.

Another Akielon man tossed in four copper sols, this time not glancing up to see who met his play. Most did, some did not. Damen glanced at Laurent, and it was when he saw the way Laurent glanced from his hand, to the upturned cards, to the pile of coin with a frown that he knew how this would go.
The game continued to progress this way, and by the end when there were eight upturned cards and a large pile of money, everyone flipped up their hand to show that Laurent had come in fourth to last out of thirteen men. A Veretian on the opposite side of the table whistled in glee, dragging the pile towards himself, leaving only enough for the next buy in.

“Again,” Laurent said, pushing his cards forward.

The same man re dealt, and the game began as it had before. A man Damen suspected to be Patran was the first to toss in additional coin to the pile, and Laurent grinned slightly as he arranged two cards in his hand, matching what the man had put in and then some. The dealer handed everyone their extra card as he upturned multiple cards from the deck, and more bets were placed, the pile continuing to grow. By the end of this round, Laurent had come out second to last.

“Again,” Laurent said, relentlessly.

“You should quit while you’re ahead,” the man on his right said. He had not done much better than Laurent had, but he was still ahead of Laurent in coin, who was slowly depleting everything Damen had brought.

“I’m having fun,” Laurent said.

“Let him enjoy himself,” the dealer said, straightening the cards in his hands before giving them a quick shuffle. By this point two men had left the table, and everyone remaining tossed in their buy in. everyone picked up their cards again, and the game began for the third time. Things progressed rather quickly, and after cards were set down and numbers were overturned, the game ended with Laurent in second place.

“Again,” Laurent said.

Wordlessly, the table was cleared and the cards redistributed. Damen was hardly paying attention at this point, opting to rest his chin on his fist and watch as Laurent tossed cards down with a flick of his wrist, pushing more and more money in until the game ended quicker than the last, Laurent in first place.

“That last game was a curtsey round,” Laurent said, looking to the man who had taken first place as he placed his palms on the table surface, pushing himself up. “I held a king and a six that could beat your set. I buried them before we showed our hands.”

He removed himself from the bench with grace, leaning forward to push his large pile of coin into the center.

“Distribute it evenly,” he said, walking away, knowing Damen would follow.

“You can never play a clean, straightforward game of cards, can you?” Damen asked when he reached him.

“Where’s the excitement in that?” Laurent asked as he turned to face him, and the lift of his lips and the bright, alive look in his eyes made Damen feel like his heart was expanding with each passing second.

“We could have saved a lot of time without all the preamble,” Damen said.

“I was having fun,” Laurent said. The look in his eyes didn’t change.

Damen gazed down at him. “Good.”
Laurent was looking up at him, a wick of hair pushed behind his ear. His face was still flushed from the cold, and Damen thought of cupping his cheek in his palm, of pulling their body’s close, running his hand down his waist until he was warm.

Laurent looked away then, off towards the path they hadn’t taken yet. Damen swallowed, stepping a fraction closer.

“Laurent-“

“Let’s see the rest.”

Damen swallowed his words down, nodding his head resolutely, though Laurent wasn’t looking at him to see it. They began walking down the direction Laurent had glanced at, the atmosphere here even louder than the last.

There were nearly fifty people in the center square, masses of groups dancing together rambunctiously. Multiple different men and women sat on crates on the side, instruments balances on their knees as they built up a fast beat, vibrating through the air and in Damen’s bones. People danced in circles, arms linked and held closely as they skipped in circles, alternating between elbows each time the music shifted in beat. One man twirled another man beneath his arm, another couple following suit.

Two girls emerged from the whirlwind of chaos, so close in appearance that they may have been twins. Their coloring hinted to Damen that they likely were Vaskian, and his suspicions were confirmed when they spoke a rapid dialect that he could still not penetrate.

Damen turned to Laurent questioningly, who was shaking his head. He responded in similar dialect.

One of the girls pouted her lips artfully, looking at Damen with hopeful eyes.

“He is too clumsy,” Laurent said, this time in Veretian.

“So?” The first girl said in the same language, the word heavily accented. “Fun!”

“Perhaps the next festival,” Laurent replied, and the two jutted their lip out for a moment before shrugging their shoulders, moving on to another pair not too far off.

“I’m not clumsy,” Damen said, following Laurent’s retreating figure. Laurent simply hummed, and Damen thought back to the group of men.

“I’ve never seen that game before.”

“It’s an old Veretian game,” Laurent said. “I played it often when I was younger.” He didn’t say anything else.

“You’ve taught me many card games,” Damen made himself speak. “I haven’t seen you play that one.”

“I don’t see why I would,” Laurent replied. “I think the outcome would be fairly obvious.”

“I’m very good at games,” Damen said.

Laurent turned to him. “And who’s to say I wouldn’t swindle you as well?”

“You can’t cheat me,” Damen said. “I know you too well.”
Laurent’s eyes flickered but otherwise nothing changed, his expression showing nothing of what was going on inside his head. Damen remembered the words Laurent had said to Damen the night of the wedding, alone in a candlelit hallway.

Just as Damen began to speak, a loud noise rang out, the sound of banging against a table, followed by rowdy cheers. They both turned their heads to see two men sitting across from each other at a small round table, their hands clasped, one of the men holding the other man’s fist down on it’s side. They were arm wrestling.

The man who had been defeated pushed away from the table, getting up and blending back in with the rest of the crowd. The victor leaned back in his chair, looking around with self-assured confidence on his face. Despite the cold weather he was wearing a simple undershirt, the muscles in his arm bulging as he lifted a casual elbow to the backrest of his chair.

“Who’s next?”

A silence followed, other than the constant buzzing around them. Everyone in the gathered crowd looked around themselves to see who would chance going up against the seemingly undefeated champion. Damen turned to Laurent to ask him where he wanted to go next, just opening his mouth when the man spoke up again.

“You!” he called out, leaning forward on the table. “I remember you, you’ve been here before.” Damen closed his mouth, shrugging his shoulders as he glanced his way. He had been here. He’d competed with that same man, multiple times.

“Finally.” the man continued, kicking the chair out beside him. “Some actual competition.” But Damen simply shook his head, smiling politely as he waved his hand.

The man tisked, waving Damen over insistently. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s give the people what they want to see.”

“We’re in the middle of something,” Damen said, tilting his head to Laurent’s direction. As he did he heard a low sound, and he turned to see Laurent’s arms loosely crossed, glancing over at the table listlessly before looking back at Damen.

“I see why you’re nervous,” Laurent said.

“What,” Damen said.

“He does look strong,” Laurent continued, observing the man’s large arms that were crossed now, watching the two of them impatiently. “It would be quite a blow to your ego to loose publicly.”


“Let’s go observe the puppet show,” Laurent said, but Damen was already unlacing his jacket, starting from the collar. It would be more proficient without a heavy jacket restraining his movements, and so long as he kept the sleeve of his undershirt over his cuff, it shouldn’t be an issue.

“Let’s not,” Damen said, handing his jacket off to Laurent and stalking forward towards the table. His arms felt freer as moved, and he could feel the way the thin material of his shirt shaped around the ripples of his biceps.

Damen sat down, murmurs spreading in a growing hum as he and the man faced each other, the prospect of two strong men facing off setting off a feeling of adrenaline in the air. Damen kept their
eyes locked as he brought his elbow to the table, his palm upturned.

Damen knew he could go about this the way Laurent had with the cards, feigning weakness and taking a few losses before showing his true potential, but he saw no merit to that. Damen was a more straightforward man than that, and if he was truthful, he knew how appealing strength was to some people.

“I’ll go easy so you can impress your lover,” the man said, clasping their hands and gripping him tightly, already pressing forward.

“I don’t need help,” Damen said as he slammed the man’s fist down with minimal effort.

There was a shocked sound in the group of people, cutting off halfway and being replaced by a bubble of laughter. Damen removed his hand with a straight face and the man frowned, slamming his elbow back in a serious position. “We had not yet begun,” he said, though Damen had felt form the way the man’s wrist had flexed that they had. “Again.” He stretched his fingers in a way that said *let’s go*.

Damen took the man’s hand again, this time giving him a small block of time where he simply kept their arms upright before he began to use any of his own strength. The man’s face was pinched, concentrated, and though he certainly did possess strength that would serve well in hand-to-hand combat, it was simply a statement of fact that he was not matched for Damen. Damen could feel the slight straight in his forearm as he held the man’s arm up, and he decided to count out five singular seconds before finally slamming the man’s hand down.

The impact of two heavy fists on the wooden surface was loud, but not as loud as the ripple of applause around them. Damen released the man’s hand and leaned back, looking at him questioningly.

“Again?” Damen asked.

To Damen’s relief, the man let out a breath of good-natured laughter, slapping Damen on the back as he leaned into him.

“Perhaps next time, you can use at least an ounce of your actual strength.”

Damen grinned back at him, clapping him on the shoulder before rising from the table, vacating the seat and making his way back.

Laurent watched as Damen approached with an odd look on his face, his mouth doing something strange as he handed Damen his jacket wordlessly. Damen shrugged it on, doing the laces up quickly and with ease.

“Where to?” Damen asked.

“It’s late,” Laurent replied, looking around. “And only getting darker. We should go back.”

Damen nodded, ignoring the pang he felt. It *was* getting late.

“Alright,” Damen said. “Let’s go.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

if the eventual smut tag is making anyone restless my secret santa fic went up on christmas and its a damen/laurent/damen threesome so its uhhh quite different from this fic lol. idk how to link things bc I'm useless but its called indulgences if anyone is interested.
i hope you guys enjoyed your holiday!

It was their fourth day at the Summer Palace, though Damen may have lost track, everything muddling together into one long dream. Damen knew in some part of his mind that their time there was coming to an end, but he chose not to focus on that. Instead, he focused on this.

It was midday, the sun at its highest point in the sky. They had had the servants bring them their breakfast to their chambers, not even leaving their bed so that the sheets were still strewn across their laps, the platters spread out between them. After they had finished Laurent had only paused long enough to set the empty dishes aside before pulling Damen on top of him, the sheet falling off of his waist as he slung a leg over Laurent’s body.

They had spent the rest of the morning walking through the gardens, their fingers brushing as they took in the perfumed scent of summer blossoms around them, feeling the grass beneath their bare feet.

At Damen’s request, a servant had set up an awning in the Veretian style so they could admire the view without harming Laurent’s sensitive skin. They sat there now amidst cushions and silks, the awning providing cool shade for them. Gauzy drapes of cream and white fell down around them, their backs supported by an array of pillows, soft and plump. Refreshments had been laid out, wine, water and sweet peach juice, each goblet filled with ice, an additional pitcher full beside it. Platters of mixed cheeses and breads, a range of sliced fruits available as well.

Damen and Laurent sat side by side, reclined comfortably as they overlooked the wide expanse of blue before them. On the eastern side of the palace you could see the mountains and the tumble of rocks where the water would crush into the cliffs. It was a violent beauty in its own way, but quite different from the peaceful view they had now. Undisturbed turquoise, the rays of sun glistening in the distance.

Damen had lost track of how long they had been sitting there, Laurent’s legs crossed beneath him in a boyish position, most of Damen’s weight being supported by his elbow. They had been discussing philosophy, a topic that could be dreary and boring if not debating it with someone who managed to align in most of your views while somehow still making you question yourself, challenging everything you once thought to be true.

It was a delight to hear Laurent’s unfiltered thoughts, letting Damen in on the way he viewed things such as values, reasons and the mind, just as it was a delight to see him part his lips, accepting the slice of pear from Damen’s fingers.

Laurent chewed as Damen pulled his hand away, and it was only after a few hesitant seconds that Laurent reached for a slice of his own, offering it to Damen between thumb and forefinger. Damen
opened his mouth for it, a new sense of emotion swelling inside him as the sweetness touched his
tongue, Laurent moving his hand away slowly.

Laurent’s skin was flushed, warm to the touch of Damen’s slowly trailing finger. Damen traced his
calf, smiling when Laurent’s leg twitched slightly, an unintended reaction to intimacy that was still
so new to him. To them.

Damen looked out again onto the still waters, and to the marble steps that led into the sea for those
who did not want to dive in. He glanced at Laurent, whose eyes were on him. They had discussed it
the previous night, side by side in bed with the sounds of waves entering through the balcony.
Damen had suggested it with his arms around Laurent, and Laurent nodded against his chest,
saying he would consider it.

“Would you like to go in?”

“Alright,” Laurent said, after a pause.

Damen grinned, rising up from his recline and offering Laurent his hand which he took with ease,
allowing himself to be pulled up. Together they walked down the path towards the wide steps,
making their way down slowly until they neared the water’s edge, the breeze playing with their hair.
Around them was a splay of greenery, vines coming out of stone and winding through steps, birds
flying above them and settling on branches, chirping together melodically.

Damen was the first to reach for the clasp of his chiton, unpinning it at his shoulder with practiced,
mindless ease. Laurent’s eyes followed the cloth as it fell down his chest, baring his pectoral muscles
and abdomen as Damen turned slightly to the side, undoing the rest.

Laurent unfastened the pin at his own shoulder, standing straight the white cotton fell down to his
hips, then to the floor, pooling at his feet. Damen watched as he stepped out of it, holding Damen’s
gaze before turning back towards the steps. They went down all the way, the final few extending into
the shallow part of the sea.

“Is this where you go in from?”

“You can,” Damen replied, stepping up next to him. “You can also dive, if you like,” he said,
motioning towards a spot not too far away. The rock was wide and flat, the perfect spot for a low
jump. He raised his hand to a higher spot, and Laurent’s gaze followed the winding path that led up
to one of the cliffs where one could jump from a higher distance, tall enough that it would take a few
seconds to hit water. He and Nikandros had opted for that spot often when they were young,
showing off their best moves.

“Have you ever swum before?” Damen asked, surprised that he did not yet know this simple fact
about Laurent.

“When I was very young,” Laurent said. “There were hot springs, and river streams around Arles,
in the mountains north of the palace. It’s been a while.”

With a hand sweeping his shoulder, “This is yours, now. For whenever you want.”

Laurent looked at the different spots, humming softly as he made for the steps alone. He walked
down them slowly, his shadow following him as he reached the bottom, his ankles touching water
first, then his knees. Damen made his way towards the rock and sat himself down, his wrists on his
knees as he watched as Laurent waded in, his body cutting through the clear water, lapping against
him lightly as he turned, waist high now.
The sun was haloed around Laurent’s golden head as he stepped back slowly, moving gracefully through the water like an exotic sea creature, deep enough that the water wet his chest when he bent his knees slightly, further immersing himself.

Damen’s eyes followed the water that trickled down his arms and the smooth plane of his chest when he lifted himself back up, everything but his face now dripping. The only sound around them were the hum of cicadas and the water lapping against the stone, Laurent’s body moving soundlessly through the water like it was made to.

The water where Damen was sitting above was slightly deeper than where Laurent had stepped into. Laurent looked at Damen’s easy pose with a considering expression, looking to the spot in which they had been sitting earlier, and then back at Damen.

“Can you dive?” Laurent asked.

“Of course,” Damen said.

“Well?” Laurent asked, swimming towards Damen, the muscles in his arms flexing as he moving through the water fluidly, his hands meeting and spreading in front of him in an expert breaststroke.

“Yes,” Damen replied when Laurent reached him.

It was too deep here for Laurent to stand. He was bobbing in one place, moving his arms and legs so he could tread water, his lips pursed.

“I used to be able to dive head first,” Laurent said, his voice remaining steady despite the movements of his body. “Auguste taught me. I was rather good at it.”

“Would you like to try again?”

Laurent hesitated. “Can you lift me out?”

Damen rolled his eyes, pushing himself up. “Of course,” he said, offering Laurent his hand. Laurent closed the small gap between them, extending his own arm so he could clasp Damen’s hand.

Damen waited for Laurent’s fingers to close around him so he could pull, lifting his body out of the water with what he knew would be ease. Laurent’s eyes locked with his and right as his wet fingers touched his, Damen felt an odd strain on his wrist. Damen frowned, opening his mouth to question Laurent’s resistance.

And then he was being pulled forward, the sensation of being yanked and his legs slipping out beneath him the only thing he registered before he was hitting cool water, his entire body submerging in a heavy splash.

It was a few dazed seconds before Damen’s head came up from the surface, water rushing around him as he shook his head, pushing his hair out of his eyes. There was a loud noise, and it was a few more confused seconds before Damen realized that the sound was Laurent’s laughter.

“What-“ Damen said, and Laurent continued to laugh harder, his body now unsteady in the water.

Damen—who could stand here—began to move towards Laurent. Noticing this, Laurent began to push his hands out, moving himself away from Damen as quickly as he could, laughter still leaving him in breathless pants. Damen abandoned walking and simply dove forward, cutting through the water and closing the distance in two quick strokes so he was right in front of Laurent, grabbing him by the waist and pulling Laurent into him.
Laurent was slightly above Damen like this, grinning down at him as water dripped down his face, hitting the surface in drops.

“That was clumsy of you,” Laurent said.

He looked careless and pleased, and Damen felt foolish with happiness as Laurent’s legs tightened around his waist.

“I knew you couldn’t actually dive,” Damen said.

Laurent dipped his body back, letting it briefly submerge in the water so his hair was properly wet. His straightened himself back against Damen after, slicking the hair off his face, emphasizing his sharp cheekbones and the smooth line of his jaw.

Damen turned them around, walking back towards the rock as Laurent’s hands rested on Damen’s shoulders, their chests touching. Damen pushed Laurent’s back against the smooth surface, disturbing the water between them as Damen’s lips went up the trail of water running down his chest, his neck, his lips.

They were leaving the festival when Laurent heard it.

They were exiting the threshold, making their way out amidst another group of men and women. It was crowded, the murmurs and the wind carrying all conversation around them, so Laurent wasn’t initially sure which direction, which person it had come from.

He was looking around, his eyes following a string of lanterns, wrapped along the branch of a tree when he heard the woman’s voice again. He only caught the tail end of it, but he knew he had heard Damianos’ name and something made him stop and listen.

“Where did you hear that?” Her female companion asked.

Laurent looked to Damianos and saw that he was speaking with another man, something of directions. He was pointing away towards a separate path, and Laurent looked back to the women, feeling that he had a few minutes to spare before rejoining him.

“My aunt told me,” she said. “She had heard whispers of it in the marketplace.”

“How would Damianos disguising himself as a slave have helped him uncover Kastor’s treachery?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps he hoped to find answers in Vere.”

“That is not what I heard,” the second woman said. Her brows were pinched. “I was told that the kings had allied themselves in secret, months before the alliance was officially announced. Laurent hid Damianos away as a slave and helped him remove Kastor from the throne.”

The woman pursed her lips, lifting a shoulder. “That does make more sense.”

It didn’t make more sense. Neither of them was correct. Laurent turned away, knowing it was unlikely he would be recognized but still not wanting them to catch his eye. He looked to Damianos and saw that he was alone again, busying himself with untangling their horses. If he had heard their conversation, he showed no indication to it.

Laurent walked back to him, taking the reins from his outstretched hand and swinging up into the saddle wordlessly. His mind was already working, their words knocking around in his head.
He tugged on the reins, spurring his horse into a turn and allowing Damianos to lead, following him close behind. As they left the narrow pathways and made their way out into the open road, Laurent let the rhythmic sounds of hooves on cobblestone soothe him, his mind on the one mad whose fate was still a mystery to him.

The next morning, Laurent walked through the hall with one destination in mind. He mad multiple things he could do, other things he had to do. But first, this.

Laurent knew he could go straight to the source for this discussion. He most likely should, knowing that he would receive the most knowledgeable, proficient response. However, Laurent had an idea how the conversation might go, and he didn’t want to cause unnecessary pain.

That was how Laurent found himself in front this door. He knocked rapidly three times against the wooden surface, and had to wait less than a minute before it was pulled opened, bringing Laurent face to face with Nikandros.

“Your Highness,” Nikandros said, after a pause.

“May I come in? “Laurent asked, stepping around him and into the room. He looked over his should and saw Nikandros looking in the hall, glancing at both sides.

“He’s not here,” Laurent said, sitting down in the seat that Nikandros had clearly been occupying before Laurent had knocked. It was pushed away from the table slightly, documents set out on the table. “It’s just you and I,” he added, smiling pleasantly.

Nikandros closed the door, walking into the main chambers and pulling a chair out beside Laurent. Laurent looked around as he situated himself, taking everything in. The rooms were nice. Not as large or extravagant as his or Damianos’, but they were well suited for a kyros.

“Is everything alright?” Nikandros asked, still looking a bit startled.

Laurent brought an elbow to the armrest of his chair, leaning his cheek on his palm. “I can’t simply be visiting?”

“You can,” Nikandros said. “You’re not.”

“No,” Laurent said. “I’m not.”

He moved his palm to his chin, closing his fingers around the skin as he ran his thumb along his lips, looking at Nikandros deep in thought. Nikandros leveled Laurent with a similar gaze, looking at him with a form of brazen confidence that gave Laurent all the assurance he needed. Nikandros treated Damianos and Laurent with utmost respect, always addressing them with the deference that their higher rank deserved. However, he held himself around Laurent with a certain familiarity that he may have not even been aware of himself. Despite the rift that Laurent’s predicament had caused, it was clear that Nikandros was a certain fixture in his and Damianos’ life, and therefore would have the answers that Laurent needed.

“I have questions for you,” Laurent said.

Nikandros nodded his head, adjusting himself in his chair. “Alright.”

Laurent saw no reason to go in circles, or hint to anything. He raised a leg, crossing it along his knee comfortably.
“They are about Kastor.”

Nikandros froze, and for a moment Laurent saw a flicker in his eyes that could be described as nothing other than disdain.

“Not a fan?” Laurent asked.

“No,” Nikandros said.

“Care to explain why?”

“He betrayed Damen,” Nikandros said. It was all he said, as if that was all that mattered.

“I know that much,” Laurent said. “He killed their father and sent Damianos to the enemy. That is not news.”

“It was more than that,” Nikandros said, his face twisting like he was recalling something unpleasant. “Growing up, their entire lives. All Damen did was love his brother. He strove to please him, to earn his respect. Since he was a boy, Kastor had looked at Damen like he was a nuisance. Like he was the reason for any and all faults in Kastor’s life.” He passed a hand down his face. “I told him how I felt. What I saw. But they were brothers, and Damen wouldn’t heed my words.”

“No,” Laurent said. “He wouldn’t have.”

“I had told him that Kastor had always believed that Damen had taken his throne, and that all it would take was one person to agree with him for action to be taken.” His voice trailed off, and he raised his hand in Laurent’s general direction.

“And I assume,” Laurent said. “That he and my uncle had been working together, long before Damianos was sent to Vere.”

“I can only assume,” Nikandros said.

Laurent nodded his head slowly, absently, looking off into the distance of the room. None of this was new, not really. Damianos had told him of this in simpler words, but Laurent thought of it now, the actual mechanisms of it. The way his uncle had managed to insert himself into the affairs of an enemy nation, finding the cracks and seeping his poison into them. Laurent had no recollection of Kastor or the man that he was, but if he knew his uncle, he knew he had likely held absolute control over Kastor, all the while making him feel as if he had power when in reality, it would have been his uncle pulling his strings like a puppeteer.

Damianos had told him that after spending some time in Arles, they had left for the border together, making their way through Vere until they reached Ravenel which straddled the border of Delfeur. His retelling had stopped there, but Laurent knew they had forged an alliance some time later. Though he did not have the details on how exactly that came to be, Laurent understood enough now to know that the force of Akielos was not the only thing Laurent required to beat his uncle. An additional army was not the only thing Laurent had needed.

Laurent thought back to what Damianos had said the previous night at the festival, before they had entered. They had been traveling through Akielos, trying to keep their identities hidden, as Kastor had had scouts out looking for Damianos. While Laurent was unsure of why they had entered Akielos to begin with, he knew how it had ended. Damianos had told him long ago of Laurent’s own trial where he had been tried for treason against Vere. The trial which had led to the end of everything.
“My trial,” Laurent said. “In Akielos. You were there.”

Nikandros nodded.

“My uncle and Kastor were both there,” Laurent said. Nikandros nodded again.

Laurent’s uncle had died at the end of that trial, he knew this. Paschal’s letter had sealed his fate, giving them the final blow that they must have been looking for. However, Kastor’s fate was still ambiguous to Laurent. That he was dead was clear enough, but how he had died was a mystery to Laurent.

Laurent lowered his hand, resting it on his knee. “What happened to Kastor?”

Nikandros froze again, looking at Laurent oddly like he had asked something entirely off topic. “What,” Laurent said.

Nikandros cleared his throat, leaning forward slightly. “Perhaps you should talk to Damen about this.”

“I’m talking to you,” Laurent said.

Nikandros lowered his eyes, focusing on the marble ground between them like it held an explanation. He seemed uncomfortable, uncertain, and he cleared his throat again before lifting his eyes. “I wasn’t there,” he said. “I ran in at the end, when Kastor was already dead.”

“Who killed Kastor?” Laurent asked. A soldier had killed his uncle, beheading him and splaying his body on the gates. Perhaps he had executed Kastor as well, similar fates for the usurpers working together.

Nikandros said, “you.”

Laurent paused, his shaking foot momentarily ceasing as he looked at Nikandros. And looked.

“He was going to kill Damen,” Nikandros was saying, still talking despite the way Laurent’s mind had slowed down. “He was on the ground when I entered the baths, bleeding out half to death. You had entered after Kastor had stabbed him, and fought Kastor to his death. You saved Damen’s life.”

Laurent wasn’t listening. Or he was, with only a part of his brain, taking in what Nikandros was saying. The other more dominant part was circulating over the same singular fact.

“What did-“ Laurent said, but he did not finish his sentence. It didn’t matter. Nikandros finished it for him.

“Damen is not a fool,” Nikandros said. “He loved his brother despite the fact that it was undeserved, but it had to be done.” When Laurent said nothing, Nikandros continued. “Your Highness,” he
hesitated. “I don’t think this is a conversation for the two of us.”

“No,” Laurent agreed. He stood up from the chair, but he kept his eyes on Nikandros as he watched him, multiple quiet beats before speaking.

“I know in these past two years you had taken to calling me by my given name.”

Nikandros looked up at him, blinking rapidly before opening his mouth to speak, though he only gaped.

“I will see you at dinner tonight,” Laurent said, and then he turned and made for the door.

Laurent was walking through the trees that afternoon, his preferred book of the week wedged under his arm. Jeurre had requested a meeting with him some time that day, but until then Laurent had a little free time on his hands. He chose to select a book and find an open space in the gardens to read.

There weren’t many people around. The gardens were usually a place for couples to stroll arm in arm, groups of courtiers availing themselves, reclining on the low benches amidst refreshments and conversation. There were now a few people here and there, random parts of the gardens occupied, but the chirping of the birds and the rustle of the wind through the leaves were the only sound in Laurent’s ears. He felt as if he may have been the only person there.

Laurent made his way towards the stone bench on the far end of the garden, curved low into the ground and encircled by the greenery of bushes, white roses surrounding him like a boundary from everything else. Something about that spot soothed him, how no one else was ever there, almost like an unspoken rule of it being Laurent’s sanctuary.

But apparently that wasn’t quite true. As Laurent neared he noticed someone in his spot, sitting there comfortably without a care in the world. Laurent began to feel a spike of annoyance prickle inside him, but then just as quickly, it evaporated when he recognized the back he was looking at.

“Don’t let me disturb your languor,” Laurent said, dropping his book down heavily on the surface of the bench.

Damianos jolted slightly at the sound, turning his head to see who had spoken. When he saw it was Laurent he smiled. A light, unabashed smile, and Laurent might have looked at him similarly, had it not been for the odd twinge of uncertainty inside him. That, or something akin to it. Some form of a paradox.

Laurent didn’t know what to do with this new information that he had received. He wasn’t entirely sure what it meant or what to make of it, and for that reason chose to put it in the back of his mind, because toying with it would do nothing.

“You could never disturb me,” Damianos said, his smile deepening as Laurent sat.

“Don’t be too confident,” Laurent said, adjusting himself beside him comfortably. “I’m full of surprises.”

Damianos picked up the book Laurent had set down, running a finger down the spine, his fingers sweeping the leather of the cover.

“Have I read this?” Laurent asked.
Damianos nodded, handing it back to Laurent. “You had me read it as well,” he said. “It’s very good.”

Laurent looked down at the cover, thumbing at it the way Damianos had. He wasn’t sure what it was about yet, he preferred to go into books blind and see where they took him. He set it down between them again, thinking about what Damianos said. He wondered if he would be able to read something now and deduce that it was something Damianos would enjoy.

“You seem very confident, sitting here in my spot,” Laurent said, shifting gears in his head. “I’m the only person that sits here.”

Damianos turned in his place, leaning his back on one of the armrests of the bench. It was curved outward, subtle designs carved into the stone. “Perhaps that is why I chose to come here.”

There was a pause. Laurent pulled his eyes away eventually, setting them on Damianos’ bare arms. “You can’t actually be comfortable like that,” he said. It wasn’t as cold as when the temperature dropped at night, but it was chilly enough out that Laurent was aware of it, jacket and all.

Damianos looked down at his clothing, or rather, the piece of cloth he had wrapped around a fraction of his body. He shrugged his shoulders, seeming entirely unbothered by the crisp air around them.

“My body is very warm,” he said. When Laurent said nothing he lifted a hand to the clasp at his shoulder, the pin holding his cape in place.

“Are you cold?” he asked, his fingers on the red like he was planning to unpin it, handing it over to cloak Laurent’s body.

“I’m fine.”

Damianos looked back down at the book, his hand beside it. “Did you wish to read?” he asked. “I can go.”

“Well, I didn’t bring a book with me as a prop,” Laurent replied. “But no. You don’t have to go.”

“Alright,” Damianos said, sounding as pleased as he looked.

Laurent’s attention was pulled elsewhere by the sound of childish voices. A little girl ran a few yards ahead of them, shortly to be chased by a boy about her age. His arms were spread at his sides like he planned to tackle her to the ground when he reached her, and the two of them were laughing openly, careless squealing leaving them in breathless pants as they ran together.

The girl moved towards an old tree and began to run around it in circles, trying to confuse the boy who kept stopping and switching direction, only to be evaded by the girl. Laurent watched as she made to jump a few feet forward, and it was with a churning in his stomach that he saw her shoe get caught on one of the gnarled roots of the tree, coming out of the ground. She let out a yelp of surprise when it arrested her motion, her yelp changing in nature when she fell to the ground.

Laurent’s immediate inclination was to go and help her, but Damianos was up and halfway across the grass, lowering himself to one knee beside her before the thought had even processed. Laurent felt frozen in place as he watched the little boy run up to her fallen figure, his fingers tangling as he sputtered out words that Laurent couldn’t hear.

Laurent’s eyes were only on Damianos as he took her hands, murmuring something as he pulled her up gently, wiping the mud and grass from her clothes. The instant she saw who it was she turned
beet red, looking down and taking a step back, but whatever it was that he said caused her to look back up at him with a bit less hesitation.

Damianos—the king—remained on his knee beside the little girl and continued to speak with her, including the boy in their conversation. He turned his body and pointed towards Laurent, saying something else that caused them both to look over as well, their eyes widening, smiles spreading across their cheeks. Damianos added one last comment, and whatever it was that he said caused the two of them to barrel into him, throwing their short arms around his body. Laurent saw him blink multiple times, letting out a breath of surprised laughter before bringing his arms around them as well.

Laurent felt it again. The incongruity of it all, stirring something inside him. Thoughts came back to him, unbidden, reminding him of Nikandros’ words from that morning. Reminding him of the understanding that despite what he had thought, what he had so determinedly thought for so long, things may not have been quite as he had believed. As impossible and as wrong as it was, as much as it went against everything Laurent had always known to be true, he was not the only one between them that had suffered. And while one loss did not cancel out another, the revelation of it still worked to lift the invisible barrier in Laurent’s mind, opening the floodgates that he had carefully set in place.

Laurent tried to reconcile all that he knew in his head, and found simply that he couldn’t. To come to terms with the fact that the man that Laurent had mythologized in his head for years was the same man before him was impossible, yet was plainly set out before him, unable to be ignored.

The person who Laurent had conjured in his mind the first time he had taken an oath on himself or held a sword by his own volition. The person he had woken up next to, encompassing all of the anger inside him, was the same person who saved a poor boy from the empty fate of a cell because he had acted desperately to support a family. The person who commanded his troops with equality and honor, and spared the life of a murderous bandit because he was unarmed and defenseless.

The man who had saved Laurent, more than once, and treated this like it was something sacred.

“What is it?” Laurent heard, pulling him out of his spiraling thoughts and back into the present. He turned to see Damianos seated back down, watching him with a concerned expression that softened his sharp Akielon features.

“Nothing,” Laurent said, because there was nothing to say that could change the past. Laurent looked up at him, and it was with a thrum of resolve that he came to the understanding that this thing he was feeling was something he should become accustomed to. And while he couldn’t make sense of the pressure in his chest or the twisting in the pit of his stomach, maybe he didn’t have to.
Chapter 25

They had traveled on that night through the small village of Halki, trekking through the town in their wagons until they finally found another inn, even smaller than the one they had been to previously night. Their minimal guard were in their bedrolls outside, the air warm enough to sleep outdoors unbothered. Charls, Guilliame and Alexon had found their own rooms, occupying some other portion of the building.

Damen and Laurent were in the best room they had to offer, considering the circumstances. They were in a moderate sized bed, the mattress surprisingly soft. The walls were stone, grooves and hollows etched into it. The windows were wide with thick framing, the moonlight barely visible through the paint-darkened glass. Candles lined the mantel, illuminating Laurent’s face in flickers, casting the line of his body in a glow.

Laurent was on his back with a hand above his head, his chest still rising and falling from the release he had found only moments ago. Damen was stretched out on his side, feeling drenched and sated as he pressed self-satisfied kisses along the curve of Laurent’s shoulder. Laurent lowered his hand to Damen’s head, pushing his fingers into his hair absentmindedly. Damen could hear his breathing.

The bedding shifted, Laurent pushing himself up with his arm so he was turning himself around, now on his side so he was facing Damen. He brought an elbow to his pillow, pressing his cheek into his palm. His eyes roamed Damen’s body, moving along every inch of skin unabashedly. Damen’s hand found its way to Laurent’s hip, the skin very smooth beneath his palm.

“It amazes me,” Laurent said, “that you’ve remained entirely unmarred after your antics earlier.”

“I would hardly call it antics,” Damen said.

Dryly, “you started a tavern brawl against eight men for no reason.”

Damen frowned. “He insulted your honor.”

Laurent’s mouth twitched. He shifted his palm against his face, making himself more comfortable. “My loyal barbarian,” Laurent said. “How lucky I am to have you protecting my honor.”

“You don’t need anyone’s protection,” Damen said. “That doesn’t mean I’ll allow anyone to speak to you disrespectfully.”

Laurent said nothing, but his free hand drifted to his own hip, finding Damen’s fingers.

“You’re entirely capable yourself,” Damen continued. “So long as you’re fully stocked with olives.”

Laurent was grinning. “How did you know that was me?”

“Because you’re ridiculous,” Damen said. “I knew the instant one hit me in the face.”

Laurent huffed out a short laugh, one of his fingers trailing Damen’s knuckles. “You are impossibly large. It wouldn’t make much sense to miss you.”

“I’m sure that was it.”

Laurent was silent again, his thumb then sweeping Damen’s wrist, his expression thoughtful. He
lowered his hand, laying his head down properly on his pillow so he and Damen were better aligned, their faces closer together.

“I must say,” Laurent said. “I was a bit surprised.”

“Surprised,” Damen repeated.

“After our conversation,” Laurent said. “Around the fire.”

Damen’s brows pinched. “Which conversation?”

Laurent brought his hand to Damen’s neck, his finger moving along his collarbone. His touch was light, a suggestion of itself as he glanced up at Damen through his golden lashes.

“You had fought those men quite vigorously, at the inn,” Laurent said. “And then Alexon mentioned your encounter with the gladiator from Isthima.”

Damen blinked, feeling as if he was missing half of this conversation.

Laurent’s fingers were still sweeping against his skin. “If your blood was up enough after a few minutes in an arena with one gladiator to make you last six hours…” He shrugged his shoulders, the rest of the sentence trailing off.

Damen grabbed his hand. “You know it was seven.”

Laurent did nothing to remove his hand from Damen’s grip. He glanced down between them, at the minimal amount of space between them, neither of their bodies cleaned off yet. “That was hardly seven.”

Damen blinked again, looking at Laurent’s relatively straight expression, at the darkness outside the window, back at Laurent.

“We need to be on the road in a few hours,” he said, uncertainly.

Laurent nodded solemnly, seriously, looking as if this response was expected. He raised his body slightly, just enough to reach the blanket pushed to the edge of the bed. He began to pull it upwards, adjusting his body like he was making to tuck them in.

“Perhaps the hearsay of Damianos’ virility is a bit overstated,” Laurent said, pulling the blankets up their lower bodies.

Damen kicked the sheets off the bed, just barely registering the sound of Laurent’s laughter as he reached over him, grabbing at the phial of oil that was still half full.

The palace was a continuous hustle of commotion, messengers, coordinators and the council constantly working in tandem. The games were the following week and there was much to do. Things to plan out, go over and solidify, and there was little time to spare.

It was the third games that Damen and Laurent would be hosting in the palace at Delpha, and the first Akielon tradition that they had readily incorporated into the united kingdom. It was a much loved custom that was favored by most, giving everyone the opportunity to participate and show off their skill. Damen and Laurent would be meeting soon to discuss the finer details of it all with the help of Nikandros, as he had been participating in the games with Damen since they were boys. Damen had other business to attend to currently, but he had sent a servant to Nikandros’ room to have him know that the kings requested that he remain available.
Presently, Damen was on his way to the palace kitchens, a place he did not once frequent often but found himself at increasingly over the past few weeks. As he walked through the double doors, nodding his thanks to the guards who had pushed them open for him, an instantaneous shift could be felt in the room as he entered.

All sounds ceased. Knives froze midair, stirring stopped, ingredient assortment pausing. All servants scurrying around set down whatever was in their hands and prostrated themselves, and anyone of slightly higher rank stopped whatever they were doing and lowered their eyes, silent as Damen walked through the large kitchen.

“Rise,” Damen said. “Please, continue.” He motioned towards the separate workstations, prompting everyone to return to their task. Damen looked around the counters, seeking out the head chef who he spotted after a moment of contemplation. He was standing by a large mixing bowl, two containers of spices in his hands. He set them down as soon as he saw Damen approaching, wiping his hands off on his apron and straightening himself.

Damen did not plan to linger for too long, he was only here for a brief inquiring. They had been served a honey glazed chicken with yams the previous night and Damen had noticed that Laurent had taken a second helping, even lapping the remaining sauce from his plate with bread. He wanted to make sure it was offered to him tonight as well.

When Damen asked of it, the chef’s cheeks reddened, looking around at all the food around them. “I had not planned to serve anything similar two nights in a row, Exalted,” he said. “We only want to offer you and His Highness new delicacies, but if you would enjoy it again it would be our honor.”

“We would, thank you,” Damen said, feeling how odd the situation was. Royalty seeking a chef out, making request.

The chef flushed again, the nature of it different now, his face red with pride and the urge to please his kings. “Is there anything else we can do for you to make your meal more enjoyable?”

Damen’s eyes flicked around them, seeing sacks of flower, a woman to his right cracking an egg. Crates of vegetables and fruits lined the shelves.

“Something with oranges,” Damen said. “A pie, preferably. As sickly sweet as possible,” he added, only half joking.

The chef nodded profusely, his hands clasped. “It would be our pleasure,” he said, motioning towards another woman in a similar apron who Damen could only assume specialized in pastries. “You’ve graced us with your presence.”

Damen smiled politely, raising his hand in farewell before turning for the exit. Heads were lowered as Damen passed, feeling that he was too large and out of place for the hectic back and fourth of the room. As he made his way through and towards the door, he let his eyes roam a narrow table covered in vegetables, more piles of peppers in one place than Damen had likely ever seen. Damen was about to pass by the table without a second thought when he recognized the head of light brown hair.

Amis was holding a halved pepper in his hand, using the knife to scrape out all of the seeds, emptying them off into a side bin before adding the pepper to the already cleaned pile. Damen walked around to the front of the table, standing before him.

“Hello.” Damen said.
Amis glanced up, dropping the next vegetable he had picked up with a thud. “Exalted,” he said, rising from his chair in what Damen assumed was preparation for prostration. Damen raised a hand, motioning back towards the seat which Amis took reluctantly.

“I simply wanted to see how you were doing,” Damen said, knowing this too was incongruous for a king.

“I,” he said, looking down at the cutting board in front of him, covered in liquids and peals. “I am well. Thank you, Exalted.”

“And how fare your sisters?”

“The same.”

Damen nodded, stepping away. “I am glad to see you have found yourself here. You are a big help to the palace.”

Amis flushed in gratitude. “Thank you, Exalted. You and king Laurent are so kind, saying such things.”

Damen paused. “Laurent was here?”

“Yes.”

Damen looked back over his shoulder towards his surroundings, trying to imagine Laurent in his polished boots and fancy jacket, stepping gracefully around spilled batter and soured ingredients. He thought of Laurent here, in this same spot, speaking with a young bashful boy, trying to bring him peace of mind and comfort in a way that he knew only Laurent could do.

He left the kitchen with his thoughts occupied, his chest light.

Later, Damen walked down one of the hallways in the section of the palace adjacent to his rooms, making his way for Nikandros’ chambers. He had finished most of his duties, indulging himself in a rare soak in the baths before dressing himself and setting off to begin preparations for the games. He was nearly there, just turning the corridor when he came face to face with Laurent.

“Oh,” Damen said, feeling like the sun was streaming in brighter through the pillars. “Hello.”

Tight lipped, Laurent nodded back in greeting. They were standing by the wall, Nikandros’ door at the opposite end of the hall.

“I was just going to see Nikandros,” Damen said.

“So was I,” Laurent said.

“Oh?” Damen said, pleased. “Are you two bonding without me?”

“Hardly,” Laurent replied. “He isn’t nearly as fun when he’s not trembling with uncertainty around me.”

Damen motioned forwards with his hand, prompting Laurent to turn and walk with him down the line of doors.

“I was going to send for you from his chambers,” Damen said.
“Afraid to get me yourself?” Laurent said, but he turned away and knocked on the door before Damen could formulate a response.

It only took a few seconds before the door was pulled open, Nikandros standing there and glancing between the two of them.

“Is something confusing you?” Laurent asked.

Nikandros’ mouth was in a straight line, but he stepped aside, waiting for Damen and Laurent to enter before he closed the door behind them himself. Damen walked through the familiar room, having spent many days in here both with Laurent, or alone with Nikandros. He walked towards one of the smaller, narrower tables at the edge of the room by the wall, reaching for a pitcher of wine and pouring himself a drink. He turned to Nikandros who nodded his head, joining Damen.

Laurent was sitting at the table, sprawling in a comfortable position where both of his legs were stretched out, his wrist dangling from the armrest. Nikandros poured himself a drink as well and made for the table, sitting across from Laurent. Damen sat beside him.

They were mainly doing this for Laurent’s benefit. Damen and Nikandros knew how the games worked, they had been a part of their yearly routine for their entire lives. While this would technically be Laurent’s fourth games, he had no memory of either of them. He knew Laurent had read up on as many Akielon affairs as he could, working to educate himself as best as he could, but that was different than hearing of them firsthand.

“Will the kyroi be in attendance?” Nikandros asked, setting the goblet down after a long sip.

“Invitations are being sent out,” Damen said. “We are waiting for our messengers to arrive, but we can expect them, yes.”

“And I assume all the usual men will be competing.”

Damen looked to Laurent for his input, only to see him gazing off to the archway that led into the bedchambers. Damen followed his gaze and saw the fine silk of a dress strewn on the floor, a chiton only feet away. The bed was unmade, the sheets rumpled with pillows in disarray. Damen grinned at Nikandros approvingly, tilting his goblet forward.

“The servants had not yet been to clean my rooms,” he said, by way of explanation.

“You chose to occupy your free time while waiting for us with a woman,” Laurent said, not exactly a question.

Nikandros leaned his arms forward on the table. “Can you think of a better way?”

“I don’t see the appeal of indulging in women.”

“Damen used to,” Nikandros said, not unkindly. He sounded like he was simply carrying conversation.

With quirked lips Laurent said, “not anymore.”

Damen’s thoughts narrowed as he gazed at Laurent, taking in his comfortable posture.

“It’s not only other women I no longer see the appeal in,” Damen said.

Golden brows arched. “No?”

Laurent turned his eyes to Nikandros, something in it resembling one’s demeanor when sitting at an outside meal, swatting flies away. Damen felt like a certain part of his brain lit up.

“Well?” Nikandros said, referring to his original question.

“I assume the participants will be mostly the same,” Damen said. “And it will be the usual activities. Javelin and trident. Target practice and spear throwing, long and short sword, each one sectioned off to a different part of the day. And then of course, the okton.”

Laurent nodded in agreement, having spoken about this with Damen before, on one of their nights early on when they had been practicing Laurent’s Akielon.

“Well?” Nikandros said, referring to his original question.

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“What makes you think you’ve beaten me?” Damen asked helpfully.

“Of course I have,” Laurent said.

“Of course I have,” Damen said helpfully.

“Of course I have,” Damen said helpfully.

Damen turned to him with a grin. “You’ve yet to beat me.”

Laurent turned his eyes to Damen slowly, considering him for a moment before speaking. “Perhaps I didn’t want to harm your fragile ego.”

“I think,” Damen said, “that you simply can’t take me.”

Laurent set his chin on his fist. “You don’t think so?”

Damen looked at the loose arrangement of his limbs, the self-assured look on his face. With the proud lift of his chin and the lightness behind his eye, Damen had no idea what to think.

“We shall see,” Damen said, making himself speak.

Damen heard the sound of fingers tapping the surface of the table, prompting him to tear his eyes away from Laurent. He had forgotten Nikandros was there. Nikandros, who was looking between the two of them oddly.

“Both Veretians and Akielons compete in the games?” Laurent asked, turning to look at Nikandros
“Yes.”

“Well, Veretians don’t generally compete in wrestling,” Damen said.

“Why?”

“It must be all your Veretian sensibilities,” Damen said.

Laurent looked at him skeptically. “What?”

“All those wrists and ankles,” Nikandros added.

Laurent looked at the two of them. “I’m not understanding.”

“The sport of wrestling is done without clothing,” Damen said, lifting his wine to his lips.

After a pronounced pause, “you wrestle each other naked.”

“We do.”

Damen watched as a series of reactions flickered across Laurent’s face. He blinked, then frown, then blinked again. His eyes roamed the room, not really settling on Damen or Nikandros as he spoke. “And who is it that competes in this?”

Damen shrugged, looking at Nikandros with a tilt of his head. “The two of us,” he said. “Pallas has.”

“Aktis and Lydos, usually,” Nikandros added.

Laurent was looking at the pitcher of wine at the far end of the room, a muscle in his jaw clenched tightly. After a few seconds of this his expression changed, twisting as he turned to Nikandros.

After a moment, Nikandros’ expression mirrored Laurent’s. “We kept our clothes on,” he said, a bit loudly.

That seemed to settle Laurent’s reaction minutely, but he still looked a little dumfounded. “I don’t,” he said, rubbing at his temple with his fingers, ”understand your country.”

“It’s your country, too,” Damen reminded him.

“Is nudity really that odd to you?” Nikandros asked, sounding both genuinely curious and equally confused by the idea.

“It’s not the nudity,” Laurent said. “It’s the brazen, public flaunting of it.”

Damen rolled his eyes, setting his goblet down. “Veretian monarchy has sex in front of the council!”

Laurent frowned like Damen’s outburst made no sense. “How else is the council supposed to know the marriage has been consummated?”

“That argument is no more convincing now than the last time you made it,” Damen said.

Laurent observed Damen for a stretch of silence before something in his mind caused his mouth to twitch. “What is it,” he said. “Performance anxiety?”
Damen felt his mouth harden. “No.”

“That’s not exactly true,” Nikandros pointed out. “Remember that one girl from the village?”

“No,” Damen said.

“I think you do,” Laurent said.

Damen pulled a piece of parchment from the side of the table, slapping it down in front of Nikandros.

“Games,” he said. “Begin writing.”

“This is not my job,” Nikandros said as he took the quill from Damen, but there was laughter in his voice, similar to the laughter in Laurent’s eyes.

Excitement rushed through Damen’s body, pulsing through his veins as he knocked on Laurent’s door, just barely holding himself back from pushing it open and going to see him. He felt younger somehow, anticipation bubbling inside him at the thought of seeing twinned eagerness in Laurent’s eyes.

Damen went to knock again, the thrill of the good news he yearned to share overshadowing any concept of patience in his mind, and just as he raised a hand the door was pulled open, Laurent standing there with an odd look on his face. It was late, dinner having ended well over an hour ago, Laurent looked at him in confusion.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked.

Damen raised the rolled up blueprints to his shoulder, hearing the smile in his own voice. “It’s done.”

Laurent’s eyes flicked over to the papers in his hand, hesitating for a moment before speaking. “Is that-?”


It was Laurent’s eyes that lifted first, followed by the sides of his mouth, and then his entire face was lit up in the narrow, dim entryway. Damen watched each change with a sensation like birds in his chest attempting to take flight, his expression surely mirroring Laurent’s.

Laurent pulled the door the rest of the way open, stepping aside. “Come,” he said. “Show me.”

The first few ties of Laurent’s jacket were unlaced, trailing down the front and exposing the line of his collarbone, like he had been preparing for bed when Damen had knocked. Laurent paid no mind to it as if he was unbothered by the prospect of the flash of skin being visible.

Damen closed the door behind them, following Laurent into the main chamber and towards the table on the side of the room. Laurent sat at one of the chairs, turning his body out just slightly so he would be facing Damen.

Damen sat, moving all of the books and papers out of the way before setting the blueprints down, tearing off the string and unrolling it, spreading his palms along the surface so the entirety of it could
be seen. He placed an empty goblet on one corner and an inkwell on another, setting his palm down beside it, letting Laurent see.

Laurent looked, his back curving as he leaned forward, his gaze splaying over the image that was before them, his eyes scanning every inch. Every line, every word, working together to display the vision that the two of them had created. The room was silent.

Laurent was pleased. Damen could see it in the brightness in his eyes. In the calm, serene look on his face, like any other thing that may have normally been weighing down on him was forgotten, nothing but this bright thing taking place in his mind. Laurent was someone who took pleasures in small victories, but this was not small. This was something that Damen knew meant something to him. It was one of the reasons Laurent was an excellent king.

Laurent lifted his eyes to meet Damen’s, his head still tilted downwards towards the table. “When did you receive this?”

“Just now,” Damen said. “I was speaking with Jord in the east corridor when a servant approached me with them, delivered by our head architect. I came straight to you.”

“It’s late,” Laurent replied. “You could have showed me tomorrow.”

“You wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“No.” Laurent said. “I wouldn’t have.”

Eventually Laurent lowered his eyes, returning them to the designs. Damen had not opened them alone, wanting him and Laurent to experience them for the first time together. He moved his chair in closer, bringing his head in so he could see everything as well. Damen could feel the warmth from Laurent’s side, the fabric of his jacket pressing into his bare arm.

“The gardens,” Damen said, touching a finger to the section where the image was scrawled. They resembled that of the gardens in the summer palace, an idea Damen had demonstrated by showing Laurent sketches of the grounds there, suggesting that they would compliment the ambiance well. Laurent brought a finger to the same spot, allowing their skin to brush for a moment before moving it around the large parchment, spanning the images and patterns that would circulate the school, creating an additional pathway.

Their proximity hit Damen all at once, something he had not initially realized but was now solely conscious of. They were very close. Closer than Laurent generally allowed, their sides almost pressing. Laurent was aware of it, perhaps more aware than Damen had been until now. Damen could feel it in the careful way he was holding himself, despite the stillness of his features, the ease in his voice. Damen made himself speak.

“We’ll go,” he said. “Soon. We will see how it starts and how it will end.”

The hearth in the room was lit, and that too only came to Damen’s attention then. The acrid smell of smoke was in the air, the crackling of the flames loud between them. Damen focused on that, feeling as if he needed something persistent to keep him steady.

“How long as it been,” Laurent asked, his fingers trailing the shading of the building. “Since this was just an idea?”

“Long,” Damen said. “But all things worthwhile take time.” His heart throbbed in is chest. Laurent looked up.
“This is only the beginning,” Damen said. He took in the flicker in Laurent’s expression, the subtle shifts. Damen’s breathing was slow. He felt the crackle of the fire in his bones. “You should feel proud.”

Seconds were incremental, spanning into a minute of pause where nothing mattered but the look in Laurent’s dark eyes.

“We’re going to help them,” Laurent said.

“I know,” Damen said, helplessly. Because he knew that they would. He and Laurent could do together what they could not do apart. Damen knew this, and now, so did Laurent.

Laurent, who at times was so unclear, and at times was so familiar that Damen thought he could feel the imprint of him in his marrow.

Laurent, who never gave more than he wanted to, and never shared his private thoughts or feelings with those he did wish to.

Laurent, who sat less than inches away from Damen, looking at him in a way that ceased all rational thought, making everything else feel like a distant idea.

Damen felt it unfolding inside him, taking shape and reforming the way he felt everything. Saw everything.

They had been here before, in this particular situation. It was the same in the helpless feeling between them, the shallow breaths and the silent understanding of what was happening between then. What had been happening, slowly, tenderly, for the second time.

But it was different. It had to be, because Damen’s identity was exposed between them. Painfully, unmistakably. There were no lies, and no pretending. Laurent looked at him now. Laurent, with his unwavering gaze and his unsteady breaths, making Damen feel like he had been reduced to single heartbeats. To something delicate, something fragile, that Laurent could put back together with his stare alone.

Damen felt it, like a pull in his chest. Like there was an invisible string tethered deep inside him, and Laurent was pulling him in with just a crook of his finger. It took the words from Damen’s mouth and the breath from his lungs, allowing him to do nothing but jump, leap, to chase the rise and fall of Laurent’s chest and the look in his unblinking eyes.

He couldn’t speak, unable to risk disturbing the vulnerable space between them. Space that was closing, dispensing more with each passing moment. The seconds could be counted by each beat of Damen’s heart, each stronger than the last, thrumming in his body as he felt Laurent’s first breath against his face.

The thrumming grew louder, Damen’s pulse pounding in his ears like beating drums, and the blue of Laurent’s eyes was the last thing Damen saw before he pressed their mouths together.

The feeling of Laurent’s lips against his was a shock to Damen’s body, something that was so familiar but still made him feel revitalized, as if he was finally back in his own skin. It was a light touch, a gentle press that had Damen reeling, the mixed breaths of air between them stronger than anything else. But the first kiss led to the second, a slow, careful closing of the distance.

Laurent shuddered against Damen as their lips met, and Damen felt it in his own body, an unstable sensation that was only tampered down by the feeling of Laurent against him again. Breathing was an afterthought. The fluttering of Laurent’s pulse was rapid beneath Damen’s fingers as he cupped
his neck. Gently, so gently.

Damen felt the shorter hairs, soft against his skin as he slid his palm to the nape of Laurent’s neck, his hand fitting there like it was made to. Laurent trembled again, his body tense, but he didn’t pull away as Damen’s lips moved with his. All of Damen’s thought came alive, blood simmering in his veins as his head spiraled, each touch making him feel over sensitized.

Damen’s entire body throbbed, an ache that only intensified at the first parting of lips, the sweet rush of air between them that made Damen’s fingers itch to hold, to touch, to caress. Their lips met again and Damen thought, it’s finally happening.

And it was with that thought that Damen pulled himself away, feeling that that single act took more power than any deed, any battle he had ever fought in.

Damen’s heart was racing, his chest moving roughly. He thought if his pulse were not pounding so loudly in his ears, surely he would hear himself panting. He opened his eyes, his throat tightening further when he saw how close they still were. Laurent’s skin was hot, his face unreadable as his eyes came open, slowly, uncertainly.

If there was one thing Damen knew about Laurent, it was that he did nothing by halves. If Laurent started something, he intended to finish it. But Damen didn’t want this to be a course of action for Laurent. Something that was done in full, just so it could have been seen through to the end. Damen wanted it to be different. He wanted it to mean something. With that in mind and with a heroic amount of strength, he pushed away from the table.

Laurent looked at him, something akin to shock morphing his features as he lifted his eyes to follow Damen’s rising body.

“Where are you going?” He asked, in a voice that was both strong and unsure. His lips were still wet.

“My chambers,” Damen said.

“These are your chambers,” Laurent said, the words cutting in Damen’s chest and seeping into his bloodstream, awakening something inside him that he had tampered down for a while now. Damen closed his eyes. Breathed through the desire and want. Opened them.

Damen looked at Laurent now, and remembered the promise he had made him, that one night two years ago in a dimly lit inn in Mellos. The opportunity they had both wished for, if they had lived in a world where they had time.

“I want nothing more than to stay,” Damen said. “Which is why I am not.”

“Now,” Laurent said. “Is when you’re going to practice self restraint?”

Damen thought of what he would have done, had they met under different circumstances. He would have been charmed on sight, completely enamored and besotted by unparalleled beauty, intellect and wit.

Damen looked around the room, remembering all the moments they had shared here together, a haven for the two of them that no one could penetrate or disturb. No one else had witnessed what had happened in these rooms. What had grown, flourished between them throughout two prosperous years.

“I know you take your breakfast in these rooms,” Damen said. Speaking was difficult. “May I join
Laurent looked at Damen as if he had brought up the state of tax affairs, and he blinked once before saying, “breakfast.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Damen elaborated. “I would like to share your meal with you, here.”

Carefully, Laurent said, “Why?” He spoke like a man circling a trap slowly, like the way one would open an unmarked parcel.

Damen said, “to spend time with you.”

Damen saw the flush spread on Laurent’s cheeks, coupled with the look of confusion and inexperience and the desperate need to remain cool and in control. It made him look so young that Damen nearly abandoned his entire mindset in favor of pulling Laurent back into him. Laurent continued to look at Damen like he was waiting for a more thorough explanation, one that better fit his expectancies. When it didn’t come he said, with false casualty, “fine.”

Surely with time, Damen would have tried his luck for a kiss, a suitor daring his limits, but he would have stopped there. He would have worked to gain Laurent’s respect and affections. He would have taken his time, showing Laurent that they had all the time in the world for something delicate to grow between them.

“Tomorrow,” Damen said, unable to keep a smile off his face and tenderness out of his voice. He allowed himself a few more seconds to look at Laurent looking back at him before turning for the door, feeling lighter on his feet than he had in months.

He would have courted Laurent, treating him with all the grace and courtesy that he deserved.

And that was what he was going to do now.
Chapter 26

Damen stood outside their chambers, his arms braced on the door. His head was pressed against his forearms, fingers tapping the wooden surface.

It had been nearly two hours. Dinner had begun and ended without either of them in attendance, and through the midst of Damen’s anger he had still grabbed a servant roughly by the arm, telling him to have dinner sent to their rooms for Laurent, pity whoever it was that had to deal with his corrosive tongue in this state.

After that Damen had made for the training arena, not focusing on anything but the burning in his lungs as he pushed himself alone, not having it in him to fake pleasantries with anyone. When he was done he tossed his sword on the ground for someone else to deal with, wiping his face off with a cloth as he stalked out of the arena.

Damen took a deep breath, rubbing his face before pulling the doors open, not bothering with a knock. He doubted Laurent would acknowledge it anyway.

Damen walked through their chambers, ignoring the main room the instant he saw it was empty. He stood in the archway to the bedchambers, turning away when he didn’t find who he was looking for there either. He leaned on the wall, rubbing the spot between his brows for a moment before he heard a sound, prompting him to lift his head.

Damen looked across the room, his eyes catching on the balcony at the far end. The curtains were closed, but Damen could just make out the silhouette through the gauzy material, swaying lightly from the air rushing him. Damen stayed where he was, taking advantage of the moment where he could look at Laurent, the way he held himself when he didn’t know he was being watched.

He was sitting on one of the lounging chairs, a leg pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped around. He had not changed out of his tightly laced jacket yet and seemed oblivious to everything but the view before him, though Damen knew he was not really looking.

Laurent paid no mind as Damen swept the curtain aside, pretending as if he hadn’t even heard Damen step up next to him. He had of course. Laurent had told Damen multiple times that he could wake the deaf with the way he moved.

Damen took the seat next to Laurent, lowering his body slowly, leaning his weight on his knees. He looked at Laurent, seeing the muscle tightly clenched in his jaw, the flat line of his mouth. Laurent’s gaze was unswervingly on the horizon.

“You reek,” Laurent said.

“I was training.”

“Have they banned you from the baths?”

Damen exhaled slowly, squeezing the tension out of his face. Perhaps two hours of solitude had not been enough for Laurent.

“Should I leave?” Damen asked.

“I don’t know,” Laurent said. “Are you ready to be level headed, or are you going to continue throwing temper tantrums?”
“Are you ready to be rational, or are you going to continue reducing everything I say?”

Laurent turned to look at Damen, a slow turn of his head, the rigidity of his features unyielding. He said nothing.

Damen didn’t remove his gaze. He had never shied away from Laurent or his rage, and he was hardly going to start doing so now. This was not the first time they had been in this situation, and it would be foolish to think it would be the last. They were two people who were prone to anger, though they expressed it in different ways. Damen had long ago learned that what Laurent needed in those moments was space to clear his head. To think.

Damen straightened his body, placing his palms on his thighs. “Laurent,” he said. When Laurent remained mute, Damen said, “We cannot shut each other out whenever something happens.”

“I haven’t shut anything out,” Laurent said. “You stormed out like a child.”

Damen sighed, trying to keep his anger from resurfacing. Laurent’s initial fury was gone, carefully repressed now. He was no longer being corrosive, trying to invalidate everything that left Damen’s mouth. This was just his normal bite, and while it could be frustrating, it was the least of what Damen could handle.

“We knew this wasn’t going to be simple,” Damen said.

“I know that.”

“We knew,” Damen said, “that we were going to disagree on things. Not every decision was going to come easy.”

“I know that,” Laurent repeated. He brought his fingers to his temple, the first breach in his careful composure. “You are far too stubborn for things to be simple with.”

Against all odds, Damen let out a breath of laughter. “You really think I’m the stubborn one.”

“You can be,” Laurent said, dropping his hand and looking up at Damen. “When flailing your arms and raising your voice doesn’t get you your way.”

Damen felt the corner of his mouth lift, prompting Laurent to let out a long, slow breath of air that pushed against Damen’s chest.

“I know,” Laurent said, his voice a pitch lighter now. “That this isn’t going to be simple.”

Damen looked at Laurent carefully, only thinking for a moment before shifting back on his seat, extending his arm. Laurent’s eyes were on Damen’s hand, his entire body held in hesitation before his eyes flicked up, his hand carefully placed in Damen’s. Damen pulled Laurent towards him gently, spreading his legs enough so that Laurent could fit himself in between them, his back pressing into Damen’s chest.

They were still upset; Damen could see it in Laurent, could feel it in himself. But for now, Laurent let himself be held, and Damen let himself wrap his arms around Laurent’s waist. He placed his chin on Laurent’s shoulder, pressing his face into the warmth of Laurent’s neck.

Uniting two kingdoms was no easy goal, much less two enemy kingdoms fueled by years of hatred and prejudice. There were decisions upon decisions to be made, things to be kept and things that needed to change. It was going to be brutal, nearly impossible at times, and they were not always going to see eye to eye.
A few minutes of silence passed when Laurent shifted his body, turning so he could face Damen. The chair was large enough for the two of them to sit comfortably, and he pulled his leg back up, splaying his fingers across the knee. The look in his eyes reflected everything Damen was feeling.

“If it were easy,” Laurent said, “It wouldn’t be worth it.”

Laurent stood in the center of the room, his hands braced on the table in front of him. He tapped his fingers continuously, listening to the rhythmic sound they made and focused on that, and nothing else. Nothing related to breakfast or blueprints or stupidly fucking careful Akielons.

Laurent continued to inspect the carvings etched into the wood that spiraled around the sides and down the legs of the table when a knock sounded on the door, pulling him out of his stupor. He lifted his head, briefly considering the option of simply ignoring the sound before he righted himself, straightening his jacket along with the rest of his features.

Laurent pulled the door open, his gaze falling onto a single servant who held a large platter, laden with enough food that surely would have tipped the entire tray over had she not had practice in keeping her balance.

“Your Highness,” she said. She was generally the servant that brought Laurent his food. Laurent stepped aside, giving her space to walk past him and into the room, towards the dining area. Laurent could hear the sounds of dishes and cutlery being set down as he turned back around, readying himself for the smug, self-satisfied look.

Damianos looked at him calmly, most of his emotion showing in his eyes. “Good morning,” he said.

Laurent pursed his lips, waiting. Damianos simply blinked at him, not at all looking disturbed by being held up in the doorway. A part of Laurent expected for him to lean a shoulder on the wall, lips quirked.

“Good morning,” Laurent replied.

Damianos smiled, just as the servant stepped up beside them, her head lowered. Damianos stepped aside for her, his boulder of a body taking up most of the space in the doorway. She kept her head down as she exited, leaving the two of them alone.

When the silence became ridiculous, Laurent looked up at him impatiently. “Do you plan on coming in or shall I throw you a loaf of bread into the hallway?”

“Are you inviting me in?” Damianos asked.

Laurent narrowed his eyes. “What.”

“I would love to come in,” Damianos said. “If you’ll have me.”

Laurent let go of the doorframe, deciding to simply leave him there and go to the table alone. He didn’t know what Damianos was attempting with his show of chivalry, but Laurent wasn’t going to just idle around in the doorway for all to see. He took a seat, and looked back to see Damianos still lingering.

“Oh.” Laurent wanted to roll his eyes. “Just come in already.”

Laurent heard the door shut softly as he set his attention on the table, the soft patter of sandaled feet audible on the marble floor. He sat down in his usual spot by the window, the sun streaming in and warming Laurent’s back. There were pitchers of freshly squeezed juices, plates of sliced fruits and
cheeses. Multiple different dips and spreads in shallow bowls, a basket of rolls and pastries beside it. Laurent saw eggs, vegetables, and a multitude of other things that neither of them were going to finish.

“This is excessive,” Laurent said.

Damianos shrugged, pulling out a chair beside Laurent and sitting comfortably, his limbs sprawled. He looked at Laurent like he was waiting for him to say something. Laurent reached for a pitcher of grape juice, filling his goblet to the brim and taking multiple long sips. He set the goblet down heavily, turning to Damianos after. He looked at him pointedly.

Damianos said nothing, simply reached for a pitcher of grapefruit juice and poured himself a glass as well. He drank slowly, watching Laurent.

Laurent was already growing bored of the silent beating around the bush. If Damianos was intent on playing games and acting slyly innocent, he could do so on his own. Laurent leaned forward and reached for a slice of bread, smearing it with a cheese and olive spread. He took one large, deliberate bite.

“What are your plans today?” Damianos asked, reaching for a roll of his own and ripping it open with his hands, entirely ignoring the bread knife beside the basket.

“My plans,” Laurent echoed.

“Yes.”

Laurent gazed at him with all of the lack of amusement that he felt. He took another bite, chewing just as slowly as Damianos had sipped his drink, watching as Damianos lifted the bread to his lips.

“Why?”

Something about that elicited a short laugh out of Damianos, though he covered his mouth as it was still full of bread. He swallowed, taking another sip from his goblet before answering, “Does everything need an explanation?” he asked. “Can’t we simply make conversation?”

He looked at Laurent steadily as he spoke, always making eye contact with him, despite the impassivity on Laurent’s face. Or at least, what he hoped looked like impassivity.

Laurent tore his gaze away from brown eyes, returning his attention to the cool comfort of his drink. He reached towards a bowl of ice and dropped a few cubes into his glass, swishing the liquid around inside for a moment before taking a drink. He focused on the clinking sounds against the edges, the cold crunch against his tongue.

As he set the goblet down on the table, he saw Damianos’ hand reach for his, the heat from his skin radiating off him as their bodies neared. Laurent felt the closing of the distance in his ribcage, feeling like his insides tensed up in anticipation, and then felt instantly foolish when Damianos skewered a slice of pineapple with his fork.

Laurent turned to look out the window and onto the training yard, trying to think of anything but the noise in his head and the sensation of having swallowed something heavy. He watched the soldiers train in unison for approximately five seconds before deciding that this entire scenario was ridiculous.

“What is this?” Laurent asked, turning to him sharply.

Damianos paused with a hand outstretched, reaching for the plate of cheese. “What do you mean?”
“You know precisely what I mean.”

Damianos brought his hand back to his lap, looking at Laurent contemplatively before replying. “We’re having breakfast.”

Laurent nearly threw a handful of berries at him in vexation. There was an anticlimactic sensation inside him, there had been once since Damianos walked into the room, and him treating a shared meal by choice like an ordinary thing was only fueling Laurent’s annoyance.

“Why don’t you say why you’re really here,” Laurent said.

Frowning, “Why don’t you tell me why I’m here, if not for a meal?”

“You are not stupid,” Laurent said. “Stop acting like it. It’s unflattering.”

“Laurent,” Damianos said, in a tone that was becoming more natural for Damianos to use with him, more familiarity and ease behind it than Laurent knew what to do with. “I told you I wanted to spend time with you. I don’t lie to you.”

“You spend time with me every day.”

“Not like this,” Damianos said, as if Laurent was supposed to know what this was. What this meant. “I want to be here because you allow me to, not because you have to.” And Laurent was grateful that he used the term allow rather want, because he would not have been able to answer otherwise. As it was, words were not forming, everything in his head contradicting and skewing as if all aspect of his thoughts were in a sparring match.

“Do you think I have any certain expectations?” Damianos asked slowly, and Laurent scoffed at that, resting his elbow by his plate.

“You can have whatever expectations you like,” he said flatly. “I live to defy them.”

Damianos grinned at his words, and Laurent had to take another bite of food to push down the odd feeling in his throat.

Eventually, in a voice that did not invite further comment on the matter, “If I did not allow you to be here, you would not be.”

Silence for a few uncertain beats, and then Damianos turned his attention away from Laurent and back to the spread of food, grabbing the first platter in his reach. He began to pile on eggs, topping it with a mix of vegetables. He put an additional roll on his plate and a few slivers of cheese, adding a spoonful of granola to the side.

“Are you a horse?” Laurent said, watching as Damianos reached for a sliver of watermelon.

“I’m rather large,” Damianos replied, as if anyone with even an ounce of vision was unaware. “My body needs sustenance.”

Laurent added food to his own place as well, slicing a peach into small chunks so he could add it too his mix of fruit and yogurt. He mixed everything up, sprinkling a spoonful of sugar after before taking his first bite.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, nothing but their chewing until Damianos looked at him. “Can I make you something?”
Laurent looked at the different platters, then at his already full plate. “What?”

Damianos motioned to the general direction of the food, repeating his question. When Laurent didn’t reply, he seemed to take it as an interest on Laurent’s part, when it was merely just confusion. Damianos reached for one of the flaky pastries, ripping a junk off and using a knife to cut it lengthwise. He then spread a thin layer of butter to it, followed by berry jam and then a third spread that Laurent did not recognize. He drizzled the tiniest bit of honey to it before setting the small spoon down, handing the pastry to Laurent.

“What is this?”

“Poison,” Damianos replied flatly, in a tone similar to the one Laurent had used.

Laurent looked down his nose at the offering. “It looks vile.”

“I suspect it is vile,” Damianos said. “From all the sugar, which is exactly why you will like it.” When Laurent kept his hands to himself, Damianos quirked a brow. “Shall I feed you?”

Laurent took the pastry out of his hand simply to stop his mouth, and then proceeded to look at it oddly, not understanding what the point of this was.

“You can select something for me to eat, if you try it,” Damianos suggested. Laurent looked at him blankly, grabbing his crusts and peach pit and dropping them on Damianos’ plate. And then to shut Damianos up, he took a bite.

The taste was not what Laurent was expecting. It was sweet, that was for certain, but the jam offered tartness and the spread Laurent did not recognize added a savory element to it, the different flavors somehow working together.

“Well?” Damianos asked.

Laurent took the final bite, wiping his fingers off after. “Bland.”

“I saw one of Jeurre’s granddaughters make it during dinner a few nights ago,” he said through his grin. “I thought you would enjoy it.”

“Don’t overrate yourself,” Laurent replied. “It was not your own combination.”

Damen reached for the grape juice Laurent was drinking, topping off Laurent’s goblet before filling his own. He reclined in his seat comfortably, stretching his legs out beneath the table, crossing them at the ankles. He took a casual sip, not seeming in any rush despite the fact that they had finished eating and were technically done.

Laurent looked at the door, and then back at Damianos who had his head tipped back, leisurely sipping form his drink like he had nowhere else to be.

“Comfortable?” Laurent asked.

“Immensely so.”

“That’s good to hear,” Laurent said. “It’s not as if a king has obligations or duties throughout the day.”

“I much rather prefer where i am.”

“A pity,” Laurent said, pushing away form the table and rising. “One of us needs to be productive,
seeing that we have a kingdom to run.” He began to walk for the door, knowing Damianos would follow behind him, which he did. Laurent grinned to himself before turning back around to face him, resting a shoulder on the wall by the door. Damianos mirrored his position beside him.

Laurent simply remained that way for a few seconds before motioning to the door handle. “You know how to use it.”

Damianos stayed how he was, not appearing to be in any hurry, despite Laurent’s clear dismissal. He did not seem unnerved, or intimidated by Laurent’s cool gaze on him. He adjusted his stance, fitting himself against the wall so that he was more comfortable.

“Thank you,” he said.

Laurent wasn’t sure what exactly it was Damianos was thanking him for. They had had a meal that they would have eaten regardless of where they each were located for it. He opened his mouth to voice exactly that when he felt a light, brief touch that clamped Laurent’s mouth shut quicker than it had opened.

Laurent’s entire body tensed; he felt it from the bones in his hand to the tips of his toes. Damianos’ fingers had swept against his wrist for just a moment but Laurent could still feel the incongruity of it, coupled with an odd sensation like his skin was searing.

Damianos didn’t say anything else after that, simply pulled the door open and left without so much as a backwards glance. Laurent only lingered there for a moment, his own fingers pressed to his wrist with his brows drawn before he turned, going back into the room.

Laurent stood in the training arena with his hands clasped behind his back, eyeing the swords that lined the wall in thought. He had been here for around ten minutes waiting, and just as impatience was beginning to creep in, he heard the first sound of footsteps. Not the familiar sound of Veretian boots that he was accustomed to hearing in here, but the soft patter of sandals that he had been expecting.

Laurent looked over his shoulder, lifting his chin in greeting. “Nikandros.”

Nikandros stopped a few steps in when he noticed Laurent, one leg outstretched slightly. He looked around before gazing at Laurent skeptically.

“You seem confused,” Laurent said.

“I was told to meet Damianos here,” He said.

“Were you?” Laurent tilted his head. “The servants seem to be defying my instructions.”

Nikandros frowned. “Well, I was told to meet the king.” He said nothing more after that, his voice trailing off purposefully.

“Have I been dethroned?”

Nikandros looked at him. Laurent looked back.

Warily, “you- want to spar with me?”

What Laurent wanted was to be able to use his mind properly again. For some reason lately it felt as
if he couldn’t think, as if something was clouding his better judgment and he needed to regain some semblance of a clear head. Jord was a good swordfighter. Not better than Laurent, but good. However, Laurent knew all of his tricks, all his methods. Sparring with someone for years would give you that familiarity, but the downside of familiarity was that it was effortless. Sparring with Jord allowed Laurent to fall into a basic pattern of back and fourth, and did not require any thought on his part.

So, Nikandros.

Pulling two swords off of their hangings on the wall, Laurent said, “If you think you can take me.”

Nikandros looked as if Laurent had invited him to step into quicksand together. With caginess he said, “I’ve seen you spar before.”

“Then you know I’m better,” Laurent replied, tossing him the sword.

Nikandros caught it with ease as if playing catch with blades were a common pastime for him. He continued to observe Laurent with obvious hesitation, as if unsure if this were some form of trickery. Despite this he began to adjust his body, shifting his stance in an almost unconscious way. He straightened his back, adjusted his footing, though his grip on the hilt remained languid.

Laurent unleashed a striking blow, not offering any warning beyond the preamble of their conversation.

Nikandros dodged it, swinging his sword up and blocking the hit with ease, not even taking a moment before returning it to Laurent with just as much ruthless strength. Laurent parried, and then proceeded to deliver a two-strike sequence that drove Nikandros back a bit, but otherwise did nothing to disturb either of their breathing.

“Should I feel honored that you seem to have a habit of coming to me for help in training?” Nikandros asked while advancing on Laurent with three quick strikes, each one coming from a different direction.

“I’ve seen you in the yard before,” Laurent replied, meeting each blow with minimal effort, hardly even being pushed back. “This is my gift to you: the offer of improvement through training with a king.” He went for the shoulder.

Nikandros blocked Laurent’s attempt, their swords meeting with a heavy clash, the sound of steel loud and screeching in their ears. Laurent felt the force of it in his wrist, the strain from the pressure of resistance. “I train with Damen every day,” Nikandros said.

“We’re not talking about Damen,” Laurent replied, breaking the hold and stepping out of Nikandros next strike, moving in a fluid turn that had him behind Nikandros with ease. He aimed for his back, not feeling any reservation of the dangerous angle because he knew Nikandros would manage to turn in time.

Nikandros did, meeting Laurent blow for blow, and Laurent was finally starting to feel the traces of fatigue in his arm. Nikandros was good, better than most of the swordsmanship Laurent had observed, and despite the general straightforwardness of his Akielon techniques, it was something new to evade. As they continued to parry and counter, Laurent felt that he was finally able to apply his thoughts to something again, his head temporarily no longer feeling like it was in the clouds.

Laurent sat at the table that night during dinner feeling very much out of his element, which was not
something he was accustomed to, nor was he comfortable with. Laurent was an adaptable person. He always knew the landscape of a situation and was skilled in knowing how to navigate it. He prided himself on reading people, their intentions and motives, and knowing how to act in response to their actions, how to achieve the desired outcome. Now, Laurent was stuck in uncharted territory and he was unamused, to say the least. On top of everything else Laurent already had on his mind, he had to deal with navigating whatever convoluted game Damianos was playing.

A few minutes upon the meal commencing, Damianos had motioned over a servant and in hushed tones inquired if they could perhaps check the kitchens and see if they had any of the sweetened rice tossed in almonds and spices; the very same that Laurent had taken a secret liking to but had never stated. He had glanced narrowly at Damianos and received nothing in turn but an innocent smile. On the way to the great hall, Damianos had asked for Laurent’s opinion on a certain novelist who was renowned in Vere for her symbolism, wondering if Laurent had recently read anything of hers of interest. This too had derived a blank stare, and an unfurling of frustration in Laurent’s chest.

Laurent didn’t have the slightest notion of what seemed to be going on, or what in turn was expected of him. For all of his Veretian roots and unparalleled skills in sophistry and doubletalk, Laurent still found himself struggling to make sense of Damianos’ angle.

As the meal neared its end, Laurent found himself in conversation with Vannes who had returned from Vask the previous afternoon. As ambassador she handled most of their dealings with the matriarchal kingdom when letters were not enough and a personal visit was not possible.

“I have spoken with Herode,” she said, her goblet dangling between loose fingers. “I am told the plans for the new school have been finalized.”

“They have,” Damianos said, immersing himself into the conversation neatly.

“Have the two of you been to the property, since?”

“We had not yet found the time,” Damianos replied, looking to Laurent. “Would you like to go tomorrow?”

Construction had only gone that day. Damianos had told him that last night when he had arrived with blueprints in hand, before he had showed Laurent the finished outline. Before-

Laurent wanted to go. He knew that logistically it would have not been enough time for much leeway to be made, but he wanted to see the property again. He wanted to feel again the pride in what they were creating together.

“Yes,” Laurent said. The sides of Damianos’ eyes crinkled as he smiled.

Eventually they looked away from each other, the two of them fitting their gaze elsewhere. Damianos looked down at the remnants on his place, Laurent back at Vannes.

“How were your meetings?” Laurent asked her. She finished off the last of her wine, setting in down before recapping the news of her negotiations.

Laurent retuned to his rooms that night exhausted, weary to the bone, though he held his head high as he walked through the halls, straight-backed and steady. The day had felt long and trying, and he relished the thought of retiring to his bed.

Laurent approached his door, two guards standing on either side, their gaze unwavering, unflickering
until Laurent was in their direct line of view. He saw one of them shift slightly, something of his presence alarming them, calling them to attention. Laurent stopped at the entrance, raising a brow.

“Your Highness,” the guard on the left said, taking something from behind him and extending it towards Laurent. “This was brought for you.”

Laurent looked down at the parcel in his hand, not seeing any note or letter on the outside. “By who?”

“One of the servants had it brought over earlier,” the guard replied. His expression was unyielding, giving nothing away. Laurent simply looked for another few seconds before taking it, waiting for the doors to be opened for him. He walked into the main room and through the archway, entering the bedchambers with the parcel in his mind, setting it down on the small side table as he began to undress, beginning with his jacket, his eyes never straying.

When Laurent was in nothing but an oversized bed shirt he sat down on the mattress, pulling the package onto his lap. It was small, not much larger than a book, the cover being held tightly by a golden string, wrapping around the box horizontally and vertically. Laurent shook it a little, frowning when he heard nothing and felt no weight in his hand. For all he knew, it was empty.

Laurent untied the string with an easy flick of his wrist, pulling it through its simple loop and setting it down on the side. He lifted the cover, dropping it carelessly when he noticed a narrow parchment placed inside. He ignored the contents beneath it, his focus narrowing when he immediately recognized the looping scrawl.

Laurent,
I hope these are an adequate replacement, and that you will allow me the grace of your presence for breakfast tomorrow morning.
Damen

Laurent turned the parchment over, not entirely sure what he was looking for but feeling as if he needed some form of explanation. He continued to stare down at the words, his finger on the ink as he tried to make sense of the words.

Eventually he set the parchment down, bringing his gaze to the inside of the box. He moved the thin piece of cloth aside, setting it down beside the card before finally looking to see inside the box.

Laurent looked. And looked.

Laurent reached into the box, an odd, tingling sensation in his fingers as he pulled out the contents. The gloves were simple, the leather feeling cool and smooth to the touch, creaseless and unworn. They were a deep brown shade, a near perfect match to the saddle of Laurent’s horse.

Laurent looked back at the card, blinking at it aimlessly before bringing his attention back to the gloves. Laurent’s attention was wavering, his thoughts feeling muddled as he tried to make sense of this, of why he was receiving-

An offering? A gift? It was not even close to his birthday, but that still didn’t feel right.

Laurent’s breathing felt shallow as his mind continued to spin, his lip between his teeth. He thumbed at the material, thinking of how long it had been since he had ridden with proper gloves, securing his hold and preventing friction. They felt well made, sturdy, and Laurent couldn’t quite suppress the curiosity of testing the fit of them.

Laurent slid them on slowly, one finger at a time, his heart behaving strangely as his hands became
encompassed in warmth.
double update this week bc why not act on my impulses
also, i finally put a chapter count up! I'm almost done with the fic and have the last few
chapters very roughly plotted, so if anyone is curious it should be somewhere around 36
if not that.

Damen brought his hands to either side of him, bracing his fingers against the mattress and
changing his grip, beginning to shift his weight.

“Don’t even think about it,” Laurent said, not bothering to look up from whatever it was he was
writing at the desk on the opposite end of the room.

Damen tightened his grip, his nails bighting into the sheets. He let go of his weight, dropping his
head back on the pillow.

“Enough of this,” Damen said. “I can get up.”

“You can get up when Paschal says you can get up.” Laurent licked his finger, flipping to a fresh
page and beginning at he top.

“Laurent,” Damen said, frustration roughening his voice. “I am the king. There are things I need to
oversee, matters I need to attend to.”

Laurent glanced up briefly, hardly sparing Damen with a blink before looking back down. “That’s
what I’m here for.”

“I want you here,” Damen said. He preferred to ignore the fact that this was temporary and that
Laurent would have to return for Arles eventually to stabilize his own kingdom. “But this is
ridiculous. I have suffered many injuries before. I know my limitations.”

Laurent ignored him.

Damen brought his hands to his face, rubbing at the skin exasperatedly, trying to keep his irritation
in check. He looked between his fingers and saw Laurent engrossed in his readings, his thumb
sweeping against his chin as he tapped his fingers on the desk. Damen lowered his arms, pressing
his elbows into the bedding and pushing, slowly.

“Damen.”

Damen exhaled roughly, resisting the urge to throw a pillow at Laurent’s head. Laurent, who hadn’t
even acknowledged Damen as he admonished him like he was a house pet crawling between his
legs, a minor disturbance as he worked.

“You didn’t even see me,” Damen said.

“The amusing thing,” Laurent said, finally lifting his blue gaze to Damen. “Is that you truly think
you are subtle.”
“I am going to throttle you.”

“You need to get out of bed to throttle me,” Laurent replied, returning to his work with a placid smile.

Damen let out a slow breath, deciding to give it a few more minutes before trying again. He brought his arms behind his head comfortably, turning his head so his cheek was pressed to his pillow, his eyes on Laurent sitting at Damen’s desk, in Damen’s chambers, in Damen’s kingdom. Damen liked it. He liked the way Laurent seemed to fit here, despite the obvious way he stood out, a stark, bright presence that you couldn’t ignore if you tried.

It had been five days since Damen had woken dead in the night, his senses still disoriented as he had blinked sleepily, trying to recall the unfamiliar surroundings. He had turned his head, shock stalling his motions for a moment as he realized that he was not alone in the bed.

Laurent lay there on his side on top of the covers, his hair falling into his face, still dressed in the bloody, tattered chiton. He had been breathing deeply, his face pressed into the pillow in exhaustion. One hand was by his face, the other only inches away from Damen, clutching the sheets even in sleep as if he were holding Damen’s hand.

Damen had shifted in his place, trying to adjust his body so he could better face Laurent, hissing unintentionally when he felt a burning sensation in his side. He stopped moving immediately, trying to even out his breathing, but the impact was instantaneous. Laurent’s eyes snapped open at once as if waiting for the slightest movement on Damen’s part.

It took Laurent a moment to acclimate to his surroundings as it had Damen, blinking rapidly through sleep-muddled eyes. It only took a few seconds however for him to understand, because a moment later he was pushing himself up, rising onto his knees shakily.

“Laurent,” Damen said. His voice was oddly hoarse.

“Damen,” Laurent said. His eyes wouldn’t stop moving over Damen’s body. “Damen.”

He inched himself closer, bringing his hands to Damen’s face and cupping his cheeks in a gently way that was very unlike Laurent but somehow still felt right. His thumbs were sweeping his cheekbones, his chest visibly unsteady, and then his lips were on Damen’s. He could feel Laurent shaking.

“You’re awake,” Laurent said. His voice was hoarse in a different way.

“Of course I’m awake,” Damen said. “It was just a light wound.”

Laurent closed his eyes, breathing out something like choked off laughter. Damen took his face in his hands and pulled Laurent back into him, trying to move him so he was lying on top of Damen.

“No,” Laurent sad against his mouth, pulling away from Damen roughly. “Don’t touch me.”

Damen frowned. “But-“

“No,” Laurent repeated, putting more space between them. “No strenuous activity.”

“Supporting your weight is hardly strenuous,” Damen said.

“No.”
Damn looked at him a little petulantly and Laurent sighed, moving back next to him just enough that he could run a finger down Damen’s cheek. “You’re awake,” he whispered again.

Before Damen could answer he laid back down, arranging his limbs carefully so as not to shift the bedding, which was really just excessive. The situation really wasn’t so dire.

“Will you at least get under the blanket?” Damen asked.

“No,” Laurent said. “Stop talking. You need rest.”

Damen wanted to argue but he knew it would serve pointless, and begrudgingly, could already feel the fog of sleep starting to settle back over him. Damen closed his eyes, his heart beating slow in his chest with the sounds of waves coming in from outside, the comforting knowledge of Laurent’s presence in his bed, inches away. A few minutes of silence had passed, the sheets feeling cool against Damen’s bare torso. In those last few moments between consciousness and sleep, Damen thought he could feel Laurent’s hand, brushing against his.

A knock sounded on the door then, pulling Damen out of his reverie. He brought his hand to the side table, gripping the edge. “I can get it.”

“Try that again,” Laurent said, pushing up from the desk. “And I will retrieve another cuff and chain your ankle to the bed.” He made for the door quickly, ignoring the look Damen gave him as he settled back against the cushions. Damen expected one of the physicians to enter, annoyance unfurling inside him at the nuisance of their prodding and insistent questions.

Damen was surprised to see Laurent walk back in alone, but felt that same displeasure when he saw a bowl of steaming broth in his hand, which was a nuisance in another way.

“I’ve had enough broth,” Damen said morosely. “I would rather meat.”

“Pity,” Laurent said. He cradled the bowl in one hand, using the other to pull a chair towards Damen’s bed, setting the bowl down before turning to Damen. He took hold of Damen’s sides, reminding Damen, again, to only use his feet as leverage as he used his own considerable strength to pull him up enough that he was sitting upright, his back resting against the headboard. Damen tried not to feel like a toddler.

Damen looked at the broth distastefully. “What use does broth have for a flesh wound?”

“It was not a flesh wound,” Laurent said, again. “And I don’t know. I’m a prince, not a physician.”

“You will be a king, soon,” Damen reminded him.

Through the flush on Laurent’s cheeks he said, “We can read about it, if you like, seeing as you’ll have plenty of spare time in this bed.”

Damen glared at the broth before lifting his gaze to Laurent. “My time on bed rest would be more tolerable if you were here with me.”

Laurent looked down his nose at him. “Have you listened to a single thing the physicians have said?”

“Yes,” Damen said, pushing a strand of hair away from Laurent’s face.

“Are you listening to me?” Laurent asked, swatting Damen’s hand away. “Damen.”
“Yes,” Damen repeated. The skin behind Laurent’ ear was very soft.

Laurent set the broth down heavily on the table, taking both of Damen’s hands in his and holding his wrists tightly. “Listen to me,” he said. “If you do anything to strain your wound or open your stitching, I will return to Arles immediately and leave you here to navigate this alone.”

“No,” Damen said. “You won’t.”

Laurent leveled him with a cool gaze that would make anyone else look away, but Damen knew where Laurent’s gravity was stemming from and it made happiness throb inside him. He felt his mouth twitch.

Laurent’s eyes narrowed as he handed Damen the broth. “Eat.”

Damen was light as he walked, feeling as if the soles of his feet were treading through clouds. He thought he may have dreamt the previous day, or perhaps he had just lain awake in bed all night, playing over memories that felt too ethereal to be real.

Damen was aware that he was smiling as he pulled on a chiton, pinning it in place as the sun rose over the horizon. He was aware that he was smiling as he had one of his guards call for the servant that had fetched breakfast the previous morning. He was aware that he was smiling as he walked through the halls in the early morning light, somehow repressing the urge to clap anyone who passed him on the back.

Damen had to work particularly hard form letting the tender happiness he felt show through as he sat in the same spot as the day before, doing his best to remain composed.

The meal had begun similarly to the previous one; Laurent staring at Damen across the threshold with very obvious skepticism, looking as if he was waiting for some grand reveal while Damen simply stood there calmly, unbothered by the pronounced silence. That led to an additional stretch of silence which included what Damen was sure to be more internal conflict and confusion, and eventually resulted in Laurent entering the room, Damen eagerly on his heels.

The servant had arrived that day a few minutes before Damen, and the table was already covered in spreads of foods, some the same as yesterday and many things new. Damen knew he was staring, watching as Laurent tested certain things and loaded his plate with others immediately, and he made himself go through the motions of selecting food, putting it on his plate, taking bites. All he wanted to do was look at Laurent.

Damen longed to know what was going through Laurent’s head. His mind was a labyrinth, and though throughout the years he had learned to navigate the complexities of it and confidently had a better understanding of Laurent than anyone else, this was different. This was vulnerable for both of them, because neither of them had been here before.

He knew that Laurent was unnerved and on edge, constantly on alert. Laurent was someone who needed control in a situation, and he struggled profusely with letting go of it. Damen could see how he was trying now to maintain some semblance of it, despite the fact that he was unsure how to proceed. Damen broke the silence first.

“Would you like to visit the grounds after we eat?”

“Fine,” Laurent said, spreading butter on a cracker. He held Damen’s eyes as he took his first bite, an almost daring nature to it. For all of Laurent’s discomfort, he did well in not showing it. There was no doubt in Damen’s mind that a part of Laurent felt awkward and out of bounds, but rather retreat
into himself, he made himself seem bolder.

Damen reached towards the fruit platter and selected a bright green one, it’s top separating in pointed sprouts. Damen sliced it open with one of the sharper knives, the inside of it bright pink will small, black seeds throughout. The seeds were edible, and they added a tang to the fruit’s overall sweetness.

Laurent was looking at it with his nose slightly scrunched. “I have never seen this before.”

“No,” Damen agreed, setting one of the halves on Laurent’s plate. “They grow specifically in Lentos.” It had been one of Laurent’s favorite delicacies during their stay at the summer palace. Damen had had a crate picked and sent to them.

Laurent continued to look at it, turning it over in his hand. “I assume you expect me to eat it.”

“That is typically what’s done with food.”

A pale brow arched. “Is there any particular reason you think food is the key to wooing people?”

Damen couldn’t help the grin that broke out on his face. He felt like his cheeks might split form it, boyish pleasure over brimming inside him. “Am I wooing you?”

Laurent flushed the instant the words left Damen’s mouth. It was instantaneous, his cheeks staining like pomegranates as he visibly tried to tamper the unwilling reaction down.

“I simply know what you like,” Damen said.

“Yes,” Laurent said. “Two years worth of memories would be advantageous.”

Hesitantly, “there is no upper hand, here,” Damen said softly.

Rather reply, Laurent cut a slice of the fruit and placed it in his mouth, a bit less hesitantly than the pastry Damen had made for him yesterday. Damen watched as he chewed, knowing he enjoyed it and would likely not say so. He remembered the smell of sea salt around them, the taste of the fruit’s juices dripping form Laurent’s fingers.

“I prefer the warmer weather,” Damen heard himself say, as Laurent continued to eat. “And I don’t like raisins. When I was young, I refused to eat from the bread the chefs baked them into.”

Laurent said, after a pause, “I like the cold.”

He took the remaining half from Damen’s plate.

Damen arrived to the stables as quickly as possible after they had finished breakfast, only stopping by his chambers long enough to change into pants and a loose shirt. It was generally warmer inside the palace, allowing Damen to wear his chiton until the wintertime. However, it was chilly enough outside now that Damen opted for his selection of Veretian clothing.

Damen heard the leaves crunch beneath his boots as he walked to the stables, the sounds becoming softer as he stepped onto hay and dirt. Damen looked around the stalls once, seeing that he had arrived first this time. Laurent nowhere in sight. He made to turn down the right towards where his larger stallion was kept, but after a moments hesitation, made for the left.

Damen approached her, extending a hand towards her neck as she lifted her head as he approached. It still felt out of character for Damen to take the time to caress an animal, but everything felt as if it
were becoming brand new to him again.

Damen remembered the first time he had seen her, looking through a large selection of different breeds before he had reached her stall. He could immediately see Laurent on her, the way she would move beneath him like the two were connected, creating the perfect picture in Damen’s mind. Damen knew the instant he had set his eyes on her that she would be the perfect gift for Laurent.

“I don’t think she is quite suited for your proportions.”

Damen started, his hand falling away from her flank. He turned around and saw Laurent there, a shoulder casually on the post, arms crossed. Damen’s eyes lowered slightly towards the spot where Laurent’s hands were tucked in beneath the crook of his elbow, and his heart soared when he noticed brown leather peaking out, barely visible from the way his hands were positioned. Damen had looked around the room when he had enter to see if he would spot the box, or the gloves. He had not, but that hadn’t really surprised him.

Pulling his eyes up he said, “I don’t think she would let anyone but you ride her, even If I tried.”

The sides of Laurent’s mouth lifted as he pushed away from the wooden post, walking up beside him and setting a hand behind her ear. Damen watched as he scratched lightly, his smile widening as she huffed air out of her nostrils, turning her head like she planned to arch into Laurent’s touch.

Damen left Laurent with her, preparing his own horse and then tugging on the reins, walking into the yard with Laurent on his heels. His shirt billowed in the wind as he swung into the saddle, some of the top laces left open so he could still feel the air against his chest. He heard Laurent mount his own horse and together the two of them turned down the path, riding out the back gate.

They kept the pace steady, the early hour meaning they had a whole day ahead of them to take their time. They kept to their usual route, passing through the village and slowing the horses further when they reached cobblestone so as not to jostle anyone passing them. A mother walked with her two children, a man balancing two crates of cabbages in his arms. Many people noticed them as their cuffs were on display; some stopping in their tracks to gawk, some waving their hands erratically, calling out excitedly.

It was only when they detoured off the road and into the trees that Damen turned his horse to face Laurent’s, reining in. They were about a fifteen minute ride away from their destination, the grounds here opening up into a vast field, large, clear stretches of grass ahead of them. Damen focused on keeping his eyes on Laurent’s, not letting them stray to gloved hands gripping the bridle. Laurent looked at him oddly, glancing around at their surroundings.

“Have you injured yourself recently?” Damen asked.

“Excuse me?”


“Compromised,” Laurent repeated.

Damen lifted a casual shoulder causing Laurent’s eyebrows to pinch, a line appearing in his forehead. He looked at Damen for a few seconds, the trees rustling behind him as a gust of wind picked up, causing the laces trailing down Damen’s throat to sway against his chest. Laurent’s eyes flicked over Damen’s shoulder, staying there for a moment as they settled on something. Damen shifted in his saddle as he waited for Laurent to look back at him, one hand comfortably on his thigh. He opened his mouth to attempt a different approach, considering his best
course of action. The moment he did Laurent looked back at him, a new look in his eyes. Before Damen could speak, before he could think, Laurent was tugging hard on the reins with a pivot of his body and then he was gone, galloping away faster than Damen had seen him ride in weeks.

As Damen sat there in started surprise of how simple that had been, he thought he heard the distant sound of laughter, getting farther and farther away from him. Damen bashed in it for only a second before he was whirling his horse around, squeezing his thighs together and spurring his own horse forward.

Damen leaned forward in the saddle, driving his horse forward at the speed he needed to catch up with Laurent at the rapid pace he was going. Laurent was galloping fluidly, effortlessly, golden hair flying around him as he made his way around rocks and through trees, occasionally changing his seat as he squeezed his thighs together, taking his horse into the air and over fallen tree barks, simply because he could.

Damen loved to watch Laurent ride. It was one of the few times he saw Laurent absolutely let go, moving like he was an extension of his horse, two parts of a larger whole. Initially Damen hung back a bit so he could admire Laurent; his exquisite seat, the way he occasionally looked back with a breathless smile on his face to gage Damen’s distance.

Evidently, he was behind because Laurent was simply better.

Eventually Damen managed to progress enough that they were neck and neck, the two of them riding at an equal speed, only minutes away from the school grounds at that point. Laurent looked to Damen and nudged his head to the right, indicating that they would take that option of the two possible routes. As Damen shifted his seat and gripped the reins differently, Laurent took left, evading Damen with another bout of laughter.

Undeterred, Damen pivoted his body and directed his horse to change courses, wheeling it around and charging for Laurent as quickly as possible. He pushed a little harder, a bit more than was likely necessary in an airy valley full of clouds and the bright blossoms that managed to hold on throughout the falling of the autumn leaves, and his efforts were rewarded when he managed to push ahead of Laurent.

Damen wasn’t sure how long they went like that, at a certain point just going back and fourth in circles, doing everything they could to trick the other, each temporarily gaining the upper hand and leaving the other behind. Eventually Damen was the first to stop, tugging back on the reins so that his horse halted, blowing air out of its nose roughly.

Laurent reined in next to Damen gracefully, his chest moving rapidly, his eyes bright and alive from the race. Damen ran a hand through his hair, feeling his own chest’s rise and fall.

“It was a good effort,” Laurent said. “On your part.”

“I would call it a draw,” Damen said.

Laurent turned to look over his shoulder, lifting a hand above his eyes and squinting into the direction past a hill. “The grounds aren’t too far form here,” Laurent said, dismounting as he spoke. “And I don’t want to leave the horses there. Let’s walk the rest.”

Damen dismounted as well, wrapping the reins around his fist as they walked their horses towards one of the smaller trees amongst a cluster of cherry blossoms. The branches were hanging low, some dipping low enough that Damen would have to bend his body to stand below it. The area was well shaded and the grass was covered in fallen flowers, a scattering of petals.
Most of the tree was bare, its entirety mainly made up of twigs and wilting blooms, though there were some flowers that had maintained their beauty, a lovely pink and white that stood out in the open field.

“I’m surprised these have lasted so long,” Laurent said noncommittally, his eyes focused on his hands as he secured the two of their horses to one of the extended branches, a series of methodical pulls and tugs.

Damen’s eyes roamed their surroundings, falling to the arch of Laurent’s back as he hunched forward slightly. The strand of hair pushed behind his ear, the smooth line of his neck, porcelain skin peaking out of his collar.

Damen felt ungainly, a foreign self-consciousness taking over as he stepped forward, under one of the brightest, most intact flowers he saw. He felt nervous and out of his element, his hands shaky and clumsy as he reached up and picked the flower off of the branch with ease. Laurent turned around at the low sound of the twig snapping, his lashes fluttering rapidly as his eyes zeroed in on the flower in Damen’s hand.

It looked odd between Damen’s fingers, his hand seeming very bulky and rough against the delicate fragility of the light pink petals. It much more suited Laurent’s graceful hands and elegantly long fingers, the contrast softer against his ivory tones like something out of a portrait.

“Here,” Damen said gently, feeling like his heart might leave bruises against his chest.

Laurent didn’t move, his entire body held in stiff tension as his mouth gaped slightly, looking down as if Damen was offering him something he had never seen before and didn’t entirely trust. Damen waited patiently, consciously keeping his manner casual as he waited. And waited.

Eventually Laurent’s eyes lifted, his gaze undecipherable as he took the flower from Damen’s hand, and Damen was rewarded with the heady sight of Laurent’s cheeks coloring, a lovely pink shade that resembled that of the flower. The nature of which he took it was somehow a cross between the way one would lift a baby kitten and the way you would pick up an insect that you planned to let out the window.

Laurent looked down at it between his fingers uncertainly, looking every bit the young man who had just received some display of affection and had absolutely no notion of how to respond to it. He turned awkwardly, lifting the flap on his horse’s saddlebag and slipped it inside, closing the bag after. Damen supposed that he very well could have tossed the flower onto the ground had he wished to, and he felt his own cheeks color in turn at the thought of Laurent keeping it somewhere so close to his adored horse.

Laurent turned back to Damen stiffly, and Damen couldn’t help but remember the sight of a white flower tucked behind Laurent’s ear.

“Thank you,” Laurent said, though it came out sounding more like a question than anything else. “Though I don’t know what use you believe I have for flowers, especially considering that the gardens at the palace are full of them. This was not my first time seeing one.”

There were different ways Laurent acted when he was uncomfortable, grappling for control. Sometimes he was crude. Others, he became abrasive. Most times, he talked more.

“You’re welcome,” Damen said.

Laurent remained where he was, his back only inches away from the bark of the tree. His hands
were at his sides, his chin tilted back as he looked up at Damen, that same undecipherable look in his eyes. Damen felt the roll of his own throat as he looked down at Laurent, feeling like the breeze around them had stilled, everything around them stopping but the movement of their chests.

It was Damen who looked away first, because that was the right thing to do. He breathed cool air into his lungs as he pulled himself away, stepping into the direction of the path they needed to take.

“Come,” Damen said. “Let’s walk.”

Damen and Laurent had stayed at the schooling grounds for somewhere around an hour, talking with the workers and observing their progress. It was very early in the whole advancement and not much was there to show for it yet, so after seeing all that there was and getting a feel for the entire process, they bid them goodbye and began to make their way back to the field.

They were silent as they walked, the two of them somewhere in their own heads, basking in their accomplishments. Damen couldn’t help the occasional glance at Laurent out of the corner of his eye, a part of him not believing that they were actually there, together. More than once he opened his mouth to speak, ultimately deciding to let the silence speak for itself.

The first thing Damen realized when they reached the field was that they were not there alone. As the two of them made their way down the path, the grass long and sweeping against their ankles, Damen noticed two women standing off on the side a few yards away from the cherry blossoms, their eyes on a cluster of small children. A handful of boys and girls no older than ten, some sitting on the ground and playing hand games, some chasing each other around.

Damen and Laurent saw the women before they noticed the two of them. They were standing very close to each other, entirely preoccupied with watching the playing children.

“Hello,” Damen said as he and Laurent neared.

The woman with darker hair glanced at him briefly, the look you give a stranger who’s nothing more than a minor inconvenience. She nodded briefly as she turned back, and Damen saw the moment recognition registered. She gripped the hand of her companion and turned to the two of them rapidly.

“Exalted,” she said, lowering her head. “Your Highness.” Damen wasn’t sure if they had seen them before in a parade or large gathering where he and Laurent addressed the masses, or if it were their displayed cuffs that gave their identity away.

One of the youngest boys heard the sound of the honorific, tugging on the arms of two of the girls near him. Everyone who was sitting cross-legged scrambled up, circling Damen and Laurent in a swarm of wide, unblinking eyes.

“You are the kings,” a very young girl said, looking at the gold on Laurent’s wrist in awe.

“We are,” Laurent said.

“Why aren’t you in your palace?”

“Abella,” One of the women said in a warning tone.

“We had business to attend to,” Damen said.

A boy standing behind one of his friends stepped forward, his fingers in his mouth.
“I like your horse,” he told Laurent timidly, watching as Laurent untethered her from the branch. “My eldest sister has one just like it. She’s teaching me how to ride.”

“And how do you like it?” Laurent asked.

He frowned slightly, kicking at the ground. “I’m still having trouble mounting.” He kept his eyes on the grass like he was ashamed by his admission.

The corner of Laurent’s mouth lifted, his eyes warm on the boy causing Damen’s heart to feel too large for his chest.

“Would you like help?” Damen asked impulsively. “Laurent is a very good teacher.”

“No,” One of the women said loudly, perhaps his mother or caretaker. “You are too kind Exalted, but we must be going.” Her companion nodded, taking two of the children’s hands. Most of them pouted, looking like they wanted nothing more than to stay and converse with their kings.

Laurent lowered himself to the boy’s level, looking him in the eyes as he spoke. “I was very young when I started riding,” he said. “And I had difficulty mounting as well.” He lowered his voice like he was sharing a secret. “I had to use a stepping stool.”

The boy grinned shyly and Laurent smiled back as he stood, his demeanor light as the children waved goodbye, allowing themselves to be pulled away, taken to the opposite direction and leaving the two of them alone.

Damen looked at Laurent, and it was not just impulse but a matter of powerlessness that had him stepping up to him, putting the two of them beneath the floral shade beneath the tree. Damen felt remade with the helpless need to touch Laurent again, in any capacity that he would be allowed, because ignoring Laurent’s pull was as foolish as ignoring gravity.

Slowly, hesitantly, Damen reached a hand out, his fingers slowly wrapping around Laurent’s hand, grazing his palm. He felt Laurent lock up immediately, his entire body seizing with unsure tension as his hand became stiff like steel. Damen kept his eyes locked on Laurent, making his intentions very clear as he slowly lifted his hand, giving Laurent every chance to withdraw or step away.

Damen knew if he slid his fingers down just a little bit, he would feel the fluttering of Laurent’s pulse in his wrist, rapid like butterfly wings. He felt his breath hit Laurent’s hand, his lips brushing the smooth skin above his knuckles, impossibly soft, and it was with a dizzying rush of emotion that Damen felt his hand push forward, just slightly. For the second time that day, Damen was gifted with the unbelievable sight of Laurent’s cheeks coloring.

“Let’s return,” Damen said, leaving Laurent to stand there as he turned for his own horse, mounting effortlessly.
Chapter 28

Damen sat with his legs drawn to his chest, his body warm from the heat emitting from the hearth. Outside the wind howled, the only sound in the room other than the crackle of the fire. He watched as the flames ate at one of the logs slowly, the embers smoldering. Smoke billowed up from the burning wood and curled in the air, filling the room with a warm ambiance that soothed the chill coming in from outside.

“Here,” he heard, looking up to see Laurent standing above him, a mug in his hand. “Drink this.”

Damen hadn’t heard him approach as he had removed his boots earlier, his socked feet soundless against the marble floor. He had removed his jacket as well and wore only his pants and a loose shirt, the collar unlaced so that it nearly dipped off one shoulder, exposing the smooth curve and the line of his collarbone.

“What is it?” Damen asked, taking the drink from Laurent’s outstretched hand, watching as Laurent sat across from him and crossed his legs, placing his hands in his lap. He looked down into the mug and saw a deep, berry colored liquid.


“My throat is fine.”

“Right,” Laurent said. “Just as your nose isn’t stuffed.”

“I’m fine.”

“I can see that,” Laurent replied. “Now drink.”

Damen lifted the mug to his lips, albeit a little petulantly. The tea was thick and far too sweet, and Damen swallowed with a scowl on his face, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You are incredibly dramatic,” Laurent said.

“And you’re excessive.”

“It is not excessive to drink tea or medicate yourself when you get sick.”

“I’m not sick,” Damen said. “I’m just a little cold.”

“You’re also stubborn,” Laurent said. “I told you to wear something heavier if you wanted to go out into the snow.”

“I wore a jacket,” Damen replied. He looked back at the fire, thinking of the feel of it in his hands and the way Laurent’s cheeks had reddened from the wind. “It was much colder than I expected,” he muttered.

“I know,” Laurent said. Damen looked to him and saw that he was smiling.

Laurent reached over and took the tea out of Damen’s hands, setting it down on the marble floor beside them. He then leaned forward on his knees and pushed Damen’s legs down so they were straight on the ground, and before Damen could react he was climbing into Damen’s lap. He situated himself easily, leaning his head on Damen’s chest.
“Comfortable?” Damen asked.

“Yes,” Laurent replied, taking Damen’s arms and wrapping them around him.

“I can’t drink my tea if I’m holding you.”

“Shut up,” Laurent replied, pressing a kiss to Damen’s exposed neck. “You weren’t going to drink it regardless.”

“You would have found a way to make me.”

Laurent reached beneath the blanket that was covering Damen’s body, wrapping them around his midsection. Damen tugged it around himself tighter so they were both partially covered, kissing the top of Laurent’s head. He knew if he looked behind them out the window he would see the continuous flurry of snowflakes falling, being blown around by the wind and covering the palace grounds in sheets of pure white. He remembered the way Laurent had looked against it, standing in the cold carelessly as his shoulders became covered, his eyelashes glistening.

“You like the snow,” Damen said. His hand was beneath Laurent’s shirt, warm against his stomach.

Laurent nodded. “Do you?”

Damen shrugged. “It’s nice, I suppose,” he said. “Nothing like what I’m used to. I don’t know that I could live in it.”

“No,” Laurent agreed. “I don’t think you could either. You would miss the ocean too much.” His fingers trailed Damen’s thigh as he spoke. “Vere is very different from Akielos in that regard. I experienced all four seasons growing up.”

“Akielos is mainly summer, with the occasional heavy rain.” He tightened his arms around Laurent. “Which was your favorite season as a child?”

Laurent shrugged against him. “Autumn, maybe. Auguste liked winter.”

“Really?” Damen smiled.

“Yes,” Laurent said. “He would wake me up early and sneak us out of the back exits of the palace so we could play outside together.”

“What?” Damen said, pulling away, a little shocked. “In the snow?”

Laurent looked up at Damen, an amused look on his face. “Yes, Damen. In the snow.”

“Laurent, it’s freezing.”

“I was a child, Damen,” Laurent smiled. “All children play in the snow.”

Damen blinked, trying to imagine a younger Laurent wrapped in heavy furs, knee deep in the snow. “I’m having a hard time imagining it,” he admitted.

Laurent leaned his head back on Damen’s chest, gazing up at him with his eyes only. “I was not easily coaxed,” he amended. “I was a prickly little thing, and as much as I enjoyed the sight of it, I would have much rather sat in Auguste’s room while he worked and read a book. Auguste would pout like a child and beg me to indulge him.”
“Did he like it that much?”

“I don’t think so,” Laurent said. “He was doing it for me, I know that now. He didn’t like that I was surrounded by so much seriousness and wanted to give me opportunities to just be a kid and play.”

Damen’s smile lingered, though he felt the way it changed in nature. Laurent noticed, the way he noticed everything when it came to Damen. He lifted himself just enough to press a chaste kiss to Damen’s lip, looking in Damen’s eyes for a moment before turning himself back around. Damen breathed through the dull pressure on his chest, bringing an arm back around Laurent’s waist.

“So,” Damen said. “Tell me what games you would play with him.”

The days seemed to be passing in a blur; a certain kind of routine setting in. Mornings were all spent the same, easy conversation and subtle glances amidst a different spread of foods each time. Days were spent rigorously filled with demanding work and constant training, leaving little room for much else. Nights were spent in the dining hall, the two of them sitting beside each other at the head, looking as if they were sharing a secret.

Laurent didn’t think about those past few days, those past few weeks, because he didn’t know what to think. As he sat at the table in his usual spot, his eyes on a tree that’s leaves were slowly turning orange, he thought of nothing but the churning he felt in his stomach at the thought of the familiar knock that would come on the door at any minute.

When it eventually came, Laurent was up and out of his seat much quicker than he liked to acknowledge. He pulled the door open calmly and with expectancy, but found himself pausing when he came face to face with a servant rather warm brown eyes.

“Your Highness,” she said, lifting her tray minutely to indicate the reason for her presence.

Laurent nodded his head, stepping aside and allowing her to enter. He could hear the sound of glasses and metal dishes being set down as he lingered, eyeing the empty hallway with uncertainty.

He was still there when she finished, still listening for the familiar sound of his name, deep and rich like melting dark chocolate. He turned upon her approach, looking at her like she had an explanation for the notable absence.

Shifting slightly, “Is there anything else I can do for you, Your Highness?”

“No,” Laurent said. He waited for her to leave before shutting the door, the silence in the rooms feeling very thick. He eventually made for the long narrow table, focusing on the tapping of his boots against the marble as he stood at the head, placing his palms on the side. He looked at the spread before him, noting the absence of apricots and olive spread, drumming his fingers slowly.

It was only when he pulled out his chair, sitting himself down that he noticed the note, the parchment folded over once, wedged between two pastries. Laurent glanced at the door as if it would open on command, his lip between his teeth as he pulled the paper free.

Laurent,

Unfortunately I will not be able to join you today, though there is nothing I would rather do. Nikandros has coerced me into a meal so he can go over certain matters with me, as apparently I’ve been distracted.

You can finish the book you were reading when I arrived yesterday. I noticed you were near the end and I know you don’t like leaving things unfinished. You’ve recommended it to me before, you will be fond of the final chapter.
You can also eat as many of the cherry cookies you like, being as I am not there to pretend like I haven’t noticed how many you’ve snuck onto your plate.
I’ll see you soon.
Damen

It took Laurent more than a minute to realize that he had read the note multiple times, his finger tracing the ink on the paper. He pushed away from the table and made for the bedchambers, unsure of what look was on his face but pleased that he did not have to see it. He opened the drawer beside the bed and slipped the letter in thoughtlessly, hiding them amongst the rest.

Laurent sat back at the table, crossing his leg across his knee as he reached for a pitcher of juice, filling up his goblet. Instinctively he turned, readying himself to fill a second goblet, and paused when he was faced with an empty chair.

Laurent blinked, setting the pitcher down with a loud thud. He had quite literally just read a letter that Damianos would not be joining him, yet he still slipped into this mindset that he was there, because that was what had become natural.

It was that fleeting thought that gave Laurent pause again. Natural. There was nothing natural about this.

But that was just another question that had been floating around Laurent’s head for days. He had no idea what this was. Scheduled breakfasts and sarcastic comments that bounced between the two of them as easily as reciting their names. Going to sleep with his mind buzzing and waking up slowly, feeling the sun stream in through the windows and across his body as he rolled onto his back, his chest light as his eyes fluttered open.

Laurent heard a harsh scratching sound, and looked down to see that he had cut through his bread roll too roughly, pushing down and onto his plate with a scrape. He dropped the knife beside his napkin, taking a large bite from the roll and ignoring whatever thoughts had been slowly filtering into his mind.

It was the new school. It was the optimism of the children and the overall success of the empire. Things were happening, progression advancing before his eyes and Laurent was getting caught up in it. That was all this was. He was doing nothing wrong.

Laurent was reaching for a platter of cut fruits, contemplating between a peach and a pear when he heard a knock on the door, prompting him to stand up rapidly, the peach falling from his hand and rolling between the dishes. Laurent stood there, listening to the clinks as it moved along the table, fueling his annoyance. He made for the door, irritation with himself causing him to yank the door open a bit too roughly.

“What?” Laurent said, his face pinching in confusion when he saw that it was Jord.

“Apologies, Your Highness,” Jord said. “Am I interrupting?”

Laurent’s eyes narrowed. “What would you be interrupting?”

“I—” Jord blanched, pressing his lips together. He did nothing for a moment, eventually repeating nothing more than, “apologies.”

“Did you want something?”

“I wanted to know if you planned to train today. Enguerran requested my help in implementing new drills, I was unsure if you had other plans occupying your day.”
“No,” Laurent said, flatly. He would not be training that day. His mind was a whirlwind of confusion, and he knew that the training arena and its rhythmic back and forth would not help him sort through his tumultuous thoughts. Laurent needed clarity. He needed to think, and he knew where he needed to go. “I don’t require you today.”

“Your Highness,” Jord said, dipping his head.

Laurent remembered the first time he had come here.

He remembered the way he had stormed through the palace, trudging through the gardens until he reached this secluded area, anyone attempting to seek him out only needing to glance in his direction to see that he was not to be disturbed. He had approached the statue slowly, taking in the surroundings of what had been his brother’s favorite flowers as he lowered himself to the ground, pulling his legs into his chest.

He remembered how he had felt. So much anger, bitter and coiling inside his throat like it would reach around his lungs and squeeze. His stomach tight with what felt like searing acid. He thought the bones in his fingers would crack form how tightly his fists were clenched. Anyone could have seen him, sitting there in front of a pillar of carved stone. He hadn’t cared.

And now Laurent sat in the same spot, just as confused and at a loss as he was then, but it was different. Everything was painfully different. Then, his ire and confusion was targeted towards the entire world, and towards circumstances he could not understand. Now, anything and everything he felt was targeted only to himself, because he could now understand what he had not then, and that was terrifying.

It was a compilation of everything, making him feel too much at once. The clenching of his fists were like an assurance that he would not claw at himself in helpless desperation. The unpleasant tightness in his stomach had changed drastically in nature and felt more like a violent fluttering, like Laurent had stepped off the edge of a building or was constantly balanced on a tightrope. He wasn’t sure when he had begun feeling these things, when the dread of seeing someone had turned into anticipation. But really, what did timing matter when the outcome was all the same.

Laurent felt like he was drowning in it all, and the bitter irony of it was that the one person who he thought could alleviate the sensation and make him feel airless was the reason he was here. There was no one else who understood, who could ever understand. Laurent was a pragmatic person and he always had been, since he was a little boy, analyzing everything around him like he could navigate an entire court with his mind alone, and so that was what he would do then. In the cold whistling wind with his hair whipping around him and his lungs heavy in his throat, Laurent found himself thinking of the one person he did not wish to, but could no longer ignore. He thought of his uncle.

His uncle who Laurent knew so well, just as much as he had known Laurent. Laurent thought of chess, the large board on which they had all lived for years, long before they realized their lives were nothing more than someone’s personal game. How they were all simply pieces in his hands, different things for him to knock out of his way before he reached the end, checkmating all in his way. Obstacles averted, threats removed. No one was safe. If someone did not perish one way, they would perish the next. If the heir wearing your crown was not cut down, you cut him down yourself.

Laurent knew this. In his heart, in his mind, he had known this. His uncle had wanted the throne, and he would have stopped at nothing. He would have done anything and everything to feel the solid
presence of it at his back. His brother had never been safe. Not in a court like theirs with a
transparent heart like his.

But that knowledge, that aching, painful knowledge could not dispense the memory of swords
clanging, clashing, metal ringing out across a field so that Laurent thought he might have felt the
impact of it in his own bones, hidden away on the peak of the hill, watching.

Laurent thought of that. He thought of the cold exteriors he had built around himself gradually. The
hours upon hours spent in the training arena, pushing his body to limits it was never meant to reach.
The days he had dragged himself up from the ground by the hilt of his sword, just barely throwing
himself into bed to do it all again the next day. He thought of the sketches he had seen and the
techniques he had practiced, always preparing himself for the day he would finally face him and get
the opportunity to meet cold, soulless eyes.

Laurent thought of that. He did. He clinged to it like a man slipping off the edge of a precipice, and
while those thoughts lingered, he could do nothing to rid the other thoughts slipping in, caving him in
like a rockslide.

Laurent saw brown eyes, large and honest, every possible hint of feeling and emotion helplessly
reflected in them. He saw a person who had stepped away when Laurent had feared him and had
been there when Laurent needed him, time and time again. He saw a man who treaded his way
through kingship with fairness and honor in a way that was so familiar to Laurent that at times it hurt
to experience. He saw gentleness. He saw kindness.

The pressure of his brother’s death would always be heavy on Laurent’s shoulders, on his heart, but
he could no longer deny to himself that there was one person who managed to make that weight a
little less heavy, and Laurent didn’t know how to reconcile that.

Laurent saw the past. He always would to a degree, because there would never be a time in
Laurent’s life in which he didn’t see his brother, but Laurent could see him now, and he could
practically feel Auguste’s presence, here, in his mind, like a hand on his shoulder. The approval and
the happiness that Auguste would emit, because he had found someone who treated Laurent with the
same guileless affection as he always had.

One day you might meet someone who makes you happy.

Laurent looked up at the statue helplessly, the tilt of the chin and the proud stance, and suddenly he
was a boy again, visiting a statue every day, pacing in circles and speaking words that he knew
would never be returned. Laurent longed to hear something, a piece of advice that he could hold on
to and carry with him forever. But despite the impossibilities, time had done nothing to change
Laurent’s knowledge of his brother. He knew what Auguste would say now, just as he knew what
he would say then, all those times he had gone to him. Seeking guidance and a solace to feeling so
alone.

“You would have probably been friends,” Laurent said. To his brother. To himself. “You’re both
stupidly artless and think everyone is your ally. I would have likely had to spend half my time
ensuring that you weren’t naively befriend all of our enemies.”

Distantly, he felt a drizzle of water misting against his face, heard the patter of it on the stones
surrounding them. Some time since Laurent had arrived there, the clouds had covered the sun
completely.

“I don’t know how this happened,” Laurent said. His fingers dug into the grass on his sides, his nails
biting into the dirt. It was wet; his fingers slid right in. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”
Laurent brought his hand to his mouth and squeezed at the skin, closing his eyes as he exhaled slowly. He let his hand linger there, feeling the press of his lips against his palm. He remembered sitting at the table in his chambers, long after he had been left alone to stare blankly into the hearth, the tips of his fingers on his lips that still felt like they were buzzing. He still felt like that, sometimes.

Laurent dropped his hands, looking up into the empty, stone eyes of his brother. They still hadn’t gotten it right. Auguste’s hair had been longer. His nose was smaller.

Would you forgive me? Laurent wanted to ask, and didn’t. He already knew.

Laurent walked through the halls quickly, determinedly. He took the stairs and the winding turns, making for his destination with no other thoughts in mind, no other distractions. He ignored the guards that stood at attention, looking ahead but making it clear that they were there to serve however he requested.

Laurent didn’t bother knocking when he arrived. He didn’t wait for the guards to acknowledge him or reach for the handle to open it for him. He just stepped up to the doors, bracing his arms on the wood and pushing them open himself.

Laurent heard the doors shut behind him as he stepped into the main chambers, taking one look around and seeing that they were empty. He looked again and saw that the balcony was vacant as well, not seeing the silhouette of a body through the gauzy curtains. He didn’t stop, nor did he turn around and leave. He simply walked the rest of the way in, making for the alcove that let into the bedchambers, the only other area in the rooms.

Laurent still didn’t know what he was doing, or why he had come here. He hadn’t thought about or, or taken a moment to consider what his objective was. He had eventually stood in the gardens, saying goodbye and making his way inside and out of the rain. The moment his foot touched marble, he was walking. Coming here, like his body knew before his mind did.

Laurent lingered in the doorway, seeing him sitting at a smaller table by the window, going over something in his hands. Laurent said nothing, simply waited.

Damianos looked up upon his entry, shock and confusion registering on his face before he pushed away from the table.

“Oh,” Damianos said, rising with a smile. “Hello.”

Laurent didn’t respond, just watched Damianos stepped around the desk.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “I didn’t hear you enter.” And then, “Why is your hair wet?”

Laurent said, “I’m fine.”

Damianos waited for him to elaborate, or explain his presence. When he didn’t, Damianos looked around them briefly. “Were we supposed to meet?”

“No.”

Damianos didn’t say anything. Laurent didn’t say anything. They just looked at each other, waiting to see who would be the first to break the silence.

It was Damianos. Eventually he said, “I don’t understand.”
That for some reason irritated Laurent. He felt as if Damianos spoke out of turn, as if he didn’t have claim on those words. On that sentiment. He took a step forward.

“You don’t understand?” he asked. Damianos looked taken aback by the reaction, by the rise in Laurent’s voice. With a frown, he watched Laurent take another step forward.

“I-“ Damianos started, but instead said, “Are you upset?”

“What?”

“Have I upset you?” Damianos specified.

He was making it worse. Everything Damianos did; every word, every gesture, every look. It only added to the growing pile of things that made Laurent feel like he was slowly losing his grasp on all of reality. He had barged in on Damianos’ rooms without permission. He had been brusque, and Damianos was concerned over Laurent’s emotions, on the verge of apologizing when he had done nothing but defy all of Laurent’s preconceived expectations.

“Stop,” Laurent said.

“Stop what-“

“Stop,” Laurent repeated. “Stop with this. With whatever it is that you’re doing. Whatever you’re trying to prove.”

That seemed to anger Damianos in turn, who’s brows pinched, his back straightening so he seemed to tower over Laurent, despite the feet that separated them. “And what is it that I’m doing?”

Before Laurent could answer, Damianos took another step between them, slowly closing the distance. Laurent felt the close proximity in his chest. “Tell me,” Damianos insisted. “What is it that I’ve done?”

“You-“ Laurent said, but he didn’t know how to finish it. He didn’t know what to say, because he didn’t know.

Something on Laurent’s face, something in his eyes must have sparked something in Damianos, because his entire demeanor changed, in an immediate way that was entirely jarring. His eyes softened, the anger dispensing like it hadn’t been there to begin with, snuffed out like a flame. The tightness in his shoulders visibly suppressed, and he took a small, careful step forward like he was nearing a spooked animal.

“Please,” Damianos said, his voice soft in a way that anyone who didn’t know him would never expect. “Just tell me. Tell me whatever is going on so I- so I can try.”

Laurent closed his eyes. He felt like any form of steel in his body was slowly melting into butter, and looking into Damianos’ open gaze wasn’t going to help him hold on to any resolve he might still scrape together.

“What do you want from me?” Laurent heard himself ask. He thought it was him. He hardly recognized his tone.

Eventually he opened his eyes to see Damianos in the same place, looking at Laurent with an implacable expression. When he spoke, it was like the words were being pulled out of him.

“You know what I want,” he said. “But I only want you to be happy.” When Laurent pressed his
lips together he said, “would distance make you happier?” he spoke like the words alone pained him, like they cut something deep inside him, marring him.

Laurent didn’t reply. Partly because he couldn’t, but mostly because he knew the look in his eyes answered that question in ways words could not. There was nothing he wanted less.

It was Laurent who stepped closer. It was Laurent who was closing the rest of the distance. With each step forward that Laurent took Damianos took one back, as if he was giving Laurent every chance to back away, to stop whatever it was that he was doing. Eventually Damianos’ back was at his desk, his thighs hitting the cold marble of it, Laurent in front of him.

Laurent could see the way Damianos’ body was reacting to the proximity, the way he tried to control his breaths so that they appeared calm, even. Laurent could see it, because he could feel it in himself. The way his heart felt like it was going to bang out of his chest, his pounding pulse seconds away from ripping his skin open. He didn’t care. He didn’t care about anything else.

Laurent knew. He knew why he was there, and in that moment, he couldn’t bring himself to be convinced that this was wrong.

“Laurent-“

“Stop talking,” Laurent said. His voice was strong, and that was good, because the same could not be said for any other part of himself.

Obediently, Damianos did not speak again. He looked down at Laurent, every part of himself open and on display and Laurent thought; it is not just me whose insides are being bared.

Laurent’s hand moved like it had a mind of its own, and the smooth touch of skin was a spark to Laurent’s entire body. He felt soft, shorter curls graze the tips of his fingers, and Laurent let himself just focus on that, the grounding touch of skin against skin, a neck pulse beating in tandem with his own.

Laurent felt like the ground was going to slip out from under his feet. Like he was going to be pulled into some dark unknown and swallowed whole. And with brown eyes on his and slow, unsteady breaths against his face, Laurent thought that that might not be so bad.

Laurent was always so controlled. He closed his eyes again and for once, allowed himself to lose control.

The first touch of lips was as dizzying as it had been the first time, something inside Laurent somehow both tearing apart and clicking into place, making Laurent believe that he might never feel hollow again. Laurent heard the shocked inhale against him, filling Laurent up so that he might burst at any moment. Laurent didn’t think about that. He didn’t think of anything else but the slide of lips pulling apart, the solid press of forehead against forehead.

It was quiet in the room, a deafening silence that was only interrupted by the steady pace of rain, battering against the windows. Laurent focused on the heat emanating into his body, the sturdy press of another chest against his own, giving Laurent the strength to hold himself upright when he thought his knees might buckle.

Laurent thought they would pull away. He thought that that had been enough, that the point had been made, his stance clear. Just as he had begun to gather himself and prepared to put more distance, he felt two hands come up roughly from where they had been gripping marble, grabbing onto Laurent’s face and pulling their lips back together so strongly that Laurent thought he would
feel a ghost of the touch for days.

Laurent remembered the riverbanks he used to visit in the forest north of the palace at Arles. The water was a deep blue shade, almost black at night, the moon glistening down in jagged shards. It was lined by rocks and surrounded by pointed trees, jutting up towards the sky. Laurent had initially been too afraid to go in, the water seeming bottomless, the depth of its unknown frightening.

Laurent remembered the way it felt as he finally jumped in, his body cutting through the still water like shattering glass. He remembered the initial shock of it, freezing enough that his entire body had seized up, disorienting his senses. He had been afraid, uncomfortable, but he stayed in because he wanted to prove something to himself; that he could do this.

Laurent was treading water, cold and scared until eventually, he wasn’t. As much as he remembered the beginning shock of it all, he also remembered the way he slowly acclimated. His body temperature adjusted. Eventually the water felt good on Laurent’s skin, soothing his body and warming his insides. He was no longer flailing, moving his limbs around rapidly, trying to remain steady. His eyes were closed as water lapped around him, and he was floating. He felt weightless.

That is what it felt like as Damen kissed him.
Chapter 29

so something very sporadically came up and i have to go away for a few days (i literally booked a flight half an hour ago) and I'm not sure what my wifi situation will be, so I'm posting now. this is an early update not an extra one, so there wont be an update on wednesday.
enjoy ily all <3

The villa of Kaenas of Aegina was a homely place, the high walls thick with stone, the meats good and rich, despite having to eat alone in the servant quarters with Charls. Damen and Laurent had strategized with him when Laurent had eventually joined them following Laurent’s dinner in the gardens, discussing the route they would take north to Kalamos and what possible obstacles Makon’s rivalry added.

They all retired to their respective rooms at the end of their conversation; Laurent in the best room Kaenas had to offer to a renowned cloth merchant, Damen sneaking in after him when the halls were cleared.

“Did you wake the entire building with your footsteps?” Laurent asked as Damen shut the door behind him softly. He was standing in front of the chestnut vanity, removing his large feathered hat.

“Let’s hope not,” Damen said, pressing a kiss to Laurent’s cheek as he passed him, making his way to the mattress and sitting at the edge. “I would hate to be removed from your quarters and placed in Charls’ bed.”

Laurent smiled at him over his shoulder, pulling his jacket off his arms and placing it on the back of the chair. “You didn’t have fun with him at dinner?”

“Not as much fun as you did at yours,” Damen replied.

Laurent turned to face him, the nature of his smile changing so that the edges of his lips were crooked, his eyes twinkling. “I was eating.”

“I know,” Damen said. “It must have been some meal to have lasted so long.”

“I was gathering information on Makon.” When Damen didn’t acknowledge that he quirked a brow, crossing his arms loosely. “Is something the matter?”

“I thought highborn Veretian men weren’t allowed to be alone with women,” Damen said.

“They’re not,” Laurent said. “The household was present.”

Damen nodded.

Laurent stepped forward, coming towards Damen so he was standing in front of him. “Damen,” he said, touching him below the chin. “What?”

“I just thought it was a taboo,” Damen said. “That’s all.”
“It is,” Laurent repeated. “You would think uniting the kingdoms would make things a bit more progressive.” When Damen said nothing, Laurent’s mouth twitched.


“It’s nothing,” Laurent said. “It just amuses me that you’re jealous of my sharing a meal with women when I have never shown a single interest in them.”

The notion itself was preposterous, and Damen felt the way his face shifted with his reaction. “I never said I was jealous,” he muttered. There was no reason to be. He and Laurent had never questioned their affection for each other, or their exclusivity.

Laurent didn’t reply to that, simply lifted a palm to Damen’s face, thumbing at his cheek gently. Damen grabbed at his hand.

“Everyone knows that I am Damianos of Akielos’ lover,” Laurent said. “And Charls suspects that I am fucking Lamen behind his back. Could I really balance a third?”

“Laurent,” Damen insisted.

Alright,” Laurent said, placing both hands on Damen’s shoulders. “I had a prolonged meal with a throng of women whom I have never seen the appeal of to begin with. I have only ever had an interest in men. One man, in particular.”

Damen’s chest felt very light as he spread his legs slightly, pulling Laurent in between his knees. “Oh?” he said, bringing his hands to Laurent’s hips.

“He is very attractive,” Laurent continued, causing the warm sensation in Damen’s stomach to spread. “And just as smart, though he does this stupid thing where he likes to pretend like my interests could ever lie elsewhere.”

“I never said you were interested in anyone else,” Damen said, nuzzling his face into Laurent’s neck.

“Good,” Laurent said, smoothing his hand through Damen’s hair, pressing his lips to his forehead. “One of you is enough. I don’t think I could be bothered to nurture anyone else’s ego.”

Damen slipped his hands under Laurent’s shirt, feelings the smooth skin on his sides, the jut of his hipbones beneath his thumbs. Laurent brought his hands to the front of Damen’s shirt, pulling the laces apart easily.

“What I find especially amusing,” Laurent said, reaching the bottom of Damen’s shirt as he spoke. “Is that my being around a large group of females unsettles you when you are the one between the two of us that prefers women.”

“I prefer you,” Damen said, allowing Laurent to pull the shirt off his body, his upper body now bare to him. Laurent ran his hands down the expanse of Damen’s chest, his fingers trailing smooth hairs, his nails grazing his abdomen.

“Good,” Laurent said, throwing a thigh over Damen’s.

Damen had been surprised many times before in his life.

There had been many instances where he had been caught off guard, whether it be good or bad.
Different situations and occurrences that had staggered him, reminding him once again that things were not always the way they seemed to be. That you could always be shocked by something, or someone.

This was one of those instances.

Damen had lost all perception of time, the concept itself losing its meaning in that moment, in that spot, with Laurent against him. Damen could hardly think, his mind registering nothing other than the fact that Laurent was here. That Laurent had come to Damen, had reached for him, had kissed him again. If Damen weren’t backed against a table, that fact alone would have been enough for his legs to give out.

Damen felt the moment Laurent lifted his hands to Damen’s body, resting his hands against him as if checking to see if beneath his chest was a beating heart, a body made of flesh and blood. Blood that Damen felt rushing, simmering in his veins.

Laurent’s hands turned to fists in Damen’s chiton, acting to pull him closer when there was no distance left to be dispensed of. Damen’s hands were still on Laurent’s face, holding him firmly like he would disintegrate if he released him. He knew he should let go, should soften his hold, but all Damen managed to do was hold Laurent tighter.

Damen felt clumsy, blundering with inexperience. He had kissed Laurent thousands of times and yet this may as well have been the first, up against the battlements of Ravenel where nothing else mattered but him and Laurent sharing the same breath.

Damen didn’t want to ever let go, but breathing was a practicality that could not be ignored, causing them to pull away slightly, just enough so that air could enter their lungs, the tips of their noses still touching. Through the small space and the panting breaths, Damen could not help pressing another hard, desperate kiss on Laurent’s parted lips before pulling away.

Laurent’s hands were still on him, his nails digging into Damen’s chest, and Damen felt nothing else as he lowered his hands slowly, setting them on Laurent’s shoulders as he tried to regain his breath. Laurent’s lips were glistening, his eyes still closed.

“Laurent,” Damen said, surprised that he was managing to formulate words. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me.”

He could see Laurent react to the words, could feel the way his fingers tensed against him, his chiton bunched in Laurent’s fingers. Damen waited for him to open his eyes, slowly, the sight of blue so close to him making him feel breathless again. It was a long stretch of silence and unblinking moments before he spoke, his voice low.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said, causing something inside Damen to swell.

“You don’t have to.”

“That is idiotic,” Laurent said. His fingers loosened slightly, but he didn’t pull away. Damen’s hands did not stray from Laurent’s shoulders, the sides of his fingers touching his neck.

“And so?”

“And so,” Laurent replied dryly, blowing out a slow breath. Damen felt it against him, felt it enter his lungs and revitalize his entire body.

“Was that~” Damen said, unsure what the right thing to say was. As it was, there were no words to
Laurent shook his head, breathing out what might have been amusement or possibly disbelief. “You are ridiculous,” he said, glancing up at Damen. “This was not the first time.”

“It was the first time you kissed me,” Damen said, the words making him feel fragile. *He kissed me.*

“Do I look like I regret it?”

Though Laurent sounded calm, easy, his body only contradicted him. Damen felt the hesitation when he had first kissed him, the vulnerable, unsure way he had pressed his lips against Damen’s, just as he had momentarily locked up when Damen kissed him back. His body had been like a rod of steel against him, his fists tight like gipping for purchase, but he was here. He had let Damen hold him, had kissed him with just as much enthusiasm as hesitation, and he was still here, with Damen.

“Would you,” Damen said, speaking softer than he ever had, “Allow me to again?”

Blinking, Damen said, “What?”

“You-” Laurent said. “Why are you bothering to ask?” He took a step back, causing Damen’s hands to slip away and fall to his sides. “Why,” he said, his frown deepening the more he seemed to think about it. “Are you always so *careful.*” He spoke like he was pushing the words out, like they left a bitterness on his tongue that he could not understand.

Shaking his head, “how else would I be?” Damen asked. “Don’t you see how precious you are to me?”

Laurent turned his head abruptly, denying Damen his reaction, his hair like a curtain. He shifted his body, gazing off into the main chambers as his chest moved, the line of his back rigid like a wall. Damen waited, his heart thudding until Laurent turned back to face him, his expression now neutral.

Laurent said, “You want to fuck me.”

It took Damen a moment for the words to register, and the unexpected shift from what they had just been doing had him reeling.

“You want to fuck me,” Laurent repeated, his voice firm. “Yet you continue to act like this is enough.”

“It is enough,” Damen insisted. “Everything with you is enough, Laurent.”

Laurent looked at him in disbelief, a muscle in his jaw tightening. Damen knew Laurent had only ever observed a certain kind of sentiment. The ribald way people spoke, the lewd surroundings he had grown up around.

Damen stopped that train of thought immediately, pushing down the anger that he could already feel threatening to rise. He would not allow thoughts of anything or anyone to disturb this moment.

“Whatever you want,” Damen said. “Whatever I can give you is enough. Kissing does not have to equate to sex. I will never have any set expectations or assumptions, regardless of what we do, or have ever done.”

Laurent crossed his arms against his front, his head tilted slightly to the side. He did not look angered
or defensive, which Damen took note of with relief. He seemed skeptical, lost, like nothing Damen was saying was making any sense to him, an equation that would simply not add up.

“We kiss,” Laurent said, the words sounding awkward despite the steady look in his eyes. “And you have a newfound interest in celibacy?”

Dryly, “I can assure you, that is not the case.”

His words caused Laurent’s cheeks to flush a rosy pink, but he firmly held his ground, arms still crossed. When Damen stepped forward, he did not back away.

“In a traditional courtship,” Damen said, noticing the way Laurent seemed to blanch at the word. “You would not typically make love after the first kiss. Or the second.”

Laurent’s arms were uncrossed and fallen at his sides, the flush spreading across his face as he looked at Damen in bewilderment. “A what?”

“Did I get the translation wrong?”

“Shut up,” Laurent said. And then, “we share a kingdom. Why would you—court me?” He said the words like he was speaking a foreign language for the first time, not unlike when they had started practicing Akielon together. Carefully pronounced, unsure, fastidious. Damen remembered him plucking a white flower, tucking it into Damen’s hair with an unsteady but determined hand.

“I want nothing more than to lavish you with all the grace that you deserve,” Damen said, looking into Laurent’s eyes. “I want to earn your affection.”

Laurent’s eyes were a storm, wide and unblinking. It was a few seconds before he said, “you have the pace of a snail.”

Daringly, Damen thumbed at his cheek. “Only a fool would rush things with you.”

Laurent did not reject the touch, but he glanced down at Damen’s finger like an insect had landed on his face. Slowly, making his intentions very clear, Damen changed the grip of his hand so that he was cupping the side of Laurent’s face, soft hair grazing his knuckles. He felt Laurent tense up again, his eyes lifting back to Damen’s as his lips twitched.

“Can I?” Damen whispered.

Each heartbeat felt slower, stronger than the last as Damen watched several emotions play out across Laurent’s face, his throat rolling as he swallowed. Technically he said nothing, but the tilting of his head and the closing of his eyes were enough to make Damen feel like he had just been given everything.

The kiss was a soft brush of lips, as gentle as if Laurent were made of glass. Damen asked for nothing in it, the second press just as light, just as exhilarating. Damen brought his fingers to the bottom of Laurent’s chin, allowing himself to trace the line of his lip with his tongue briefly before he pulled away slightly, tilting Laurent’s head back. Before Laurent could react or register the change, his lips were on the skin of Laurent’s neck.

Damen heard the soft sound that escaped Laurent’s mouth, a sigh that caused heat to uncoil in Damen’s gut. His lips curved in a smile as he kissed him again, just a bit more to the right, the movement slow and deliberate. Damen felt the way Laurent shuddered against him, the way he pressed himself into Damen’s touch, the movement seemingly unintentional but just as thrilling.
Damen had told Laurent that there was no upper hand between them and while that was true, Damen still had the wonderful advantage of knowing Laurent. Of knowing his body, and the surprised reactions tenderness and gentle attention could coax out of him. Damen brought his mouth to the soft spot below Laurent’s ear, nosing against it before pressing his mouth to the sensitive skin, letting his lips linger there for seconds after. Laurent was just as warm as he remembered, his light, unrepressed breaths just as sweet.

Damen lifted his head and took Laurent’s mouth again with no preamble, delivering the kiss that he had longed to give for what may have been months, long and deep and slow. Laurent breathed against him as he did, lifting a gentle hand to Damen’s arm, his fingers wrapping around his bicep. Damen made a sound of encouragement against his mouth when he felt the touch, bringing his hand to Laurent’s hip and holding him firmly against him.

It was Laurent who eventually pulled away, his lips slipping out from Damen’s as he lowered his head. He released his hold and took a few steps away which Damen accepted, knowing how much this all was for him and remembering the way Laurent had always needed time to gather himself at the beginning. He stepped back towards the table and took up the goblet he had been drinking from before Laurent had entered, thankful that it was cool water and not wine as he took a long sip.

Laurent was turned away from him again, a hand on one of the wooden rods of the bedpost as he looked at the ground, his fingers tapping. Damen pushed his hands through his hair as he leaned against the table, waiting for Laurent to regroup.

Eventually Laurent sat on the bed, looking up at Damen with his hands at his sides. “I don’t know what any of this means.”

“It means whatever you want for it to mean,” Damen said.

“You’re Akielon,” Laurent said. “Stop speaking in circles like a fucking Veretian.”

Damen let out a huff of laughter, looking over his shoulder and seeing that the rain had stopped, though the sun had long set. He looked at Laurent, motioning towards the table in the main room. “I’ll have dinner sent here,” he said. “We’ll eat. We won’t have the added stress of other people.”

“You are causing me enough stress,” Laurent said.

Damen grinned despite himself, a large part of him wanting to tackle Laurent onto the bed like when they used to play wrestle.

“Is there anything particular you would like to eat?” Damen asked as he made his way for the door.

They were sitting at the table some time later, Laurent at the head and Damen at the adjacent chair. Damen had changed clothes shortly after he had called for food, the night’s chill entering through the balcony, Damen’s chiton feeling very much like the bed sheet that Laurent had often joked that it was. Damen had pulled out a shirt and pants from the vanity, sending Laurent a pointed stare with a quirked brow as he reached for his pin. Laurent had shot him back an unamused look, leaving the bedchambers wordlessly.

“You can’t actually enjoy that,” Damen said, watching as Laurent spooned more cinnamon seasoned rice onto his plate.

“For someone who thinks he knows me so well, you seem to be very surprised by my eating habits,”
Laurent replied, spooning on another helping.

“I know that you enjoy it,” Damen said, watching as Laurent lifted a forkful to his mouth. “That is not new. I’ve just not gotten used to it yet.”

“It’s food, Damen.”

Damen felt an odd, panging sensation against his chest and he had to look away so Laurent wouldn’t see the dopey look on his face at hearing his small name on Laurent’s lips again. He took a sip of his drink to cover his smile.

“Rice has no business being sweet,” he said, setting his goblet down.

Laurent waved the comment away, pouring himself water. He gazed off listlessly as he drank, mindlessly licking his lips after.

“The kyroi will be arriving in two days for the games,” Laurent said. “We should have them in the same wing as the Patrans had stayed when they came for the wedding.”

Damen nodded, setting the salt down in front of Laurent as he reached for a platter, knowing he liked them on his potatoes. Laurent glanced at it for a few beats before picking it up, shaking the salt out onto his plate.

“We will hold the feast that night,” Damen said, taking a large bite. “And the games will commence the following morning.”

“Do you kyroi generally participate?” Laurent asked.

“They can,” Damen said. “The games are not limited to certain people. Some of the elder ones have their sons compete on their behalf; some take on the challenge themselves. Nikandros always does.”

Laurent chewed his food slowly, spinning his fork against the table like he sometimes did when he was thinking about something. Damen waited to see if he would voice his thoughts, shrugging it off when he did not.

“Are you really going to participate in the okton?” Damen asked.

“Of course I am.”

“You could harm yourselves severely.”

With a roll of his eyes Laurent said, “If I managed to jump from one moving horse to another amidst flying spears, I believe I can handle it.” He cut into a sliver of meat, bringing it to his mouth casually like he had not just caused Damen’s stomach to feel like it had dropped.

“What?” Damen said. His voice was too loud.

Laurent paused with another bite in the air, glancing at Damen oddly. “What?”

“Laurent,” Damen said. “How did you know you did that?”

“I,” Laurent said, setting his fork down after a few seconds when he saw Damen’s reaction. He frowned at the table, shaking his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t even register that it was something that I had forgotten. You mentioned the okton and it was just a fact that came up in my head, so I said it.”
Damen’s entire body felt abuzz. He felt like his hands might start shaking, like his heart rate was accelerating, some Akielon drug coursing through his veins. He had no idea what this meant, or if it meant anything at all, but it had to. This could not be nothing.

Laurent noticed his expression, and his frowned deepened in a different way. “Whatever you are thinking, don’t,” he said.

“Why not?” Damen asked. “Laurent, you remember something, and this is not something miniscule like my preferred fruit. Your memories, they could be-“

“And they could not,” Laurent said. “Do not put all of your hope into one thing. That is a surefire way to end up disappointed.”

“Besides,” Laurent continued, reaching for his fork again. “This is not the first time.”

“Not the first-” Damen sputtered, dropping his cutlery. “Have you remembered other things?”

Laurent lifted a shoulder, his casual manner nearly as bewildering as this entire situation. “Things you’ve said, mainly. I would get a feeling or have a guess before you would say it.”

Damen found that he was trying very hard not to throttle Laurent on the spot. He dragged a hand down his face, breathing in through his nose. “You told me yourself that you like to take pleasure in small victories. Why are you minimizing this?” When Laurent simply continued to eat he said, “have you at least told Paschal?”

“Yes.”

“And what has he said?”

“That it can’t be a negative thing,”

Damen nodded his head; trying to reign in everything he was feeling seeing that Laurent did not appear to be exuding the same enthusiasm as him. Damen tried to understand that. He was not the one that had lost his memories, and he could only imagine how nerve-racking it might be to be toying with the idea of hope.

But it was hope. This was hope.

“Can I tell you a story?” Damen asked, hoping for a shift in tone.

Laurent looked at him out of the corner of his eye, the rim of his goblet inches away from his lips. “A story,” he echoed.

Damen nodded, earning him a short laugh of disbelief form Laurent. “Go ahead,” Laurent said.

“Around four weeks before your ascension,” Damen said, turning to better face Laurent. “We were traveling through Akielos.”

“That’s smart,” Laurent said.

Grinning, “We said you were hunting in Acquitart. We had taken our guard and joined Charls on the road for one of his expeditions.”

“Oh course,” Laurent said.

“We had gotten wind that there was someone trading in slaves,” Damen said, the words altering the
look in Laurent’s eyes. ‘He was smuggling slaves to Patras, where slavery was still in effect. We saved around two dozen men and women and uncovered his trading route that he had been using.”

Laurent gazed at Damen for a few moments, rolling his goblet between his palms. Damen remembered the way Laurent had been in those moments after they had removed them from the wagons, solemn, a little distant.

“So,” Laurent said. “We don’t just go to taverns.”

“No,” Damen said, and to lighten the mood, “But we did get into a tavern brawl on that same trip.”

It worked, Laurent’s shoulders relaxing slightly, his fingers grazing the edge of his glass. “Was it my winning personality or your brutish instincts?”

“You were insulted.”

Slowly, carefully, “Are you under the impression that I have never been insulted before?”

“I don’t care,” Damen said.

Laurent looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it. Pulling a knee up to his chest he said, “What were your odds?”

“Eight to one,” Damen said, scratching at his chin. “Geese were involved.”

“Naturally,” Laurent said. “What did I do?”

“You threw olives,” Damen said. “I believe you hit an Akielon with a lamb.”

Laurent seemed all around pleased by this news, nodding his head like that was a logical tidbit. Pulling the platter of cut vegetables toward himself and reaching for a slice of carrot he said, “What else?” setting his chin on his fist.

Later, when most of the food was eaten and the sky was nearly pitch black, Laurent pushed away from the table, causing Damen’s heart to stutter in his chest at the thought of Laurent leaving. Damen stood up with him, watching as Laurent gazed around the room, the entrance to the bedchambers, the door.

“I will see you tomorrow,” Damen said. He was going to walk Laurent out, but he wanted to make his intentions clear.

Laurent gazed at him silently before turning around, making for the doors. Damen followed behind him, the room suddenly very quiet, the sounds of their joined steps the only thing breaking the silence.

Laurent stopped when he reached the exit, turning back to face Damen. Damen looked down at him, his heart feeling too big for his chest. He felt like he had just won his first battle. Like he had just ascended.

“Goodnight,” Laurent said.

“Goodnight,” Damen echoed.

When Damen said nothing else, Laurent blinked twice before turning for the door, reaching for the
handle. Damen waited for him to wrap his fingers around it and pull before he grabbed his other hand, turning Laurent back around gently. In the same breath he stepped forward, taking Laurent’s cheeks in his hands and pressed a light, chaste kiss against his lips.

“Goodnight,” he said again.

After, when Laurent was gone and Damen was alone, he pressed a hand to the wall and leaned his forehead on the cool stone, giving himself a minute to just breathe, ludicrously feeling like at any given moment he might sprout wings and fly.
Damen felt his back hit the bed with a thud, his hips pressing into the mattress as Laurent threw his weight on top of him, reaching for one of Damen’s wrists. Damen moved his hand out of the way the moment Laurent lunged, Laurent’s hand hitting the pillow instead.

“You have to be quicker than that,” Dame said, pivoting his weight so that Laurent toppled onto his back, rolling on to him with ease. He wedged his knee in between Laurent’s legs, pinning his wrist down above his head.

“I am quicker than you,” Laurent replied, the muscles in his wrist twitching with strain. “You have nearly twenty years of practice on me.”

It was warm in the room, all of the curtains drawn blocking out the glow of the moon. The hearth was lit, the candles etched into their bedpost flickering as well, the sheen of sweat on their bodies glowing in the flames. Laurent’s hair was a mess of tangles, his eyes alive with his efforts and exertion.

Damen loosened his grip slightly, giving Laurent the leeway to remove his arm and push Damen off as he tended to. Instead, Laurent rolled out from under Damen and in the blink of an eye, threw himself over Damen’s hunched over form so he was on Damen’s back, pushing him onto his stomach.

“That-” Damen said, laughing a little into the pillow as Laurent sat himself above Damen’s tailbone. “I am not a horse.”

“I’m still on top,” Laurent said, pressing his arms on the mattress on either side of Damen’s shoulders, leaning down so his face was near Damen’s. Damen felt the press of his chest against his spine, heard the sound of his breathing near his ear. The press of his weight caused a warm sensation to unfurl in Damen’s stomach, and the change in position had Damen’s cheeks heating despite himself.

He felt Laurent’s lips curve against his cheek, kissing him once by his mouth before he ran a hand down Damen’s side.

“Well?” Laurent said. “Have I won?”

Damen shifted his body carefully, bucking his hips just enough so that Laurent fell off him with a startled laugh, bouncing twice before Damen was back on top of him, pressing Laurent down into the bed tightly.

“You can’t beat me,” Damen said, taking Laurent’s lip between his.

“You’re simply at an advantage,” Laurent said, bringing his hands to Damen’s biceps. “It’s not as easy to fling you around as if you weigh nothing.”
“I told you,” Damen said. “I’m better than Nikandros. Perhaps if I had taught you.”

Damen was braced above Laurent on his elbows, hovering inches above him with Laurent looking up at him. Laurent’s fingers were moving down his arms slowly, against his forearms, down the line of his chest. Damen felt the warm press of hands against his hips, his fingers trailing the skin there. The shift of hips was involuntary, helpless instinct driving him forward. Laurent grinned at him, shifting his hips in return, and as Damen felt his lashes flutter, he felt Laurent’s thumbs dig in to the sensitive spot on his sides.

“Laurent,” Damen hissed, the sting of pressure momentarily distracting him, all of his focus on the throb of discomfort. Laurent used the moment to push against Damen’s upper body, reversing everything once again so that Damen was on his back, his arms pinned against his head.

Laurent said, “I win.”

To Laurent’s utter surprise, the following day’s natural events had occurred regularly.

Time had not frozen still. The world had not stopped spinning, the birds still chirping outside his window. Come morning the sun still rose, and the sky did not come crashing down around them.

Laurent had plunged. He had closed his eyes and jumped into uncharted waters, and he was still standing. Oxygen still flowed through his lungs, blood pumped in his veins, and through it all, Laurent still had the lingering sensation of another man’s lips against his own.

If Laurent focused very hard, he would swear he could still feel the firm press of another chest against his, the touch of a hand cradling his face warmly, rough, callused fingers so gentle on his cheek. If he closed his eyes and concentrated hard enough, he might have seen gleaming brown.

Logistically of course, neither of those things were real. Nothing could leave such a lasting, tangible impression on someone, and Laurent was not a fool. However, logistics could do nothing to dispense of the very real and very firm grip Laurent felt on his heart if he thought of the previous night. And for all of his reservations and all of his hesitancies, Laurent had never felt so much like one of the characters he had read about as a child, acting in ways and feelings things that he had never understood, too idealistic to exist outside of fiction.

When the knock sounded on the door early in the morning announcing what could only be one person, Laurent did not retreat into himself. He smiled.

Some time later, Laurent walked out of the council room alone, his hands clasped behind his back. He had been discussing the feast being held the next night with Herode, going over the finer points of how all the events would unfold, including the subsequent games that would take place for the duration of the entire next day.

They would commence mid morning, a handful of lighter sports starting the day off where anyone who wanted could compete to whatever degree suited them. This would be the least intensive event of the day, more so hinged on the comradery and the sportsmanship of everyone competing together, unlike the games that would later take place that were about showing off skills. Opposition. Winning.

The games would be spread throughout the day, breaking in the middle for a lunch that would be held in the gardens, not too far from the training grounds where most of the events would take place. The weather was perfect enough where it was not too cold to be outside for prolonged periods but everyone would not bake under the sun and heavy exertion.
Majority of the kyroi would be in attendance, all of them having arrived throughout the week, the rest expected by the end of the day. If the kyros himself was not able to arrive, they had sent word that a son or a brother would be coming in their stead. Earlier Laurent had been walking through the East Wing of the palace, only to be intercepted by Pyrros, a man he vaguely remembered from one of the earlier days since he had lost his memories. Laurent remembered him to be the son of the kyros of Thrace, just as he remembered his abject attempts of veiling his interests of fucking Laurent with persistent conversations about trade routes.

“How is your father?” Laurent asked when he had reached his limit of how many poorly subtle looks and hints he would tolerate.

Pyrros had paused, unprepared to be cut off mid sentence. “Well, Your Highness,” he said. “You will see him at the games.”

“Excellent,” Laurent had said as a dismissal, walking around Pyrros and continuing on his way.

Now, Laurent was on his way to the training arena, having finished most of his business for that morning and feeling that he had time to spare to train. He had not notified Jord that he would require his presence that day, but Laurent was confident that there would be some soldier loitering around that he could make use of.

As Laurent turned the corner, he came face to face with Nikandros.

“I’m starting to become convinced that you do nothing but wander around the palace,” Laurent said.

“Always wonderful to see you, Your Highness.”

Leaning a shoulder on the wall, Laurent lifted his brows. “I thought we discussed that.”

Nikandros blinked at him, and Laurent could see Nikandros working through all of their previous conversations, turning them each over in his head until he understood what Laurent was referring to.

“Laurent,” he said, with as much hesitancy as one would walk down a plank blindfolded.

Laurent began to walk again and Nikandros fell into step with him, taking Laurent’s wordless cue.

“Is there anyone who normally attends the games that I can be expecting?” Laurent asked.

“Aside from the Kyros?” Nikandros asked. “Different groups of people from around Akielos come, the games are well loved. Many noblemen and lords bring their daughters to show off.”

“I wasn’t aware we were hosting betrothal opportunities.”

After a prolonged stretch of silence, Nikandros said, “Damen met the daughter of a minor noble from Aegina at the games, once.”

Laurent glanced at Nikandros out of the corner of his eye as they began to climb the steps into a separate wing of the palace. Nikandros was often exasperated and generally wary, but he was any easygoing man. Nothing about his tone, or his expression was easygoing at that moment. Laurent figured he could inquire about it, some miniscule part of him curious, but he didn’t care enough to bother.

“Anyone else?” Laurent asked. “That I know.”

“Makedon enjoys javelin too much to not show up.”
Laurent grimaced; beckoning over his shoulder as he entered the arena. “Come,” he said. “We’re sparring.”

Laurent finished preparing for dinner the next night far quicker than he regularly would, though truth be told it had not been as simple as he had assumed. Contrary to prior expectations, sticking a pin in the correct spot and adjusting hemming was not as straightforward as it seemed to be.

Laurent looked in the mirror briefly before he turned away, ignoring the chill he felt on his arms as he placed the circlet on his head, adjusting it so the front was placed in the center of his forehead. He cast himself with one more glance before making his was out of the bedchambers, resisting the urge to roll his eyes or scoff at himself. Sandals in autumn were ridiculous really, but so was this entire ordeal.

Laurent walked through the halls at a regular pace, not paying any attention to anyone he passed, any look he may or may not receive. His focus was only on his destination and the night ahead of him, which surely would be long. He did not allow himself to focus on the odd fluttering of material against him that felt very unnatural and quite frankly outlandish.

Laurent didn’t bother knocking on the door as he entered. Damen knew that they would leave for the Great Hall together; there would be no point in alerting his presence that was already expected. He nodded at the guards on either side of the door, prompting one of them to reach over and pull it open for him, standing up straightly as Laurent walked in between them.

Laurent heard the door shut as he entered, the rapidness of it sending a slight chill against his thighs. Laurent weathered it as he walked through the main chambers, looking around any signs of movement. He gave a cursory look around the main room, glancing briefly into the bedchambers before he found him on the balcony, his arms braced on the marble edge. His grip was light, his red cape swaying against his back. Before him, the sky was turning a deep orange shade, shots of pink running through it, muddled together like swirls of a paint brush.

“Hello,” Laurent said, stepping past the threshold.

“Oh,” Damen said, his head lifting at the sound of Laurent’s voice as he began to turn. “I didn’t-“

“It is hard to hear out here with all the wind,” Laurent supplied when Damen didn’t complete his sentence, his body half twisted so that one leg was awkwardly placed as if he had the intention of stepping forward. When he received no answer he said, “have you been out here long?”

Damen blinked, looking as if he had lost his sense of sound and was trying to decipher what Laurent was saying by reading his lips alone. He nearly appeared as if had he been holding something, he would have dropped it to the ground.

“Damen.”

“What?” Damen said. And then, “what?”

Laurent could feel the strong breeze on the balcony playing with the hem of his chiton, the material swaying against his thighs. He fought the impulse to tug it down, or to pull a jacket around himself.

Laurent said, “We should go.”

Laurent watched as Damen breathed cool air into his lungs, his eyes very pointedly remaining on Laurent’s face, his weight shifting. When he said nothing, Laurent quirked a brow.
“Are you ready?” he asked.

Damen nodded belatedly, waiting for Laurent to step back into the room before making for the direction of the door.

“Damen.”

“What?” Damen said, turning around like he had been tugged.

Laurent motioned to his curls. “Perhaps you should wear your laurels, if not your crown.”

“Yes,” Damen said. “Laurels, yes.” He made for the bedchambers hastily, Laurent leaning on the door to the entrance with his arms crossed until Damen came out through the alcove, attempting to arrange his hair while he walked.

“Good?”

“Yes,” Laurent said. “You’ve accomplished what a seven year old can do. Congratulations.”

If Laurent were as absurdly sentimental as Damen, he would think that his eyes twinkled as he approached Laurent, grinning at him boyishly with the side of his lips. Laurent broke their eye contact as he pulled the door open and stepped into the hall, the door closing firmly as Damen fell into step beside him. The two of them made their way down the hall in silence.

Laurent glanced around the Great Hall as they entered, taking in the way the room had once again been transformed to fit the occasion, and the guests of the palace that were being acknowledged. The hall was dimly lit and warm, feeling overstuffed with clusters of people deep in conversation, wine and trays of appetizers that were being circulated slowly.

“The kyros of Kesus,” Damen muttered as soon as Laurent noticed an elderly man approaching them, his hair greying at the roots. He was quite short. Damen towered over him.

“Exalted,” he said. “Your Highness.”

“Kyros,” Laurent replied.

“My wife and I are especially excited for the games this year,” he said. “Our sons are growing fast, they hope to participate next year. They have long begun their training.”

Laurent nearly asked after their age, stopping himself a moment before on the chance that he somehow already knew. He turned to Damen, allowing him to take the reins on the conversation, observing the way they interacted with one another as if they were well acquainted.

“I look forward to seeing them tomorrow,” Damen said. “Your eldest has a good arm, he will excel at spear throwing. Perhaps the okton one day.”

The kyros grinned, pride shining in his eyes at the thought of his son competing in such a sport. He did not clap Damen on the shoulder, but he seemed seconds away from it. Most of the kyros that Laurent had spoken with were gruff, discussing no more or less than politics and training.

“It would be an honor to our family for him to compete with our kings,” he said, looking at Laurent now. “I will see the two of you tomorrow.”

Laurent watched as he retreated, joining a large group of men lining the archways that led to the garden, accepting wine from a servant. Laurent looked at Damen, his eyebrows raised.
“I have known him since I was a boy,” Damen said, by way of explanation. “He was friendly with my father.”

“I see,” Laurent said, watching the kyros converse with another. “And you and your father were… close?” The words felt odd on his tongue for more reason than one. Laurent held no positive sentiment for Theomedes in his heart and even if he had, he wasn’t sure if that was the proper way to ask such a question to begin with. He wasn’t entirely sure why he had asked the question.

When he looked back at Damen, he was looking at Laurent with an anomalous look on his face, his brows a bit pinched. He spoke slowly, like he was being mindful of his words.

“I admired my father,” he said. “I strove to please him, and I think I succeeded, because I was the type of son he could respect. There were no ill feelings between us, but I believe he thought of me more as his heir than his son, at times.”

Laurent was not sure how to respond. He didn’t know if that was an admission that required comfort, or how he would even go about doing that. He was not accustomed to soothing other people, and felt that it would be unnatural if he tried. However, he knew codding was not what Damen wanted, or needed. Laurent had asked a question and Damen had answered. It was as simple as that.

He could offer insight into what his relationship had been like with his own father, but something told him Damen already knew.

“Come,” Laurent said, seeing that the tables were beginning to fill. “Let’s sit.”

The seating arrangements were a bit different that night, the occasion demanding it. Unlike every regular meal, Nikandros would not be sitting with them, rather a table in the center of the room with the rest of the kyroi. Vannes sat with the rest of the council, any other occupants that normally sat with them scattered around the room, finding another place to sit. Tonight, Damen and Laurent sat alone, their table laden with the most food despite it being just the two of them.

All around, servants were swarming the table with silver trays gracefully balanced on palms, offering each person an option of courses and drinks. Music played, offering a heady melody when the lull of conversation did not fill the hall. As Damen and Laurent took their spots at the head of the table, all noise in the room quieted down to what seemed like a pre-established murmur.

“Tomorrow are the yearly games,” Damen announced, his voice strong and regal as it boomed throughout the large hall, echoing off the walls and reverberating in Laurent’s body. “We will celebrate our victories and rejoice in our unity. Tonight, we feast.”

It was returned with a boisterous cry of appreciation, goblets being lifted in the air towards the direction of the kings. Laurent tipped his goblet forward along with Damen, everyone in the room drinking to the sentiment before Damen sat down, the sound of music immediately resuming, Laurent taking his seat as well. He could feel the way the chiton rode up his thighs slightly as he sat down.

Servants did not approach their table yet, that would come only to clear off each emptied dish and to provide the water filled bowl and cloth to wipe off their fingers. Unlike the other tables, theirs held every possibility being provided by the kitchens, appetizers, main courses and sides.

As Laurent lifted a spoonful of thick pea soup to his mouth, Damen leaned towards him, his spoon in his own hand. “Do you see that man with the black hair, tied back from his face?” he jutted his chin out, prompting Laurent to follow the direction.
Laurent spotted the man easily, flicking his eyes to Damen in acknowledgment before lifting another spoonful to his mouth.

“He talks a big game every year,” he said, sprinkling pepper into his bowl. “Always boasts about all the wins he is going to accumulate, how he will grind us all to dust like the dirt beneath a horse hoof. Each year, he miraculously acquires a mysterious injury before they begin. Last year was a sprained ankle. The year before that was something with his arm, though I can’t remember what.”

Laurent watched as the man spoke animatedly with the woman sitting across from him, gesturing wildly with his hands as she nodded along, her eyes wide.

“He is trying to fuck her,” Laurent said, licking his lips off. “He’s planting the seeds now. He is likely telling her of how he will demolish the two of us in the okton tomorrow.”

“Her?” Damen said, tilting his head. “You think?”

“The real question,” Laurent said, tearing a piece of bread off. “Is whether she will still be interested when she hears of his sudden stomach ache.”

“Should we warn her?” Damen asked, turning to Laurent with what looked like a concerned expression. “I hear they come unexpectedly.”

“She will manage,” Laurent replied, dabbing his mouth with a napkin to hide the way his lips twitched.

They continued to eat, tasting a little bit of everything from each platter, the chefs somehow managing to offer something new each meal. When Damen reached for the cut of meat Laurent had had his eye on, he hit Damen’s fork away with his own and skewered it himself. In return, Damen took the remaining bread roll on Laurent’s plate and ate it himself.

At some point Laurent heard the sound of footsteps, causing him to turn away from Damen and towards the blank look of Nikandros.

“Did you miss us?” Laurent asked.

Nikandros looked between the two of them, his eyes lingering on Laurent more each time. Eventually he just settled on looking at Laurent.

“Is everything alright?” Damen asked.

“Fine,” Nikandros said, pulling his eyes away. “I wanted to see if you planned to train regularly tomorrow, before the games begin.”

Damen waved his hand away, reaching for his goblet. “No need,” he said, motioning to an empty chair in front of them. “You can sit.”

“No,” Nikandros said. “Thank you. I don’t want to disturb.”

His eyes were on Laurent again, scrolling his body in a way that Laurent was absolutely certain was innocent and likely not even something he had realized he was doing, but Laurent could not resist the quirk of his lips, the lift of his brow.

Nikandros flushed when he noticed, but he still seemed to be repressing a sigh, or perhaps a roll of his eyes. Laurent really needed to have a conversation with him about the wrinkles all those worry lines were going to cause him.
After he had left and the servants had replaced their main course dishes with desserts, Laurent felt the press of Damen’s shoulder as he leaned in again.

“This was a good idea,” Damen said quietly, meaning the chiton. “The kyroi will be pleased.”

“I didn’t wear it for them,” Laurent replied.

Damen looked at him, his eyes unblinking as he breathed through his nose, the roll of his throat the only notable movement. Laurent lifted a grape to his mouth, slipping it between his lips and chewing slowly, sweetness coating his tongue.

Damen’s eyes were closed, a multitude of seconds passing before he forced them open, looking at Laurent like a painter would a sunrise.

“You say these things when we are in a room full of people.”

“Would it make a difference if we were alone?” The question came out boldly, confidently, which surprised Laurent. He rarely felt this unsteady.

“Laurent,” Damen said, all breath and dark eyes. His knuckles were tight around his goblet.

Laurent felt like he had just dismounted off his horse after having ridden in quick, pounding circles. His felt as if everything he had just consumed was turning over in his stomach, Damen’s open, wanton gaze making Laurent’s bare arms and exposed neck feel even more prominent.

This had been Laurent’s doing. His words, his actions that had brought them to this point. He had made the decision, and the reins were now in Laurent’s hands. He could pull back. He could change course. He could put a stop to this.

Looking into Damen’s eyes, Laurent said, “We are the kings. We can leave when we want.”

It was an interesting thing to see a man like Damen who exuded confidence like oxygen and walked with so much self-assurance hold himself like he was seeing skin for the first time. Like he had lost a wager and was about to attempt something he had never done before, bashful fear of expectancy emanating from him.

“You seem to be having a crisis,” Laurent said, the door to their chambers closing.

“I’m fine,” Damen said.

Laurent left him in the doorway, walking into the large sweep of the room, his fingers trailing the edge of a couch cushion. He could hear the wind outside. There was a chill in the room that had the hairs on his arms standing.

“Laurent.”

Laurent turned, looking back at him. He could feel the cool press of the couch against his legs.

“What am I- what are we doing here?”

Laurent leaned back on the couch, leveling Damen with a look. He was standing in the same spot as when he entered and nearly pressed to the wall, looking like he would very much like to come forward and was holding himself back with some idiotic notion of honorability that said they couldn’t stand in the same spot.
“No one is keeping you here,” Laurent said. “You can go.”

“That is not-“ Damen said, his features scrunching in frustration. “You know very well that the only place I want to be is around you.”

“And yet, you’re clinging to the door like your limbs are attached.”

“How can I know that I’m here because you want me to be, and not because-“ he stopped himself again and this time, did not finish the thought. Damen brought a hand to his face, rubbing at the skin before he dragged his hand down, his gaze heavy. He took a step forward, eyes boring into some deep, locked down part of Laurent.

“I need to know,” he said, irrefutably. “I need to know that you want me here.”

The distance between them seemed to be closing with each second. Or perhaps that was Laurent’s vision, narrowing slowly so that all that was in focus was one thing. Distantly, Laurent felt the press of leather between his fingers, like he had gripped the couch behind him. He heard the sound of his thoughts, roaring in his head. He heard himself speaking.

“When,” Laurent said. “Have I ever let you do something I did not want you to do?”

Damen was in front of him. He may have been there the whole time; it was so sudden, the space between them nothing but a hand space. Laurent made himself let go of the couch.

“You are like the edge of a blade.”

“You already knew that.”

Damen kissed him.

There was no preface, no gradualness to it. One moment Damen was looking at Laurent like a lion would its prey and the next his arms were around Laurent’s waist, giving Laurent nothing to do but hold on.

Laurent wasn’t thinking. He had no possible hope of any part of his brain working as his arms went around Damen’s neck, pulling Damen into him with a sort of voraciousness that might have scared him, had he not been so focused on the feeling of Damen’s mouth against his. Damen kissed him like the press of lips and panting breaths would express what words could not. Like the only way he could prove what he was feeling was by wrapping his arms around Laurent so tightly that Laurent though he might shatter in his hands, slipping through the cracks of his fingers like sand.

Laurent couldn’t remember ever feeling something like this, having nothing to compare this unnatural feeling to. His hands felt unsteady, his entire body pulsating like he had an aphrodisiac running through his veins where he should have blood, breaths uneven like at the end of a race. Laurent’s thoughts were swarming, his ribcage feeling like it was being pelted by stones as he felt a hand run down his side, fingertips feeling like flames against the thin material of cotton against him.

Laurent tried his best to cling, to focus only on the depth of heat that he could feel building in his stomach, causing his bones to feel like fragile twigs. But for all of his attempts, he could do nothing to stop the contradicting thought of right and wrong. The ghost of a different touch. The whisper that Laurent couldn’t have this, as silent as flour spilling on the floor but enough to make Laurent’s fingers clench in an entirely different way.

And Damen felt it. Stupid, careful Damen who was as attuned to Laurent as an arrow to its target, breaking away from him and putting enough distance between them that Laurent could breathe but
could still feel another person’s warmth.

“I’m sorry,” Damen said, raggedly. “I didn’t-

“Stop,” Laurent said, his teeth gritted. “Apologizing.” He turned in his spot, placing his arms on the backrest of the couch and gripping the material, hanging his head between his shoulders. He heard footsteps as he breathed once. Twice. When he finally turned he saw Damen leaning on the archway that led to the bedchambers, looking at Laurent. Not bashfully, not expectantly. Just looking. When he spoke, his voice was low.

“I know a part of you wants to be alone,” he said, remaining where he was, a notable distance away from Laurent. “But I also know that you want me to stay.” He pushed off the wall but did not come forward. “You want control, but don’t know how to wield it now.”

“I’m not a book,” Laurent said. “That you can simply read.”

But a part of Laurent thought: wasn’t he? Frustratingly, there didn’t appear to be a single thing that Damen didn’t know about him. He seemed to expect every one of Laurent’s actions, and was primed to react to each and every one. Laurent thought that this might be easier if Damen would just- do what was expected of him, but Damen seemed committed to defying every one of Laurent’s expectations.

Straightening his body, inhaling as he walked forwards, Laurent stopped in front of Damen and looked him in the eyes, feeling the way his pulse seemed to speed up like it was aware of their close proximity.

“Walk into the bedchambers,” Laurent said, in a tone that did not incite argument. “And stand by the bed.”

Damen did, not hesitating for a moment as he stepped inside, standing at the edge of the mattress. He kept his shoulders straight as he watched Laurent enter, saying nothing as the door shut behind Laurent with a soft click. Laurent stood in front of him, feeling the silence between them as thick as clay.

One of the servants had been to the rooms to light the lanterns while they had been at the feast. Flames lined the wall, the candles on the desk and the two carved atop the bedpost, designs etched around them like a frame. It was almost eerie the way the room glowed ethereally, the light in Damen’s eyes never wavering despite the continuous flickering.

“I’m not made of glass,” Laurent said.

“I don’t think you are.”

“I won’t break.”

“Tell me what you want,” Damen said.

He said nothing else, just waited for Laurent to speak. He must of have had some idea of what Laurent needed, what he would normally do in this situation, but he was standing with his hands on his sides, waiting for Laurent’s cue.

Laurent said, “sit on the bed.”

He did. The mattress moved with the pressure, the bed creaking as Damen sat down, bringing him closer to Laurent’s level so that it was now Damen looking up at Laurent, just an inch or two
Laurent looked at him, taking in the contrast of the bright chiton against his olive skin, the deep red cape that fell down his shoulders like the gauzy curtains surrounding him, pooling behind him in folds. The gold of his pin which Laurent now personally knew would take nothing more than a flick of a wrist to undo. It matched the golden leaves in his hair, placed amongst dark, tousled curls that fell away from his face aside from that one, ridiculously large strand that fell into his eyes. Laurent’s fingers itched with the urge to brush it away.

And so he did, his chest tight like he was holding his breath as he lifted his hand, Damen’s eyes following the movement as Laurent brought it to his face, making his intentions clear so that Damen could stop him.

He didn’t, his breath hitting Laurent’s wrist in soft puffs as Laurent grazed the skin by Damen’s brow, the curl falling right back like that was its place. Laurent followed it, pushing his hand into Damen’s hair, his fingers gliding through with ease. Damen’s mouth was slightly parted, his eyes dark and hooded as he held himself still for Laurent.

Damen closed his eyes, his head slightly lowered as Laurent raised a second hand, running both hands through curls that felt like silk under his palms, soft and thick. Laurent brought a hand all the way back, lingering on the shorter hairs by his neck that tickled Laurent’s fingers. He felt Damen shiver as his fingernails grazed the skin.

Laurent brought his hands down to Damen’s shoulders, sturdy and strong beneath him. He brought one hand to the pin, hesitating for a moment before speaking.

“Remove your cape.”

Damen did, not hesitating as Laurent had to lift his hand, undoing the clasp with a mindless tug, his eyes never leaving Laurent’s as the clip released the cloth, the cape falling off his back and onto the mattress.

His strength seemed more prominent like that, nothing draped around him so that all that Laurent could see was heavily muscled arms, smooth skin taught around each ripple like velvet. Laurent’s hands followed the path of his eyes slowly, something in his stomach clenching as he felt each rise and bump of Damen’s biceps, his forearms, even his wrists. Laurent’s fingers stopped at the bottom when they reached metal, the press of gold stark and heady against his warm skin.

Laurent’s eyes lingered on it, watching as his own fingers wrapped around the cuff as he heard the sound of his voice.

“Your cuffs were a symbol of your captivity.”

“Yes,” Damen said.

“Why did you keep one on?”

Damen’s fingers flinched like he wanted to touch and was restraining himself. When he spoke, his voice was very deep.

“I didn’t think I was going to see you again.”

Laurent looked up, his fingers pausing in their slow back and fourth as his eyes locked with Damen’s, not knowing what he would find there but not expecting the way it made him feel like something in his chest had expanded.
“That’s not what they symbolize anymore,” Damen said.

“I know,” Laurent said, touching his own cuff.

Damen’s eyes eventually broke away from Laurent’s, moving slowly down his neck, his legs, making Laurent feel like he had been doused in hot oil. Laurent felt himself flush, his cheeks hot as Damen’s eyes came back to his.

“Why did you wear this tonight?” Damen asked. His voice had taken on a new tone.

“For you,” Laurent said. His hands had found their way back to Damen’s face, his thumbs on the hollow of his cheekbone, grazing the spot that he knew would deepen with his dimple if he smiled at Laurent in the way that did odd things to Laurent’s stomach.

Laurent wanted it. He wanted it with this man who could touch Laurent if he wanted, could do anything that he wanted but instead was sitting with his fists clenched in the sheets because he did not want to push the boundaries that Laurent had set, the walls that he had built.

But sometimes, boundaries gave way. When you banged against a wall enough times, ramming into it over and over, it crumbled to the ground leaving nothing but dust in the air and defenses lowered.

Laurent brought a hand to Damen’s, placing his fingers on top of his so that they unclenched, raising it to Laurent’s waist. Laurent’s breathing was labored as blue eyes met brown. He felt the outline of lips beneath his finger, the solid press of thighs against his knees as he leaned in.

He kissed Damen slowly, unhurriedly, feeling the way Damen’s lips remained placid against his, allowing Laurent to set the pace and simply take his mouth. Laurent could go about this logistically, tactically, but Laurent didn’t want to plan, to think about how or why. This was not strategy. It was feeling. It was closing your eyes and stepping forward, knowing open arms and warmth awaited you. It was fingers touching him like trying to touch a thorn bush without being pricked.

Laurent angled his head and kissed Damen deeper, stronger, stepping closer so that he felt the solid wood of the bed pressed against him, their chests touching with each movement. Their clothes were minimal, barely there so that each brush felt like what Laurent imagined Damen’s bare skin would feel like against his own. Laurent thought of that solid weight pressing him into the mattress and his blood rushed as he tightened his fingers in Damen’s hair.

“Move back,” Laurent said against his mouth, his lips feeling immediately empty as Damen pulled away, moving himself back a few inches so that he was no longer on the edge of the mattress, leaving a little bit of room in front of him.

Laurent’s eyes trailed strong legs, the edge of the chiton that stopped halfway down muscled thighs, skin unabashedly on display. Laurent breathed in slowly as he pressed one knee into the bedding, lifting the other one up and over so that he was settled firmly, his gaze daring refute.

He did not receive any, though he relished in the way Damen’s eyes darkened with undoubtful desire so that they were all pupil, strong hands coming up to clasp Laurent’s waist. They remained there, neither prompting nor inciting as Laurent focused on the touch, on the way Damen’s hips felt between his legs.

Kissing was a gradual, tender thing, nothing else holding any prominence but lips moving as one, hands wandering like settling on one spot would put a stop to this.

But there was no stopping, a smoldering flame turning into a blazing fire that Laurent felt in every part of him, felt directed back at him with just as much fervor. Laurent felt an aching throb, one that
seemed to reform something inside him, transforming flesh and blood. When Laurent felt that first solid, unmistakable press against him, it was mindless instinct that had him pressing back, a low sigh slipping from his lips.

He felt Damen stiffen against him, not meaning to initiate something and equally not having expected Laurent to reciprocate. Laurent swallowed his gasp, shifting his body again blindly as he kissed him harder, too filled with abandonment to focus too hard on what he was doing.

And then it stopped, snuffed out like a flame as Damen pressed his hands against Laurent’s chest, pushing him away gently but firmly.

“Alright,” Damen exhaled slowly.

“Are you trying to prove a point in delayed gratification?” Laurent asked, feeling very exasperated and if he was being honest, a little breathless.

Obnoxiously, something about that caused Damen to smile deeply, knuckles trailing Laurent’s cheek. Laurent grabbed at his hand roughly, pushing it down onto the sheet beside them.

“This is ridiculous,” Laurent said. He would huff if we wanted to act as indignant as he felt. “It’s not like we haven’t already.”

When Damen said nothing, Laurent arched a brow. “What,” he said, looking at him daringly. “Are you nervous now that I have a clear head, you won’t perform as impressively as you think you do?”

Damen grinned at him slyly, his voice dry as he said, “no.”

“Worried you won’t live up to your expectations?”

The nature of Damen’s smile changed, his eyes twinkling as he said, ”you have high expectations?”

Blinking, Laurent could feel the flush spreading on his cheeks, his neck hot. Despite this he said, “no.”

Damen was practically glowing with pleasure. Fingers sweeping against Laurent’s he said, “do you think about it?”

“No,” Laurent repeated. He might have been annoyed had he not been so begrudgingly charmed by the boyish nature of Damen’s pride. He looked like a large puppy that had rolled onto its back, waiting for its belly to be scratched and rubbed. Carefully, Laurent removed himself from Damen and stepped back onto solid ground, immediately reaching to straighten out his jacket before he remembered that he was wearing a fucking bed sheet.

Damen got off the bed as well, standing in front of Laurent calmly like he had not just turned his brain over in his head or made him feel like his organs had been rearranged. Laurent looked up at him pointedly and this time when Damen touched his cheek, did not push his hand away.

“There is no rush between us,” he said softly. Before Laurent could respond he lowered his head, pressing a kiss to Laurent’s forehead.

And then he was pulling away, making for the door. Laurent opened his mouth to question him but decided against it, already knowing what he would say. Damen stopped with his hand on the handle, gazing at Laurent for a long, drawn out moment before he finally left, leaving Laurent to stand there alone, his lips pressed together, his heart still pounding.
Damen signaled to a passing servant, setting his empty goblet down onto the tray and replacing it with another. He looked to Laurent in question who shook his head and then to Jolana, Herode’s granddaughter who was visiting the palace for the week.

“Thank you, Exalted,” she said, accepting the wine. She took a sip in that careful way women did without disturbing their painted lips before turning her attention back to Laurent.

“I’ve been around most of the palace,” she said. “It is very different from the architecture in Arles.”

“Damianos and I wanted to recreate what could be found in both capitals.”

“I’ve not yet been to Akielos,” She said, turning her attention to Damen. Her eyes were a bright emerald green, matching the gems that were woven into her long waves. “I hear it is beautiful.”

“It is very different than Vere,” Damen said. “They each hold their own beauty.”

“And which do you prefer?”

“I prefer the home Laurent and I have built,” Damen said.

Jolana grinned, taking another sip of her drink. Absently, Damen was reminded of a cat that had spotted a rat in its sights.

“I must say,” she continued, setting her goblet down on one of the smaller tables lining the wall. “It’s quite odd to not see pets loitering around, being fed and doting jewels. I have not yet grown accustomed to the change.”

“You are still free to keep a pet,” Laurent informed her. “The new edict has not affected the act itself.”

“I’m aware,” she said. “I have very healthy appetites.”

When neither Damen nor Laurent responded, she altered her course of action. “I spoke to one of the soldiers earlier,” she said. “I believe he is in your guard. He is Veretian.”

“Jord,” Damen guessed.

“He asked if I needed help finding my assigned chambers.”

“Lazar,” Laurent said.

“Yes,” she said, pointing at Laurent with a ringed finger. “That was his name. Anyhow, I inquired about the soldiers training and if I would be able to observe.”

“Really,” Laurent said.

“I appreciate efficiency and exercise,” she said. “My youngest brother plans to join the army when he is of age. He would enjoy stories of the king’s guard and their routines.” Tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, “If I may ask, do the two of you take part in the training, or simply orchestrate them?”

“Of course we do,” Damen said. When she gazed at him he said, “you seem surprised.”
“I guess I am,” she said. “I’m having a bit of a hard time imagining how someone can manage to continue fighting, let alone walk after they’ve been pinned down by a king.”

“I can assure you,” Laurent said, “It’s possible.”

Damen looked at him, trying to remember when Laurent had curled his fingers around Damen’s bicep.

Jolana looked between the two of them, her expression indecipherable.

“Most of the time,” Laurent added, just as Herode stepped up and joined them.


“Of course,” she said, turning back to Damen and Laurent. “It has been a pleasure,” she said, her green eyes bouncing between the two of them once more before taking Herode’s arm, walking with him to the opposite end of the room where an older woman lifted a hand as she saw her. Damen turned to Laurent who was smiling at Jolana’s retreating figure, his eyes bright. Eventually he turned to Damen, his gaze the same.

“What?”

“Again?” Damen asked.

“What?” Laurent repeated, blinking.

“Laurent.”

“Would you prefer I say that you are impotent?” Laurent asked. “We can do that next time.”

Rubbing at his temples, “why do we need to do anything?”

“Or I suppose I could simply unlace my jacket and show off my neck,” Laurent continued as if Damen had not spoken. “It does get rather hot in here. Wine, large crowds.”

“You don’t drink wine,” Damen said.

“Most of the kingdom does,” Laurent commented, leaning a shoulder on the wall. “It does work to lower inhibitions.”

“The man from Isthima wasn’t drinking,” Damen couldn’t help saying, hips lips quirking.

“That was just ridiculous,” Laurent said. “He wasn’t even your type.”

“You are my type,” Damen said, leaning his body next to Laurent’s so that their hands were brushing. “You are the only person I see. You know that.”

“That doesn’t impact the fact that most of the country wants to be under you in bed.”

“And not you?” Damen asked.

“That’s different,” Laurent said. “I’m frigid. You on the other hand are notorious for fucking half of Akielos.”

“Everyone knows that is in the past,” Damen said. “And you are far from frigid,” he continued,
thinking of the way Laurent’s lashes fluttered when Damen trailed his fingers along his neck.
“You’re the warmest person I know.”

Laurent scrunched his nose, adorably, and Damen couldn’t help taking his face in his hands and kissing him against the wall, in front of anyone who may have looked.

The games were one of Damen’s favorite events. They brought the palace to life in a certain way that stood out in Damen’s mind, causing a certain level of adrenaline to constantly be flowing through his veins and pumping in his body. Sports and physicality were something that Damen understood and had always loved since he was a boy. Whether it had been training for them competitively with Nikandros as a little boy, watching his father compete as a child or finally stepping out on the field as a young man, winning his first okton as crown prince. He always looked forward to this time of year.

Laurent enjoyed the games as well, Damen knew. Laurent was never one to pass up an opportunity of taking people by surprise. Of taking everyone’s dubious expectations and calmly, casually thwarting them. He did these things indifferently like people’s perception of him was the last thing on his mind. And while it wasn’t the most important thing to him, Damen knew that Laurent still enjoyed that moment where he managed some impossible feet and took everyone by utter surprise.

Laurent, who Damen could not think of without smiling ridiculously.

Damen was the king. There were things for him to do and people for him to see, especially considering all the people that had come to the border the day’s events, but Damen was finding it particularly difficult to focus when he knew Laurent was somewhere in the palace, possibly thinking of Damen as well.

Damen remembered all the times over those past two years when the two of them had separate business to attend to and were not meant to see each other, but Damen would still seek Laurent out, snatching away a few moments with him before their duties demanded otherwise. He remembered the way Laurent would look up when he noticed Damen was there, a certain look altering his features so that his eyes lit up, his smile soft and a little shy like he didn’t know how to react to the fact that seeing Damen had him so unexpectedly happy.

Damen thought that when Laurent looked at him now, he might be starting to see some of that look again.

Damen stepped out onto the training grounds of the palace, looking at the way everything had transformed around them. Vast, open land, orange and yellow coloring the scene, the sweet smell of summer gone and replaced with the fresh, aromatic scent of autumn. The air was sharp and crisp, chilling Damen’s bare arms and legs. It was cool enough out to merit Veretian clothing as it had been for a while, but the games were an Akielon tradition. Damen wanted to represent himself as such.

Stands had been set up around the entire perimeter of the grounds, large clusters of people already filling the spots, others wandering around with elbows linked, conversation circulating. Tables had been set up throughout the field, refreshments and platters of fruits and vegetables constantly being replenished by servants. A dais had been assembled where Damen and Laurent would sit, Nikandros on Damen’s left and Vannes on Laurent’s right. Another area had been sectioned off for the kyroi, the council not too far off.

Damen wandered the stands now taking in the lively atmosphere, the sound of weapons being hefted, swords and spears of different lengths being placed in separate piles, targets dragged out for all the events that required it. Stable boys brought the horses out by the reins and tethered them to
posts, later to be used for the intermediate horseraces and eventually, the okton. Men stood huddled together in groups, discussing strategies and placing bets, showing off in that way where everyone thought they were unbeatable, seeing no one as competition.

Damen heard a low commotion on the side by a cluster of trees, a large group of children gathered together. As Damen approached he saw barrel full of small wooden swords, the ones that were typically used in practice and could do no real harm. Damen had many memories of using those same swords when he had still been too young; his proportions not yet balanced enough to properly wield a long sword made of heavy metal. Damen saw that Aktis was there as the swords were being distributed, standing guard to ensure that no one harmed themselves.

As Damen walked the rest of the way and stepped into view of the children, he saw that Aktis was not alone. Laurent stood off beside a stone bench with two children, a young boy and girl who seemed to be around the same age, the two of them clutching a wooden sword in their hands. Laurent was explaining something to them that Damen could not hear, motioning between the two of them, to the group of children and to the swords they were gripping. Damen was partially behind a tree, his vantage allowing him to see but not be seen.

"-But my father still won’t let me,” the boy said, finishing off a sentence that Damen had not heard the beginning of.

Laurent looked to the girl. “And you?”

“No,” she said, speaking around the fingers that were not holding the wooden hilt. “Mama says we are too young.”

“And how old are you?”

“Nine,” they said in unison.

“Nine is a very young age to begin sword fighting.” Laurent said. “Certainly too young to switch over from wooden swords.”

“Do you still use wooden swords, Your Highness?”

“No,” Laurent smiled. “I have my own sword now.”

“Did you name it?” the girl asked. “Our older brother named his sword.”

Laurent was still smiling. He had sat down on the bench so he could be more level with them. “What did he name it?”

“Needle,” they said, together again.

“That is a very interesting name.”

“When did you start training with real swords?”

Damen watched as Laurent’s expression seemed to freeze. The smile was still there but the open light of it was gone, the lift at the edges kept for the children. Damen felt his heart stutter in his chest, his fingers clenching at his sides as he fought the impulse to turn around, to step away.

“Older than you both,” Laurent said.

“Why?” the girl asked, in that ceaseless way children asked nonsensical questions such as why birds
flew or why the grass was green. Damen watched a wave of emotions roll over Laurent’s face, looking between the children for a few beats before speaking.

“I was a crown prince,” he said. “It was my duty.” Before they could reply he gestured towards the group of the rest of children, nodding his head in their direction. “They are beginning to compete. You should join them.”

As the children walked off hand in hand, clacking their swords against each other, Damen watched carefully as Laurent tapped his fingers on the surface of the bench, his eyes following their retreating figures.

“Are you waiting for a personalized invitation?” Laurent asked, still facing forward.

Still hesitating, Laurent turned to Damen and looked at him blankly, unwilling to repeat himself and simply waiting for Damen to inevitably come to him. Damen did, feeling a bit unsteady as he sat beside Laurent, watching the children play as well.

They were quiet, the two of them training their gaze elsewhere. Damen didn’t know what Laurent was thinking, what he was telling himself to keep him there, in that spot. Damen wanted to know. He desperately wanted to turn to Laurent, to ask him everything that was going through his head and to understand what Laurent was feeling in that moment, sitting there with Damen.

“Your thoughts are very loud,” Laurent said.

“What is it that I’m thinking, then?”

This earned Damen a long, knowing look from close distance. Damen looked into open eyes, waiting. For what, he didn’t know. They both knew what the other was feeling.

The grounds were full of people gathering together, certain sports already taking place around them. Damen heard the joint sound of laughter, the clang of metal and steel as everyone warmed themselves up, preparing for the day ahead. Distantly, Damen heard the sound of cheering.

“I have seen you fight.”

“What?” Damen said, turning his head back at the unexpected sound of Laurent’s voice.

“In the training arena with Nikandros,” Laurent continued, ignoring Damen’s look. “From the window of our chambers, sparring with soldiers in the yard. From the sides, pulling partners apart when one crossed an obscure line.”

“Laurent,” Damen said, not understanding what Laurent was trying to tell him, but knowing from the tone of his voice, the way the words seemed to be coming from somewhere deep in his chest, in his mind that they were important. “I don’t-“

“There were stories,” Laurent continued like Damen hadn’t spoken at all. “That the boys at court used to whisper about when I was young. Highborn ones who felt confident enough to associate with me. They would exchange folktales like gossip. Myths and fables about spirits, demons and monsters. Namely the monsters that lived across the ocean in the country of barbarians.”

Damen felt his insides tighten like a rope had been pulled, his lungs full like he had swallowed cotton. He didn’t know what Laurent was saying or why he was telling him this. He still wasn’t looking at Damen, his fingers curled on the edge of the bench.

“They kept slaves,” Laurent said. “They fucked women and produced bastards, even the king. They
walked around half clothed with no sense of modesty or diffidence. Worst of all, the pinnacle of everything, they acted with dishonor in all aspects of their lives like it was a code they lived by. They deceived and used trickery, especially when it came to the battlefield where every little thing mattered.” Laurent’s throat rolled, a muscle in his jaw clenching.

“Imagine,” he said. “The way a boy would respond when the greatest fighter he had even seen had fallen, the same fighter he had watched train every day of his life, coupled with years of having nothing to cling to but stories of the barbaric nature in which opponents were deceptively taken down.”

They were looking at each other now. Damen could hear his breathing, could feel Laurent’s eyes boring into him, into the vulnerable part of him that Damen felt might never be whole, because for all that he wanted to give Laurent everything, he could never give him his brother back.

“I’ve seen you fight,” Laurent repeated. He closed his eyes, blue briefly disappearing as time seemed to slow, pausing them in that moment where nothing else could have possibly mattered, nothing but their touching knees and the look on Laurent’s face when he opened his eyes again.

“I know who you are, Damianos. I know,” Laurent said, “that you are not a myth.”

He spoke like the words hurt him, like they hurt them both, and they did. Damen could feel them take form inside him, lodging in his ribcage, making him feel weak where he thought he was strong.

Damen hadn’t been expecting this. He felt as if he and Laurent were stuck in this place where they could not go back but were afraid to push forward. Laurent felt so close, closer to him than he had been since that terrible morning when he had woken up in Damen’s arms and looked at him in rage, and all Damen wanted to do was pull him in the rest of the way.

His voice pitched low because this was not a conversation for anyone else, “what does this mean?”

The side of Laurent’s mouth lifted. It was small, a little sad, but genuine in a way that made Damen feel like his hand had been held. Like arms had been wrapped around him, a knuckle tilting his chin up.

“Whatever it has meant for these past two years,” Laurent said. He stood from the bench and after a moment’s hesitation, offered Damen his hand. It was stiff, awkward with inexperience, the bones in his hand tense as Damen clasped it.

“Come,” Laurent said. “The games are beginning.”

The entire crowd fell silent as Damen and Laurent stepped on to the dais, Vannes and Nikandros waiting for them to sit before taking their own seats. The two of them stood tall, Laurent’s voice loud and clear throughout the large expanse of land.

“As our yearly tradition begins,” Laurent said, everyone turning to him like flowers to sunlight. “We will compete with honor and righteousness, and bask in our glory and unity. Let the games begin.”

A smatter of applause broke out over the crowds, everyone finding their seats and preparing themselves for the spectacles about to unfold. Women arranged their skirts and crossed their legs, men either taking their spot or approaching the field if they were to be competing. Damen and Laurent would remain on the dais for majority of the games to give everyone else a chance at winning. The only things they would take part in were the okton and wrestling, if someone challenged Damen.
Target shooting was first, beginning with archery. Targets had been hammered into the ground while Damen and Laurent had spoken, bows and arrows made available to the group of men lining up for their turn. A line of eight targets had been assembled on the edge of the field, every person adjusting their footing and hold to whatever stance they required for a perfect shot. Damen watched with interest, the entire crowd focused as everyone took their shot, the first win going to Aktis.

The Akielons bellowed, men and women clapping and rising from their seats as the first round of the games went to a man of their country, though it was all in jest. Damen made himself comfortable in his seat and watched as Laurent observed the field, arrows being yanked out and crates of spears replacing the bows. Laurent excelled in spear throwing, his aim impeccable, and Damen wondered if he was considering participating.

“Would you like to compete?” Damen asked, gesturing towards the new group that was forming.

Laurent had a leg crossed over the knee, his elbow pressed to the armrest, his chin resting on his thumb. The rest of his fingers were loosely covering his mouth, his stance easy and casual. He kept his hand were it was as he turned his head slightly, looking at Damen.

“Why?” he asked. “We both know I’ll win.”

“And?”

“And, we are not here to show off our skills,” Laurent said. “Aside from the okton.”

“And wrestling,” Damen reminded him. Laurent’s eyes returned to the field.

The second round began with cheers and hollers from all around, bare arms flexing in chitons and muscles straining in sleeves as everyone hefted a spear into their hand, throwing it with the precision and strength that took far more practice to perfect than people who have never touched a spear realized. It was all very exact, supremely meticulous. It was one of the few things that Damen had not grasped effortlessly as a child, barefoot and eager, Nikandros usually at his side. Initially, the spears would continuously fall a few feet shy of the target. As Damen grew and his strength had increased, the new challenge had been to compromise the amount of force he used behind each attempt.

The excitement rose with each throw, the sound a loud whistle in the air, punctuated by the thunk as it stuck into the post, its end shaking. The crowd continued to scream and chant with excitement, the second round going to Enguerran.

Wine was offered to them as the targets were removed from the field, the fallen spears lifted and stacked into crates, servants clearing everything away. Damen, Laurent and Nikandros all waved the trays away, only Vannes accepting a goblet. She turned to the three of them with a quizzical look.

“Will none of you be drinking?”

“Not during the games,” Nikandros said.

“It is a shame for a lady to be drinking alone,” she said as she took her first sip.

“It is a shame for my inebriated head to be removed when spears are flying,” Damen replied.

“Or in a chokehold,” Laurent said.

“It is a pity,” Vannes said. “That we never get to see Veretians wrestle.”
“You’ve been to the Vaskian clans,” Laurent said, sipping from the water that the servant had brought them instead. “No one is stopping you.”

“Those women are something,” she agreed.

“The infamous Vaskian clanswomen,” Nikandros said.

“Have you never been?” she asked, brows arched.

Sword fighting was up next, the best ones available being retrieved from inside the training arena. Damen always found this part of the games to be interesting, to see Akielons and Veretians physically compete against one another and not to just have their performance compared like with target practice. Everyone had their own flair when it came to sword fighting, as personal as a dance.

“I have no purpose there,” Nikandros replied.

Vannes lowered her goblet, her eyes scrolling Nikandros’ body, starting at his toes and stopping at his eyes. She fitted Damen with a similar look before turning to Laurent. “Have their customs changed?”

Laurent grinned. “No.”


“Oh,” Vannes said, returning her gaze to Nikandros. “My apologies, I only assumed that you would qualify.”

“Excuse me?” Nikandros said. When Vannes sipped from her goblet, Nikandros’ frown deepened. “I am not impotent.”

“It truly is a shame that you can’t prove your virility to Lady Vannes,” Laurent said. “Ah, the next game is beginning.”

Damen turned his attention back to the games where rows of men faced each other. His hands itched to pick up a sword and join them, but he took pleasure in watching his guard compete along with a multitude of other people who had traveled from far for these very events. He briefly looked to Laurent who was watching carefully, his goblet dangling between long fingers.

Long sword went to Acton of Kesus, short sword going to Pallas. Pallas like Damen and Laurent had not competed until now, having proved his capabilities time and time again, opting to let others show their worth. A Veretian Damen didn’t know by name won at trident and with that, the first half of the games had come to an end. Everyone began to rise from their spot and make their way to the gardens at the opposite end of the palace where a lunch would take place as an interlude, resuming after for wrestling and the okton.

Nikandros and Vannes left together, leaving Damen and Laurent alone on their twinned thrones. Damen turned to face Laurent, taking in his easy posture and the way he seemed to be in no rush.

“Are you enjoying?” Damen asked.

Laurent gazed at Damen over the rim of his goblet as he took a drink, his lips glistening as he licked the water off. “You seem very intent on continuously checking in for my approval.”

“Not your approval,” Damen said. “Your happiness.”
Laurent blinked, then blinked again as he stood up from his seat, shoving the empty goblet at Damen’s chest and stepping off the dais before Damen could dwell on his blushed cheeks.

Damen set their empty goblets off on the side as he stopped off the dais as well, walking at Laurent’s side towards the direction where everyone had went, trying not to smile. A large tent had been set up, different shades of cream falling down from high wooden beams, the thin fabric working to block out most of the crisp air, making the atmosphere for lunch a comfortable experience. Damen and Laurent took their usual spots at the head of the largest table, most of the chairs already filled.

The tables had been filled with food prior to their arrival, the servants now pouring wine, water and setting out kettles of warm teas. There were thinly cut slivers of chicken and meat, an assortment of salads and light dips for the platters of breads. Damen filled his own plate as everyone conversed at an even murmur, reminiscing over past games and comparing them to the current ones.

Damen saw Laurent eyeing a kettle filled with a berry tea, just out of his reach. Damen set his fork down and took hold of the kettle’s handle, lifting it in Laurent’s direction who held his cup out.

“Do you enjoy tea?” Laurent asked, speaking as if he were testing out a new language.

“Yes,” Damen smiled, setting the kettle down closer to Laurent. “Though I find this to be a bit too sweet for my tastes.”

Laurent nodded, seeming unsure how to continue on with the line of conversation. Damen had seen him charm his way effortlessly through countless conversations with people of all rank, seeming knowledgeable and effervescent even when Damen knew he had little to no interest. Something as simple as a casual conversation about Damen’s likes and dislikes had him stumped.

Before Laurent managed to reply, a noble from Tourtaine sitting a few seats away began a conversation with him, pulling Laurent’s focus elsewhere. Confident in Laurent’s ability to hold his own, Damen returned his attention to his food, thinking of the impending wrestling matches and how good it would feel to work his muscles and exert himself again.

Damen looked up from his plate, just reaching a hand out for the salt when he noticed a man approaching with two other people trailing behind him. The Kyros of Dice.

“Exalted,” he said. “Your Highness.” Damen turned his head and saw that Laurent’s previous conversation had ended, his eyes now on the man and woman before them. The man seemed to be around Laurent’s age, the girl perhaps a year or two younger. She had dark eyes and wild black hair, a stark opposite from the man’s lighter coloring. His hair was longer than Laurent’s and pulled back with leather ties, his eyes a much lighter blue, nearly transparent. Their skin appeared to be about the same shade, unnatural for his Akielon roots.

“Kyros,” Damen said. “It is a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is ours, Exalted,” he replied. “I wished to present my son and daughter, Xavier and Safria. It is their first time on the border.”

“How are you liking it?” Damen asked.

“It is lovely, Exalted,” Safria said.

“And how are you enjoying the games?” Laurent asked. He was looking at Xavier. “Your performance was very impressive.”

Damen looked at him again and saw that he recognized him from the line of men competing in spear
throwing. If Damen remembered correctly, he had come second to Enguerran. Very impressive indeed.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” he said. “It was an honor to compete.” As he spoke, the kyros’ attention was called elsewhere. He made his excuses, leaving his children there as he approached the man that had beckoned him over, taking a seat at his table. Damen looked back to Xavier and Safria, just as he felt a knee touch his, the line of a thigh pressing against his own. Damen looked to see if a servant was on Laurent’s opposite side causing him to lean into Damen, but all he saw was Laurent.

“Have you been training long?” Laurent asked.

“I have,” he nodded. “I was lucky to have the experience of watching Exalted train with his men publicly when they visited Dice a year ago. I tried my best to emulate his stance.”

Damen blinked in surprise. He remembered that trip well but did not recall Xavier. His memories were of the tart wine they had drunk that was notorious in Dice, the discussions with the kyros, the times he and Laurent had snuck away to explore the grounds together.

“You chose well,” Laurent said. “Damianos has an excellent hold.”

Damen blinked again, looking at Laurent.

“What else can we expect?” Safria asked, when no one else filled the momentary silence.


“The sport of kings,” Xavier said. “My father speaks highly of it, I’m very excited to finally be able to view it for myself.”

“Yes,” Safria said. “I hear that it is invigorating.”

“If I may ask,” Xavier said, looking at Damen. “At what age did you begin training?”

“For the okton?” Damen asked. “Very young. I’ve always enjoyed it.”

“I’m sure,” Xavier said. “I look forward to watching your performance.”

Damen felt it just as he began to answer, the warm touch of skin covering the back of his hand that was on the table. The feel of it was a shock to him, an awakening to his senses as he turned his eyes to Laurent, his heart knocking against his chest as he felt Laurent’s fingers slide into the gaps between his own.

For all of Laurent shifts, for all of the breaches into his carefully cultivated wall in the private spaces between the two of them, he had yet to show any of that in public or around other people. Any attempts at speaking were futile.

“You really should see Damen perform,” Laurent said.

Damen felt his hand flinch on the table, just as he felt Laurent push it down.

Safria opened her mouth to speak, her name being called at the same time. She looked past their table, Xavier’s name being called as well. Damen looked and saw who he assumed was their mother, waving the two of them over.

“It was wonderful making your acquaintances,” Safria said, Xavier nodding his head in agreement. Damen could hardly hear them. The only thing he was registering was the touch of Laurent’s skin
that was so familiar to him it was like no time had passed. He remembered the feel of it running through his hair slowly, down his arms, cupping his cheeks as dark blue eyes bore into his.

The two of them were gone, finally leaving Damen and Laurent alone. Damen’s breaths felt heavy as he turned to Laurent. Complicated, beautiful Laurent. He was still looking in the direction that the two of them had taken, and it was with a flair of voracious euphoria that Damen realized he recognized his expression, the proprietary look in Laurent’s eyes.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Damen said. His voice was very low.

“What?” Laurent asked. He went to pull his hand away, only to be intercepted when Damen turned his own hand over, grabbing at Laurent’s fingers and pulling them between his own. Damen felt Laurent pause, his entire body visibly locking up with uncertainty as he looked at their joined hands, Damen’s thumbs running along the bumps of Laurent’s knuckles.

“Everyone knows of my loyalties,” Damen said. “And my heart.”

Eventually, Laurent met his eyes.

“The entire kingdom knows of my disposition.” At Laurent’s quirked brow, “That I am not sleeping with anyone.”

“Yes,” Laurent said. “That appears to be a theme with you.”

Damen breathed out a laugh, pressing his thigh against Laurent’s. Damen felt the tension there again, but the pressure of Laurent’s leg stayed firm against his own.

“Laurent,” Damen said, waiting for Laurent to look back into his eyes. He felt Laurent’s gaze like a tangible hold on him, tightening with each second. He looked at Damen like he could see inside him, every thought and feeling. He probably could. “I have not thought of touching anyone else,” he said. “Of looking at anyone else, since long before the first time you allowed me to kiss you.”

Laurent’s face remained stoic, his shoulders rigid, but Damen saw it. The small, incremental things. The way he was breathing through his nose, the blinks. The slightest shifts.

“For all of this seeming interest,” Laurent said, each word spoken carefully. “Your actions remain inconsistent.”

“We have nothing but time,” Damen said, shifting in closer. He tried to read the look on Laurent’s face, and the expression he found nearly caused him to laugh.

“You think-“ he began, unable to even consider the words. Damen loosened the grip on Laurent’s hand, moving his own hand down enough so the tips of his fingers were grazing Laurent’s wrist, the fluttering of his pulse. Damen felt it rapid like butterfly wings, his own fingers unsteady.

Damen had tried hard to suppress the thoughts. To push down the memories, to stop them from clouding his actions. But with the slight parting of Laurent’s lips and the small space between them, Damen allowed himself to think. He remembered long, languorous hours spent beneath their sheets, the warm slide of Laurent’s thighs as their legs tangled. That first deep, slow push inside, unlike anything Damen had ever experienced. Damen thought if he focused hard enough, he could still feel Laurent’s hands, running down Damen’s back, clutching at his arms. If he tried, he might still hear Laurent’s sweet sounds in his ears.

“I have never,” Damen said, opening his eyes, “wanted anyone more in my entire life.”
He had moved in closer. Or Laurent had, dispensing of the space between them. What did it matter when he could see each of Laurent’s individual golden lashes, could feel them sweep against his own if he just leaned in a bit more.

Lifting his eyes so they would stare into Damen’s, Laurent said, “Then prove yourself.”

Breathing was difficult. All of Damen’s body ached, thrumming with an unparalleled craving. He wanted this. He wanted Laurent.

Damen said, “Let me kiss you.”

He felt the words leave from deep in his chest. He felt primal, raw with the desire to take Laurent into his arms here, to ignore everyone else but the one person who could make Damen do anything just by breathing.

They were looking into each other’s eyes, and then they weren’t, because Laurent’s eyes were closed, and Damen was leaning in.

“The games will now resume,” Nikandros bellowed loudly from the opposite end of the tent, announcing the second half as he and Damen had previously decided on. Damen closed his eyes, resisting the urge to crush a goblet between his fingers.

Too soon the warmth was gone, Damen opening his eyes to see Laurent standing, looking elsewhere. His hands were smoothing down his jacket, his hair pushed behind his ear. Damen took a long, deep breath of cold air, sipping from his water before standing up, taking Laurent’s side. It was time to return.

As the crowds reconvened in the stands, Damen and Laurent took their spots back on the dais between Nikandros and Vannes. The fields had been cleared, vats of oil set out by the stewards on the sides where two men had stepped up.

Damen watched as Baris, a dark haired man from the north stepped up to the field. He had not competed in the other games that day, but Damen remembered him quite well from the previous years, always competing and managing to sweep a few victories under his belt. Some of the crowd must have remembered him as well because there was a chorus of unanimous cheers as he unpinned his chiton, allowing it to fall to the ground. He stepped up before Lydos as his opponent and the two of them took a minute to scoop up the oil in their hands, spreading it over the entirety of their body so they glistened in the sunlight. They placed their hands on each other’s soldiers and as they heaved on signal, the crowd began to roar.

Damen watched with enjoyment as the two men grappled, continuously grabbing for purchase on the other’s slippery body. Damen had wrestled Lydos before and knew him to be a capable, worthy opponent, but it was clear to anyone watching that Baris was superior. It took him not two minutes to have Lydos on his back, panting with his arms pinned above his head. The crowd whistled their approval as the two men pulled themselves up, cleaning themselves off with breathless smiles.

“Baris is very good,” Damen commented, looking over at Nikandros.

“He will request to go up against you,” Nikandros replied, watching as two new men faced each other on the field. Damen hoped so. It had been a long time since he had competed and the thought excited him. He looked to Laurent, who was looking at the discarded chitons.

“Are you enjoying?” he asked.
“Not as much as they are,” Laurent replied.

One of the men was using his hips to heft his opponent off of him, this match lasting considerably longer than the first but just as exciting. Eventually one was on top of the other, hands pinning shoulders down heavily, and then it was over, the crowd just as exuberant.

Damen motioned for a servant to refill his and Laurent’s goblets of water, waving him over with two fingers. Just as he set his down to be poured, he noticed Baris approaching the dais with an eager sort of hesitation, just as Nikandros had suspected. Damen watched with a thrum of excitement as Baris, still naked, dropped to his knees before the twinned thrones.

“If it please my lords and ladies,” he said, as was protocol, “I claim the honor of combat with one of our kings.”

The crowd seemed to be holding its breath, and Damen felt the pressure of anticipation release like pulling a thread as he stood, everyone jumping to their feet as they roared with exhilaration.

Damen lifted a hand to his pin and let it drop, the air cold on his bare skin as he stepped off the dais, leaving his garment behind. He walked with Baris to the center who looked nervous, confident, a bit shocked with his own daring at taking a renowned king on before everyone.

The two of them faced each other as they bent down and cupped their hands, scooping as much oil as they could and spreading it all over themselves, Baris for a second time. Damen felt his eagerness to compete unfurl inside him, the thought of good competition always appealing to him. They placed their hands on each other’s shoulders, nodded once, and heaved.

Baris was a worthy opponent, and Damen felt the pull and strain on all of his muscles, the actions requiring a decent amount of his force and effort. Hands slipped, grips loosening and latching on again, and Damen found himself brought onto his back twice before he utilized the strength in his upper arms and brought Baris onto his back one last time, holding him down with a knee to the chest.

The entire crowd bellowed, the breath leaving Damen roughly as he offered a hand to Baris who was on the ground, the breath ribboning out of him.

“Good match,” Damen said, pulling him up.

“It was an honor, Exalted.”

Damen made his way back to the dais, his hands extended as the dirtied oil was wiped off of him, his chiton refastened. His mind was still preoccupied with the competition, it was only when he took his seat and turned to speak that he noticed that he was alone on the throne.

“Excellent form, Exalted,” Vannes said.

“Thank you.” Turning to Nikandros: “Where’s Laurent?”

“I had mentioned passingly that the two of us used to inspect the spears before the okton when we were boys,” Nikandros said. “He thought it was a good idea, I believe he is in the weaponry tent.”

“Oh,” Damen said, bringing his hand to his chin. He had always enjoyed that task, the notion of touring the tents and greeting his upcoming opponents. It pleased him to think of Laurent doing the same.

The wrestling matches were over, and there was a small interlude before the okton would begin.
Damen looked to the direction of the tent Nikandros motioned to, thinking of Laurent wandering inside it alone. Damen thought of how they had been interrupted earlier, the blown out look in Laurent’s eyes when Damen’s finger had grazed his skin.

“Damen.”

Damen looked back at Nikandros who was watching Damen carefully, his eyes flicking between him and the tent.

“What is going on?” Nikandros said, purposefully speaking in Akielon which Vannes did not excel at.

“What do you mean?” Damen asked.

“You know what I mean.”

Damen knew what he meant. He was already smiling, and it only grew as Nikandros let out a breath and passed his hand over his face, massaging it briefly.

“It’s good, Nikandros,” Damen said. “We-“

Damen didn’t know how to finish the sentence. He didn’t know how to put any of into words, but he didn’t need to. Everything that had happened was between him and Laurent alone. Regardless, he knew it was a far cry from the morning he entered Nikandros’ room and told him that Laurent had forgotten him.

Nikandros dropped his hand and motioned towards the tent. “Go to him,” he said. With the way he was looking at him and the way he spoke, Damen felt as if they were boys again, walking through the palace and nudging each other with a suggestive elbow.

Damen made for the tent, his steps hurried with eagerness. He swept the flap aside, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the dimmer lighting before he stepped inside, hearing the muffled sound as he was closed in. Multiple tall urns lined the tent, handfuls of different colored spears stacked in each. The plain spears, sword and bows from earlier were all set on a separate side. Outside, Damen could hear the sound of targets being dragged onto the field.

Laurent was standing at the separate end of the tent, his back to Damen. His hands were on a table that held empty vats and dirtied cloths, slightly hunched over. He had not turned to see who had entered.

“Laurent,” Damen said, stepping forward.

He did not reply, did not move an inch to acknowledge Damen’s presence or the sound of his voice. Damen took in the inward curve of his back, the hard line of his spine as he remained silent. Damen was behind him before he had even thought to move, his hand on the center of Laurent’s back.

The change was instantaneous, the way his muscled locked up the moment Damen touched him, becoming rigid like stone. Damen felt his own wrist lock up, taking a confused step back so that his hand was hovering awkwardly, unsure. The tent felt very small.

Laurent turned around, seemingly unfazed by the sudden closeness between them. He looked up at Damen calmly, the contrast in his eyes form the last time they were so close that day like a kick to the chest. Anything Damen had thought they might say, anything they might do here was a distant, aborted thought. The only thing he could focus on now was the way Laurent was looking at him.
Or rather, *not* looking at him. The glaze in Laurent’s eyes resembled the way one would look at a statue. Steadily, abstractedly, giving it only a fraction of your attention.

Damen made himself speak. “What happened?”

“I haven’t said anything,” Laurent replied.

“Laurent-“

“The okton is beginning.”

“Fuck the okton,” Damen said. “Be here with me now.”

Damen watched Laurent take air in through his nose, hardly releasing it after. He stood straight backed, his hands firmly at his sides as he waited for Damen to move. When he didn’t, Laurent raised his chin.

“We are the kings,” he said. “And it’s time to go.”

And then Damen found himself in a dark tent, confused, alone.
Chapter 32

It was light in the room. The dim, wavering type of glow that came from candles, flickering against the walls, the marble ground that Damen concentrated on as he walked. It had been dark when they had left the rooms, the servants must have been to light the lanterns and fill the lamps with oil.

Damen had walked through the long halls calmly, his shoulders set with composure, his chin high. He had shown no emotion, no outward thoughts as he spoke in a neutral tone, making commands with determination, because that was what it meant to be king. To hold yourself up when others were down, to hold others up when they could not themselves.

But then they were in his chambers, the door closing behind them, and it was just Damen and Laurent, no one else around to watch the drop of Damen’s shoulders, the dip of his head.

Damen wasn’t sure how long he had been sitting on his bed, the bed he had not been able to leave for weeks of slow healing. Damen’s eyes were on his sandaled feet, his head resting in his hands, his mind a tangle of thoughts, years, stages in life.

“Put him in the family crypt,” he eventually heard, spoken in a soft voice. “Honor him as I know you want to.”

Damen raised his head to see Laurent sitting a few feet away, his eyes on Damen. Damen wasn’t sure how long he had been there with him.

“He has committed regicide.”

Laurent said, “He was your brother.”

Damen looked back down, his hands on his knees as he felt the bedding dip beside him. Damen kept his gaze downward, even when he felt a hand cover his.

Damen couldn’t speak of it. Repression was impossible, not when he had just seen the body of his brother, cold and sallow and so unlike the person he kept in his heart. Damen remembered the way Kastor had handed Damen his first sword, showing him how to properly position his fingers around the hilt. He remembered the feeling of a sword penetrating his stomach, the stairs slipping out from beneath him as he fell down, down, the ground at his back.

Now, Damen felt his hand being turned over, fingers sliding between his own so that two palms touched, the grip as tight as the one on Damen’s chest. Damen turned his head and looked at Laurent, at the only person who knew what it was like to experience pain and loss from those you expected to love you.

Damen closed his eyes and only let himself focus on the warm press of another body, on the gentle fingers cupping his face.

Laurent was the king.

For years, Laurent had known what being king meant. The instant he had lost his brother, stabbed and bleeding out onto the soaked grass of Marlas, he had understood what that had meant. The weight that had fallen down onto his shoulders, and he had carried that weight with him all those years.

Kings were the symbol of all that their country represented. They led their people, held them together
and instilled hope and morale. They set the example, and their lives revolved around their kingdom and setting aside all internal cognition to be what the people needed. Right now, Laurent needed to be here. In the games, on the grounds, all eyes on him.

Laurent needed to be alone.

Laurent knew himself, and he knew when he needed to retreat, to close himself off and away, to take however long he needed to be nowhere but in his head, thinking. Right now was one of those times, and right now he was faced with hundreds of people. Enthusiastic and abuzz, eager for a show.

Everything Laurent was feeling, every overriding thought that was entangled in his head had to be stopped. Tampered down until he was alone and could let it crack open, spilling out and spreading throughout his veins in waves, the same pulse of shock he had felt when the stark evidence of all that had been done had been displayed before him, before watching eyes.

Later, Laurent would open that door. Ignorance was not an option, not when his reality was so blatantly before him. Laurent would get on that horse, would participate in this ridiculous game that somehow equated kingship with riding in circles and throwing spears, and then he would find seclusion and force his mind to work.

For now, Laurent would focus. He was not stupid, he understood that this was a dangerous event, one that would require attention and precision. He could not exactly think with a severed head, and he would not allow himself to blunder because of his emotions.

Laurent looked out at the wide course that had been set out on the field, the two targets that the servants had hammered into the ground. Five horses were being held at the starting line by attendants, all waiting for the competitors to step up and mount. Aside for Laurent it would be all Akielons, as the okton was exclusively an Akielon sport and two years were not enough for any Veretians to practice the sport enough to compete without the fear of maiming. Competing would be Nikandros, Damen, Laurent, Pallas and Baris.

Laurent observed the course carefully, objectively. He thought of the memory that had come back to him a handful of nights ago, unexpectedly, leaving Laurent’s lips before the notion itself had registered in his mind. Laurent’s eyes circled the grounds, his mind on the rapid throw of spears and the sound they would make as they whistled through the air, coupled with the screams and gasps from the crowd.

The memory was crystal clear in Laurent’s head, as vivid as his memory of waking up that morning. If Laurent closed his eyes he could still feel it, that pounding moment of hysteria where he had seen the strut collapse and knew exactly what it meant. The way he had acted, not on thought but on simple instinct, utilizing all the skill that years of practice and dedication in the saddle had gifted him by leaping from his horse and on to Pallas’, shifting their bodies so that the spear sailed right past them. He remembered leaning down and lifting up Pallas’ last spear, even the green tip of it stark in his mind, and throwing it with an effortless confidence, watching it soar through the air and into the center of the target, quivering.

And then, nothing. Laurent’s memory of that day stopped there, fading off into nothingness, much like the sensation of waking up after a long night of dreams, trying to fill in the gaps between each or to recall the end of one that had not followed you into consciousness. Laurent might have thought that he had fabricated the entire memory, but he had seen the open, overjoyed look that had widened Damen’s brown eyes when he had said it. A look like that could have only come from one thing.

A horn sounded and cheers started to rise throughout the crowd like a growing wave. The men involved began to step up to the line, and Laurent heard the sound of a tent fold being pushed aside,
its end flapping in the wind. Laurent looked over his shoulder to see Damen step out, his eyes on nothing in particular. Laurent had been in this spot by the posts for a lingering few minutes, and Damen was only coming out now. If he tried to catch Laurent’s eye, Laurent didn’t know.

Laurent stepped up to his horse that was third in line, Damen’s stallion to his left, Pallas at his right. Each man had a hand on the saddle and mounted, Nikandros exchanging silent words with Damen that went ignored. Laurent’s own spears were tipped in blue, Damen’s in red. Nikandros’ were white, Pallas yellow. Baris’ were black, facing the okton for the first time with the same excited anticipation as when he had approached Damen naked.

Laurent faced forward, observing the field pragmatically as he waited for the horn to sound, a hand gripping the reins. Laurent had practiced for this of course, had been since he had first read about the games, riding in the yard with instructors at time of the day he was sure would not meet disturbance. For all of Laurent’s confidence on a horse and with a spear, he was not some overconfident fool. Excessiveness like this took practice and perfection. Ride the eight circuits, hit the bullseye, don’t get your head removed by a flying spear. Check, check, check.

They each took up their first spear, the crowd hushed as they waited for the first sound, the first sign of movement. A lull of silence, a prolonged stretch, and then the first horn sounded, Nikandros charging down the field. Another horn, spurring Laurent into motion. Damen. Baris. Pallas.

The field was a rapid flurry of activity, a blur of colors and movements as Laurent moved with all the skill he possessed, his spear slipping from his hand and soaring through the air with what he knew was acute precision. Laurent didn’t bother looking to see where the tip landed as he heard that familiar thunk, spurring his horse past the target and around, just as a red spear flew past him, with what Laurent was just as confident was equal accuracy.

The crowd’s shouts and cheers were a dull sound, similar to the muddled sound of voices from underwater. Laurent continued to ride, making his way through the circuits and treating the flying spears like they were no more than tavern darts. He heard the pounding of hooves and the whistle of metal, his grip tight and his mind determined.

As Laurent bent and swept up his next set of spears, he spared himself a moment to observe the field and take in his competition. Equal spears stuck both in the targets and the grass, the targets primarily holding blue, red and black, though each man had managed to get at least one in. Laurent was aware of Damen riding beside Laurent, his gaze focused wholly on the field and the commotion of it.

Three more circuits. Nikandros made a throw, his spear soaring, soaring, landing just beside Pallas’ equally timed throw. As Laurent landed another bullseye and began to enter the second to last round, he allowed himself a risky count of the progress. Thee black spears. Five blue. Five red.

Insanely, their eyes met, though Laurent knew all too well that it was not the time. Dipping down and sweeping up his final set, Laurent gripped his final spear in his right hand and charged, screams and whistles nearly as loud as his pulse in his ears.

Damen was beside him. Damen was moving with Laurent like their horses were tethered by a thread, his arm rearing back in preparation for his final, definitive move. Laurent narrowed his eyes, the field narrowing in his vision so that all he saw was the target, the end point. Laurent tightened his hold, leaned forward, and let it fly. His spear flew, rushing through the air in equal pace with red, the two colors neck and neck like competitors, like partners. Laurent’s horse continued to pound against grass, his momentum too strong to slow down, and it was with the air whipping against his face and his hair flying around him that he saw the two spears hit side by side, the target shaking with the heavy force of the twinned bullseye.
The crowd was all out of their seats, hands cupped in front of mouths and waving above their heads as they cheered at the top of their lungs, whistles and claps spreading throughout the grounds. Laurent turned his head, appraising them all with the look that he knew they wanted, cries intensifying as the kings reigned in beside each other, champions of the okton.

Mania.

Because kings did not have the option of locking themselves away or getting away from prying eyes, solitude was not yet an option. As Damen and Laurent stepped back on to the dais and were presented with the crowns they had not worn during the events, they turned away from the crowd and towards each other, Vannes and Nikandros now gone, seated elsewhere. Laurent removed his circlet, Damen his laurels, servants immediately there to take them away before leaving them once more alone. Laurent bowed his head slightly and felt the heaviness of gold, the gentle way it was placed.

Damen lowered his own head, allowing Laurent to reach up and place his crown atop silken curls, Laurent’s heart coiling in his chest as he remembered the way they had felt between his fingers. When Damen raised his head, his eyes held Laurent’s so poignantly that he may as well have taken Laurent’s hands in his.

Laurent turned away, unable to acknowledge the questions that he did not have answers to. He stepped off the dais and onto the grass with Damen at his heal, allowing them to be swept up in pandemonium once more before finally seeking refuge.

The solid press of wood was a welcome weight at Laurent’s back, leaning on it the moment the door closed, exhaling a breath that came from deep in his chest. His eyes were closed, his fingers at his temples as he breathed in through his nose, out through his mouth. This was a mantra that Laurent knew, one that he was well familiar with. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Repeat.

Laurent hands were in his hair, his thoughts wavering as he cleared his throat, willing himself to regroup. He straightened his back. Opened his eyes. Breathed in once more, and then pushed himself off the door and into the room, making for the table and the waiting pitcher of water.

Laurent poured himself a goblet, watching the clear water fill to the top, glistening against the golden rim, stopping just shy of the top. He took a seat at the spot he usually made use of, taking a long, cool sip. Laurent swallowed, letting himself feel the liquid go down his throat and spread in his chest before lifting the goblet to his lips again.

Luckily, the requirements of the games had been completed following the okton. There was no closing banquet or tradition of drinking, bless whoever had omitted that much-loved factor. The last thing Laurent needed in that moment was alcohol of any kind, further muddling his brain that already felt removed and put back differently.

Laurent had slipped away from the crowd effortlessly, both because no one held the status to question him, and because years of being the unfavored, second son had gifted him with the ability to drift way unnoticed. However despite Laurent’s avoidance of large crowds and unsuspecting watchers, there was no avoiding the large shadow that cast over him once he was in the privacy of the halls.

“Were are you going?” Damen had asked, causing Laurent to stop in his steps and squeeze his eyes
“Should I have asked permission?”

“Stop,” Damen said. “Stop shutting me out. Tell me what is troubling you.”

“I thought you knew me?” Laurent said, unsure why he was being so difficult when he was the one running away.

“Stop.”

Laurent had felt it first, a grip like steel wrapping around his wrist, a thumb digging into his bone. Laurent looked down at the hand clutching his, the sound of cuff against cuff loud in the empty corridor.

“Let go,” Laurent said.

Damen let go, but did not step away.

“This morning,” Damen said, the desperation in his tone an unnerving contrast to the force of his gaze. “Before the games. What you said-?”

Laurent knew what he said. He had been there. That was before-

“I will see you later,” Laurent said, and that was the last thing Laurent said before turning around, making for the doors at the end of the hall and closing himself in. Now Laurent was in the bedchambers on the edge of the mattress, his body slumped forward.

It wasn’t- what Laurent had seen. Not entirely. It couldn’t have been, because that was- his brother, himself. It was-

An ache that throbbed despite what felt like justification, retribution. A pain that was present, would always be present, despite the continuous way it was soothed, balanced, a heavy weight temporarily lifted so it was not crushing, dismembering. The past could not be changed and would forever remain the pathway that was carved, that had brought unexpected factors and lives together. No, it was more than just the past.

It was the present. The now. The reality that Laurent knew and remembered, but could somehow still not reconcile. Laurent could not account for the past, for a time he did not remember and could not piece together. But he was here, in a life he could have never imagined, not alone. For once, he was not alone. Whether Laurent remembered when or how, absolution had been found for him. For them.

Laurent remembered the disorienting, gut churning loathing he had felt years ago in a training arena, months ago in an unfamiliar bed. He remembered fear, he remembered anger.

Laurent didn’t know when his understanding had changed, one sensation bleeding into another, confusing the way he saw and believed everything. All he knew was that then, for longer than Laurent realized, memories and anchors and promises all felt like a distant notion, a flame that paled in comparison to the all consuming fire that Laurent felt every time he looked into eyes that reflected all the indescribable emotion that Laurent felt.

Instead of darkness, loneliness, emptiness, Laurent thought of light. Bright sunrays glistening against blue water, wide stretches of green grass beneath horse hooves and laughter, breathless with exertion and the elation of someone taking Laurent on again, pushing him to his limits and letting Laurent feel free. He thought of feeling matched, having someone there who took Laurent on in stride and threw
his words back at him. Understanding it for what it was and challenging Laurent, making him have
to try harder to surprise. He thought of feeling whole, full, unapologetically alive.

Laurent thought of that very morning when he had entered his bedchambers from the baths, readying
himself for the games. He had been on his way to his vanity when he noticed something on the side
table, stepping closer to find a small, palm sized notebook, easy to carry with you anywhere, easily
stashed. Laurent had lifted it curiously, fingers tingling against the fresh spine as he opened it up,
pages and pages of handwritten poems that Laurent had never read before, translated side by side in
Veretian and Akielon. Some of the words that had stood out had made Laurent smile, some exhale,
some causing him to shut the book and press his lips together to cause his flush from spreading,
smooth leather pressed against his chest.

What Laurent had seen, had been reminded of was that day everything. It was past and present, and
a future that was so visible and so terrifying, because it was charged with actions that Laurent could
never take back, would never take back, but could also never get past. And if Laurent could not
wholly forgive them in himself, how could he expect them to be forgiven elsewhere?

And then there was the additional, nagging thought in the back of Laurent’s head, slowly building so
that it played in Laurent’s thoughts, over and over. With all that had happened and all that had been
said, Laurent could no longer ignore the possibility that with all that he had forgotten, all that had
changed, he might no longer be the man that Damen had once come to know.

It was then that Laurent heard the knock on the door, more of a hammering than anything else.
Laurent let out a breath that was half frustration, half exasperated amusement. Laurent stayed with
his head in his hands, considering the prospect of just staying there, leaving him outside. He would
not barge in of course, though Laurent knew he was easily in the position of ignoring the guards and
stepping though, and just as capable of simply ripping the door off its hinges. No, he would give
Laurent all the time he needed and wait for Laurent to let him in himself.

Laurent pushed himself up, making for the door and then just standing there, a hand pressed on the
handle as he thought of Damen on the other side, alone, waiting. Laurent set his face, gave himself a
moment to settle the hysteria in his chest and pulled the door open.

If Laurent flinched, if he reacted at all, he didn’t know. His expression may have flickered, his
deliberation and confusion showing on his face. It didn’t matter. All Laurent knew was that Damen
was there, and Laurent didn’t feel so hollow anymore.

“Laurent,” Damen said, too quiet for the space that separated them. There were guards. They didn’t
matter. “Let me in.”

I already have, Laurent thought.

Laurent stepped aside, all hope of rational thought immediately removed once Damen was beside
him, the door shutting them in. A single step separated them, a few inches, a thousands words that
Laurent didn’t know how to verbalize.

“Why are you here?” Laurent asked.

“Because you are,” Damen said.

Laurent didn’t reply. Couldn’t. Damen said, “I have given you as much time, as much space as I
could. But I couldn’t stay away any longer, knowing what is going through your head.”

“You don’t-“
“I do,” he interrupted. “Because as you said, I know you, Laurent. Everything you’re thinking,” Damen said, leaving the space between them, a noticeable void. “Everything you’re trying to work through, don’t.”

Laurent felt his jaw clench, his fingers tighten and untighten. He did know Laurent, and Laurent knew Damen. He knew Damen was rational and pragmatic, and was not one to shy away from Laurent’s rage or to bite his tongue when it came to what he truly felt. That bit of knowledge did nothing to make any of this easier.

“Don’t,” Laurent repeated, hearing his disbelief loudly, like a third party in the room. Don’t think about what we’ve done to each other? Don’t think about how I…

Damen closed his eyes, looking as if he was revisiting some part of their history, searching for the words to use now. And for all Laurent knew he was doing that. Laurent didn’t know, because he couldn’t remember.

“I know what we’ve been through,” Damen said, something in his voice strapped down. “I’ve lived it, and lived through it, just as you have.” He took a step forward, the only step forward, putting himself directly in Laurent’s path so that Laurent had no choice but to look up at him. “We have had every opportunity to hurt each other more. To give up on each other, to let the other perish for our own gain, but we didn’t. We fought for each other.”

“I know that,” Laurent said, fighting the impulse to step away and close himself off, to retreat somewhere into himself where he could think. “Do you think I need memories to understand that? Do you think I don’t see what has happened between us?”

“Yet you’re running away from me.”

“I am trying to understand,” Damen said back, closing his eyes. He didn’t know how to say this. He had never had to do this before. “How we went on- how we can still go on-“

Silence. A silence Laurent was all too aware of, because all it managed to do was heighten the way his heart was hammering, the sound of Damen’s breathing, a constant reminder that Damen was there, with him. Since the moment Laurent had opened his eyes and cast him away, up until the moment Damen looked at him and decided that he wanted him, in more ways than he thought possible. In more ways Laurent thought he ever could.

“Laurent,” Damen said. His voice was soft like liquid velvet, and Laurent was helpless to opening his eyes.

It was a mistake. Laurent knew that the instant their eyes met, because he was powerless when Damen looked at him like that.

“Our past is not simple,” Damen said. “Nor is it clean. That doesn’t make what we are any less true.”

Laurent turned his head away, needing the minute to himself, to allow whatever it was on his face to just be his. Damen could feel his chest moving, could feel the pressure on his entire body, aching to be relieved, so be set free. He felt like he had been turned over and shaken so that all the blood has rushed to his head, making him feel uneven, unbalanced. His entire being was off kilter, and Laurent knew at that point that there was no going back. He could no longer pretend like he wasn’t exactly where he wanted to be.

Damen had taken a step back, giving Laurent the space he may have needed to breathe, to be. Laurent closed it, an unsteady step forward that made his chest throb like a fresh wound.
“And what are we?” Laurent asked. Had to ask.

Damen was holding himself very still. Laurent could feel it against his body. He could feel it in his own body; muscles stiff, breathing still. When Damen spoke, it was with bared features and naked honesty.

Damen said, “Everything.”

The words seemed to echo in the room. Or perhaps that was inside Laurent, reverberating his in head and rolling around in his chest that had once seemed empty and was now so full Laurent thought it might burst.

Laurent wanted him. He didn’t know how it happened, but he wanted Damianos of Akielos, and he could no longer cling to excuses as to why he couldn’t have this.

Auguste used to tell Laurent that love conquered all, hidden away together on his balcony in Arles when discussing the difficulties of his private relationships, away from the eyes of the court. His mother would tell Laurent that same thing in her sickbed, tired and frail, stroking his hand as she spoke of his father’s courtship in Kempt. Could that be true? Laurent didn’t know, he had never before in his life felt even a spark of what he felt then, in that room, with Damen gazing at Laurent like he was meant to look at him like that forever.

Outside, there would surely be activity. The palace was full of guests and it would be a boisterous place for many days, carrying on the excitement and exhilaration of the games until everyone departed. Somewhere not too far away, wine flowed, servants worked, guards rotated. Here, it was stillness and silence and the only two people that mattered.

“Kiss me,” Laurent said.

And Laurent didn’t have to ask again. Moving forward like Laurent had pulled him, like Laurent had unleashed something that had been restrained and waiting, Damen took Laurent’s face in his hands and pressed their lips together.

Time was nothing after than, two sets of hands wandering like they could not decide on a place, like stopping would put an end to everything else. Laurent’s arms were around Damen’s neck, pulling him in as tight as he could, focusing on the press of lips and chest.

Damen kissed Laurent with a heady blend of push and pull. Of strength and tenderness, in a way that only he could manage. It was so like him, the way his eyes alone could silence anyone in fear, but looked at Laurent in a way that made him feel like melting steel. The way his hands could likely lift a boulder from the ground but still touched Laurent like one would the sharp edge of a blade. Slow. Gentle. Careful.

It was a closeness that was not enough. Laurent felt desire pulse inside him, a swell of anticipation along with something else, a pounding of nerves that Laurent could not express, but did not stop him from pressing forward. He heard Damen groan as his thumbs dug into Laurent’s sides, felt him push back against him desperately, just as he felt the way Damen began to pull away, though his grip remained firm.

“Laurent,” Damen said against his lips, arms winding so they were wrapped around the small of his back, holding him like letting go was inconceivable.

“No,” Laurent said, his hands on Damen’s cheeks, cupping his face in his hands. His ears were roaring, every touch of Damen’s body against his making him feel tight with sensation. “No more
waiting. I want to be with you.”

“Laurent,” Damen whispered, the word no more than a breath, and nothing else mattered.
Chapter 33

The bedding shifted, sheets strewn and blankets kicked aside as Laurent sat up, lingering in that position for a few moments with a hand on Damen’s thigh before he pushed himself up and off the bed.

Damen turned over, allowing himself the stretch of watching Laurent walk off and through the alcove, clothing still tossed on the floor. It was a sweet indulgence, the languid interlude where the warmth still lingered, the sight of Laurent’s smooth back and lovely curves unpanelled, even in the darkness of the room. Damen’s wound was finally healed enough that he could remain on his side, no fear of his stitches opening or anything worsening. Damen remained that way calmly, happily, ignoring the unwelcome weight in his chest until Laurent returned to the bedchambers, cloth in his hand.

It was still a decadence beyond imagination for Laurent to do this for him, pushing Damen onto his back and toweling him down gently, the sweep of cloth light against his stomach, cleaning his skin off in meticulous swipes. Laurent dropped the cloth on the side table wordlessly before turning back to Damen, his body going still for just a moment when Damen took his face in his hands, kissing Laurent until he softened in his arms again.

Laurent laid himself out beside Damen’s outstretched body, every inch of skin pressed together as Damen lifted an arm, wrapping it around Laurent so that he was pressed even closer, his cheek on Damen’s chest.

It was quiet, nothing but the sound of their breathing. A strong, stark contrast from the frenzy of their bodies from earlier, hands and lips never stopping as they the two of them grabbed at each other in desperation, moving together helplessly like they didn’t know when they would be together next.

They didn’t.

Damen held on to Laurent now, trying to remind himself that Laurent was here, now. He was in his arms, his lips on his skin, his legs tangled with Damen’s. Laurent was here, but that did nothing to dull the growing pressure that Damen felt, every time his mind began to move again.

Damen felt Laurent squirm against him and he loosened his arm enough so that Laurent could turn onto his stomach, pressing his arms against Damen’s chest, his chin on his hand. Damen looked back at him, thumbing at his cheek faintly as he breathed in, letting the air build in his chest before blowing out.

Laurent frowned, his expression pinching as he pushed himself up, looking down at Damen.

“What?”

“It’s nothing,” Damen said. Laurent remained silent, continuing to watch Damen with a look that said a response was a matter of time and not choice.

Damen sighed, running a hand down his face before looking up at Laurent.

“I’ve recovered,” he said.

“Yes,” Laurent said, pale brows arching as his eyes scrolled down Damen’s body. “I am well aware of that.”

Damen remained silent, causing Laurent’s features to soften, blue eyes blinking. He touched a hand
to Damen’s cheek, looking torn as if he should understand what was wrong and know how to fix it.

“Damen.” Gently.

Damen closed his eyes briefly, mustering up his strength as he pushed himself up, adjusting his body so his back was to the marble headboard of the bed, a few inches away from Laurent. Damen remembered all those dreadful weeks of bed rest, Laurent always at his side. He thought of how much he had loathed it, wishing for the time where he could finally get up and be active again. Now, Damen wanted nothing more than to stay in this bed endlessly, keeping Laurent there with him.

Damen said, “Your kingdom needs you.”

He watched as Laurent’s lips parted slightly, moving back a fraction like it was the last thing he expected to hear. He blinked, looking around the room that he had made his own as well before looking back at Damen.

“Yes,” he said. “I have stayed away as long as I could allow.”

Damen nodded, ignoring the way it felt like balancing a heavy weight. Laurent continued to look at him for a few seconds, lips pressed together.

And then he was moving, shifting forward, one hand on Damen’s shoulder and one leg slightly extending, his thigh above Damen’s. It was immediate instinct for Damen’s hands to go to Laurent’s hips to steady him, and Damen felt the way Laurent pushed down the uncertainty as he settled himself in Damen’s lap, carefully, awkwardly.

“Damen,” he said, lifting Damen’s face towards his so they were looking into each other’s eyes. “You are the king of Akielos. It is time for you to take charge and make this kingdom your own.”

“It’s your kingdom now as well,” Damen said.

Laurent covered Damen’s mouth with two fingers, continuing on like Damen hadn’t spoken. “You will have so much to do, so much of your own mark to make, you won’t have the time to think of me.”

Damen took Laurent’s hand, pulling it against his chest in his fist. “I will think of you every day,” he said.

Laurent gazed down, the slight tilt of his head not enough to hide the flush spreading across his cheeks, dusting them in pink. Damen’s heart felt like it had lodged in his throat, so full it might overflow. It wasn’t right. They had come so close to loosing this, and in a way, they still were.

“Arles is very far,” Damen said.

“Luckily, you can afford a boat.”

Damen sighed again. He wanted to banter with Laurent, to continue on with their easy back and fourth that came as naturally to them as the gentle, mindless sweep of fingers as they sat side-by-side, reading treaties and revising them.

He couldn’t. Words would not form, because Damen knew that now that he was properly healed and no longer required Laurent, it was only a matter of days before that clever, witty, voice would be gone.

“Oh,” Laurent said. “Stop. We’ll see each other soon.”
“When?” Damen asked. It was mainly a rhetorical, but he would not object to specifics, and would not be surprised if Laurent was already three steps ahead in plotting the timing of it all.

The side of Laurent’s mouth lifted, his knuckles light on Damen’s jaw. He cupped Damen’s face in both hands, leaning in slowly.

And then nothing else mattered, no fear or emptiness or deadlines because Laurent was kissing him. So softly, so tenderly that in that moment Damen forgot that it wasn’t forever yet.

Eventually Laurent pulled away, pressing his forehead against Damen’s, the two of them breathing together.

“I fought hard to keep you alive,” Laurent said. “I won’t lose you now.”

It is an indescribable thing to feel as if you have just received everything you have ever wanted, everything you never thought you would be gifted with. As a man of royal blood a crown prince of birth, Damen had lived much of his life accustomed to good things, fortunate things, making certain moments stand out in his mind, a blessing he could only dream of.

His first won battle. The birthday where his father had fastened the lion pin of their household to Damen’s cape, the very same he had worn as his own his entire life.

The first time he had gazed out from the palace on the border towards the lands holding both Akielons and Veretians and thought, this is mine.

None of that compared to the inexpressible feeling of looking into Laurent’s eyes and knowing that he had chosen Damen again.

Speaking was impossible, any attempt at a formulation of word futile. Damen felt unworthy, quaky with emotion and nerves that he hadn’t felt since he had been thirteen, young and inexperienced and eager to please.

Damen knew it would be on him to take the lead, to attune himself to Laurent’s needs and to act on them accordingly, yet he found himself being taken by the hand, Laurent leading them through the archway and into their bedroom. Damen looked at the bed and thought of how long it had been, how long he had ached for Laurent and repressed it through sheer force of will. He thought of Laurent lying alone between these sheets every night, no one there to fill the other side of the bed, to hold him while he slept.

Damen felt the tension in Laurent, his over awareness of the large bed in the center of the room, of Damen beside him, unable to tare his eyes away. He was unreal. The most beautiful, wonderful person Damen had ever met, and he had chosen Damen again.

Damen stood still and watched as Laurent shut the door, pulled the sheer, gauzy curtains apart, his heart swelling as Laurent hesitated by the candles, his hand hovering before he turned away, leaving them lit so that the room glowed like something out of a dream. Damen remained where he was, allowing Laurent to grasp at control in whichever way he needed, always seeking at whatever ways he could direct a situation when he was unsure or nervous.

Damen stepped up to Laurent where he was standing by the large window, his back to Damen. He placed a hand on Laurent’s shoulder, feeling the way the muscles locked up beneath his fingers, just as he felt the conscious release of them, the battle of tension and longing. Briefly, Damen remembered their first night together, everything he hadn’t known then that he knew now, all the forces that moved inside Laurent.
No. He would think of nothing but them. This.

“Laurent,” Damen said, gently.

Laurent turned, blue eyes wide and dark as he looked up at Damen, shoulders still rigid. Damen moved his palm, caressing the curve of his back so that he felt the line of his jacket, the notches of his spine.

“I am not,” Laurent said, “some innocent.”

“No,” Damen said.

“I don’t want my hand held.”

“Do you want me?” Damen asked. Selfishly, he wanted to hear it.

Laurent’s eyes lowered, taking in the entirety of Damen’s body as his chest moved before lifting his gaze to Damen, his hand lifting to Damen’s fingers that were still holding him. He clutched his hand in his, curling their hands so their fingers were linked, using the new hold to pull Damen into him.

Damen felt himself shudder as they kissed, fumbling and clumsy as his head swarmed with sensation, his mind filled with want. Laurent’s hands were crossed behind Damen’s neck, Damen’s arms wrapped around Laurent’s middle like it was the most natural thing in the world, the two of them fitting against each other like they used to. Laurent’s back was arched, his mouth open against Damen’s, his movements unmistakably acquiescent despite the stiffness of his body.

Damen pulled himself away, reminding himself that despite their years of experiences, to Laurent it was their first. He lifted his hands with slow, unmistakable purpose so that he was holding Laurent’s face, his intentions clear, his core on open display as he traced Laurent’s cheek with his thumb, his own pulse beating painfully at the sight of Laurent so close, at the feeling of their chests touching.

He felt Laurent’s surprised intake of breath as Damen’s lips brushed Laurent’s forehead, light and skimming against fine skin, the space between his brows. He felt the rigidity in Laurent change to one of uncertainty as Damen pressed his lips to the soft skin below Laurent’s eyes. Long, golden lashes fell shut as he inhaled, remaining still as Damen mapped out each part of his face, treating each gentle press of lips like the privilege it was.

When they kissed again it was with Laurent’s hand gripping Damen’s neck, fingers tight in the ends of his curls as Damen kissed him back, trying to convince himself that this was real. That they were truly there.

A shift, a firm press of hands and then Damen was moving, his eyes opening as he felt himself being pushed back, his thighs hitting the bed before he had realized what had happened. Laurent was back on him before Damen could think, his arms once again full as Laurent pulled Damen against him, leaving Damen with nothing to do but hold him.

Damen was sitting on the mattress, straining with the pressure of Laurent between his legs, tilting Damen’s chin up as he kissed him with an assertiveness that came from a desire to present self-assurance. Damen’s hands were on Laurent’s narrow hips, the tips of his fingers sweeping against his clothed thigh, dizzy with the thought of how the slide of skin would feel against him soon, warm and firm against Damen.

Damen hardly felt the moment Laurent placed himself on top of Damen, hands steady on Damen’s arms as he settled himself properly, hips shifting in a way that made Damen bite his lip. Damen’s hands ran up Laurent’s sides, breaths leaving him in pants against Laurent’s lips as Laurent kissed
him decisively, his thighs tightening like in the saddle, pressing his body flush against Damen’s.

Damen’s back was pushed against the mattress, the sight of Laurent above him with a hand tight on Damen’s chest causing desire to flare so brightly that it had to show on his face. Damen’s lips were parted, his world narrowed to the unbelievable, heady sight of Laurent moving up his body, one hand clutching the sheets by Damen’s head, his knees holding him down.

“Laurent,” Damen said, but was silenced by Laurent’s hands, beginning at Damen’s shoulders and moving down his body carefully, exploratively. It was impossible to focus on anything but Laurent’s strong hands, touching every inch of Damen’s skin within reach like a commitment to memory, like convincing himself that he could do this. It was so much like the night Laurent had sat Damen down on this bed and traced his body slowly, though the look in his eyes was far more proprietary.

Damen felt caught in the darkness in Laurent’s gaze, in the way Laurent looked at him as he lifted his head, blue eyes locked on brown. The room felt small, oxygen struggling to enter Damen’s lungs as he felt Laurent against him, touching Damen with reverence, with claim, despite the steady way he was holding himself, a tremor that was not quite overpowering but still present. Damen lifted his own hand from its spot at Laurent’s waist, taking Laurent’s hand in his and holding his eyes as he laced their fingers together, entwining like the tight, tangled feeling in his chest.

Laurent’s knuckles were smooth under Damen’s mouth, as was his wrist, the flutter of his pulse. Laurent’s eyes shut as Damen grazed the edge of his cuff with his lips, a hitched sound leaving his throat before he was pushing their joined hands into the bedding, kissing Damen determinedly.

It was instinct and pure habit that had Damen wrapping an arm over Laurent’s body, placing a palm on the small of his back as he pushed off the bed, his world flipping so that Laurent was on his back, Damen curved and unmistakably roused above him.

“Animal,” Laurent said, the word leaving his lips in a way that had Damen’s own breath catching. Damen hitched his leg up, pressing it on the mattress by Laurent’s hip so that he was balanced above him, drinking in the sight of Laurent’s mussed hair, his own leg pushed up and to the side. Idly, Laurent lifted a hand, leaving it by his cheek. “I knew you wanted to be on top.”

Damen was once a man with many preferences, many things he favored in bed, and while those desires were still there, Damen had long learned that he preferred just about anything so long as it was with Laurent.

“I want you,” Damen said, kissing Laurent once. “I want to give you whatever you want.” One kissed turned to a second, a second turning into a long, sweet string of kisses that had Laurent’s fingers pushing into Damen’s hair, the effort of resisting the natural urge to mount and devour becoming a painful thing.

When Damen pulled away Laurent’s lips were red, his brow quirked. “You think I don’t want this?”

“I think,” Damen said, licking his own lips. His heart was beating. “I have been waiting for this for a long time.”

Laurent’s expression altered, shifting, and it was following a steady inhale of breath that he reached a hand out, his intentions unmistakable.

“Wait.” Damen intercepted his hand, seeing the way Laurent’s face flickered, his eyes moving from Damen’s grip to where his intent was aimed. Damen felt the tightening of his wrist between his fingers, the uncertain way with which he looked up at Damen now. Damen didn’t want that. He knew some things were unavoidable, Lauren’s lack of memory taking away the comfort that he had
slowly acquired in their bed, but Damen remembered their first night together. The manner with which he had asserted action, pushing Damen down on the bed and taking him in hand in a sure, poised sort of way, his purpose done in a dethatched manner. He knew Laurent was grappling now, uncomfortable with being in a position he couldn’t remember being in, needing to feel as if he was pulling the strings, guiding the entire situation. Damen understood that, but a part of him couldn’t handle it. He didn’t want Laurent to treat what was happening like a preplanned interaction, like going through the motions.

“I,” Damen said, unsure how to respond to the question in Laurent’s eyes. He inhaled. Let it tamper down his pulsing, unignorable desire. Exhaled. “I want to kiss you again.”

The bed creaked as Damen moved, shifting his weight. Flames danced against Laurent’s skin and illuminated him in waves, his hair shifting gold in the light. Throat rolling, chest still, Laurent closed his eyes and Damen couldn’t hold himself back from taking Lauren’s lips between his. Kissing was an unhurried, breathless thing, the two of them parting their lips and angling their heads, the touch of Laurent’s tongue enough for Damen to groan against him, needing more.

Eventually Damen’s hands found their way between their bodies, stopping at the top of Laurent’s tight, immaculate collar. Damen pulled back just enough to find accession, lips touching again when he did. Damen had experience with these laces. Years of experience, unlacing Laurent with promise so many time that he could not attempt to count them, to the point that Damen could likely pull them apart with his eyes closed, inebriated.

Damen struggled with the laces. His mind was such a tangle, everything inside him so powerful and alive that he could not focus, torn between pulling the jacket apart with his hands and cradling Laurent’s face in his hands, kissing him as gently as possible for hours on end.

He felt Laurent breathing against him, hands tight in the sheets as the laces came undone between Damen’s fingers, loops and pulls blurring together until he reached the end, drawing it off. Laurent was pushed up on his elbows, his eyes following Damen’s hands as they ran up Laurent’s chest, settling on the loose, trailing laces at the top, just below his collarbones. A sliver of skin was visible above the knots and Damen couldn’t resist dipping his head, the pleasure of nuzzling his face against Laurent’s neck as the pulled the final laces apart. Laurent’s body was taught, pulse fluttering on Damen’s mouth as the thin undershirt came off, hitting the ground with a thud, Laurent’s upper body now bare.

It took Damen a few seconds to pull away, his own body over aware of Laurent’s exposed skin beneath his. Laurent was holding himself still, silent as Damen’s eyes roamed him, unable to stop himself from running a hand down his abdomen. His body was as elegantly curved as he remembered, naked skin like gleaming porcelain in the candlelight. His nipples were hard and puckered, and all Damen could look at as he felt a rush of euphoria, the temptation to bend his head and take them in his mouth strong.

Damen forced his eyes upward, onto Laurent who was watching Damen with a look that Damen could not quite place, but wanted to hold on to, to keep with him forever.

“Did you need proof?” Laurent asked.

They were gazing at each other, breathing together, and Damen had to stop himself from taking everything at once. He wanted to run his hands up Laurent’s skin and lavish his entire body with the gentle, tender attention that Laurent liked. He wanted to press him into the bedding and keep him there for long hours, ignoring everything outside their small cocoon and focusing on nothing but the other, the way they made each other feel.
Damen was unsure who leaned in first, all he knew was that they were tangling together again, Damen’s hands wrapping around Laurent, the kiss like a promise. Damen felt the steady rise and fall of Laurent’s breathing beneath him, the slight spreading of his legs to accommodate Damen’s size, allowing him close. They drew apart only to gaze at each other, wordlessly, before meeting again, his fingers in Laurent’s hair.

It was unimaginable that it was happening, the two of them coming back together like no time had passed at all, like it was the first time again. Damen could hardly believe that things could be like this between them after all that was done, a vulnerable pulse of heat spreading throughout him at the proof that nothing could keep them apart, that they would always find their way, coming back to each other.

Suddenly unable to go on like nothing was happening in him, Damen pulled away with a valiant amount of strength and a surge of helplessness. His head was dropped to Laurent’s chest, his arm still tightly around his waist as he clung to him, clutching at him desperately like a life raft, like Laurent’s uneven breathing alone could soothe the fragments inside him.

“I’m sorry,” Damen said, feeling as if he needed to explain himself as he lifted his head, never straying too far. Laurent’s eyes were dark and hooded, lips glistening as he pressed a hand into the mattress, pushing up hazily. “I- It’s been-“ Damen tried, any possible words feeling derisory.

Laurent pushed the rest of the way up and Damen with him, moving until they were both upright, facing each other, knees touching. Laurent’s hair was disturbed from where Damen’s hand had been, his skin flushed from the proximity of their bodies. He was so lovely, so breathtaking, and Damen wanted this to be everything they had waited for, everything Laurent deserved.

Laurent considered him, his expression partly that of the contemplation that came with facing a puzzle while still holding the traces of a young man coaxed into a friendly sparring match, finding himself pressed against a wall. Shifting a fraction closer, each move calculated and self-aware, he lifted a hand to Damen’s shoulder. Sliding careful fingers under the pendant and onto the needled fastened into the cloth, Laurent said, “I want this.”

Focus unsteady, Damen felt the breath leave him in a rush as Laurent pulled his pin off, cloth undoing like unwinding silk as the material fell off him, pooling at Damen’s waist, against his hips. There was nothing but the throb in Damen’s chest and the sound of their breathing. And then, unexpectedly, the touch of Laurent’s hand.

Laurent touched him as he had earlier, down his chest and over his stomach in mixed awe and curiosity, this time without barriers. The lack of clothing intensified each touch, Laurent’s palm against his skin, the tip of his fingers like the lick of flames, giving Damen nothing to do but feel, to experience the sensation of Laurent’s touch.

Damen watched with bated breath as Laurent’s hands moved down his front and towards the remaining pin at his side, his fingers dexterous as he worked the pin open, pulling it off with a determination that stirred something primal in Damen, the sheets fists in his hands. The cloth unwound the rest of the way, Damen’s body painful with yearning as his chiton fell away completely.

Damen could look at nowhere but Laurent’s face. The slight parting of his lips, the glaze in his eyes, the way Damen could hear his breathing in a different way now, long, drawn out moments before his eyes lifted, dark blue blending with pupil.

Damen’s entire perception was reduced to single beats, to the press of Laurent’s chest against his, Damen’s eyes falling shut as Laurent’s hand wrapped around him, his grip firm as his thumb pushed
Damen exhaled roughly, his entire body strained as he fought to stay still, to even out his breathing as Laurent’s thumb made a slow, excruciating circle. It was much like the first time, Laurent taking Damen apart with nothing but the ceaseless shift of his hand, his movements as cool and fluid as his words.

But it was different. It was so different, because along with Laurent’s touch was his lips, his free hand holding Damen’s face as he kissed him gently, sweetly, swallowing all of Damen’s pants and breaths through the rise and fall of his hand. Damen wanted to touch, to wrap his arms around Laurent or push him down onto the bed and move into his grip, face pressed into his neck. But for all that he wanted, he reminded himself of Laurent’s earliest aversions and instead kept his hands to himself, transferring everything he wanted to give through the constant press of lips.

Too soon, Damen felt it rising within him, heat spreading in his stomach that threatened to overflow, to shatter inside him. Laurent felt it in the clenching of his muscles, his hand moving in turn as the breath shuddered out of Damen in broken gasps.

“Wait,” Dame said, feeling like he was moments away from dissolving. Laurent’s hand did not slow, the gleam in his eyes only growing. “Not like this.”

“Now,” Laurent said. “Is not the time for your verbose poetry.”

Ignoring the quiver in his thighs, his body’s desperate need for release, Damen covered Laurent’s hand with his and waited for their eyes to meet, breathing through the need.

“I want to come with you,” Damen said, plainly, honestly. He lifted his hand to Laurent’s face, his fingertips feeling the heat he found there. “I want your pleasure to be mine.”

Damen remembered his words, do you think I’m just going to flip you over and mount? And Laurent’s response, I want it to be simple.

But it wasn’t simple. It had never been simple between them, and Damen would never reduce what they had to that word, especially now.

Seeing the rise and fall of Laurent’s shoulders, his unsteady breaths, Damen leaned forward and took his head in his hands, like a jeweler holding a precious sapphire. He said nothing, allowing the look that transferred between their locked gazes to be all that they needed before leaning in.

The kiss was soft, unhurried, heat unfolding as Damen felt Laurent slowly relax against him, a crease smoothed out as he lifted his arms, hands sliding into hair, mouth parting. Laurent kissed the way he always had, the way Damen loved, like this steady back and forth between them was all that mattered to him, all Laurent wanted to do. With one hand moving to the small of his back, smoothing down taught skin and curving muscle, Damen lowered Laurent back onto the sheets, never breaking away.

Damen let himself settle most of his weight on Laurent’s body, knowing he enjoyed the feel of it and was rewarded with the surprised writhing, the hitched sighs. The kiss deepened, their hands wandering like they couldn’t stop touching each other, never knowing where to settle. Damen’s mind was a haze of everywhere he wanted to kiss, all the spots he wanted to focus on and coax out that sensitivity that Laurent kept so strapped down.

Reluctantly, Damen pulled away, only when his hands wandered down far enough that he felt the fabric of Laurent’s pants against his hands, remembering that he was still half dressed. He pressed
one deep, lingering kiss to his lips before moving down the bed, taking one of his boots in hand.

Damen paid the shoe little mind as he pulled it off, dropping it off the side of the bed, smoothing a hand up Laurent’s foot and feeling it twitch. Damen ghosted the inside of his ankle with a brief kiss, hearing the surprised breath of air it elicited before moving to the second boot. It came off with ease, both of Laurent’s feet braced against the bed as he brought his hands to the laces at the front, crisscrossed and tight. It was a slow undoing, Damen’s own breathing shallow as each lace was drawn, growing longer with each pull.

Damen curled his fingers in the sides and pulled, tugging past Laurent’s thighs and down, peeling the pants off his legs until they were entirely off, Laurent with nothing but his golden cuff, splayed out beneath Damen.

Damen was half sitting up, his eyes unable to stray elsewhere as he looked, his focus shattering. Damen ran his hands up Laurent’s skin and felt the soft hairs, the tremor in his thighs as they flexed. He felt the pulsing beat by Laurent’s hipbone, the tightening of his abdomen as he lifted his eyes, trying very hard to pace himself.

Laurent looked like something out of a fantasy, all dark gaze and roaming eyes. Damen was on him again, the slide of their skin and chest against chest enough to make Damen feel like he and Laurent were already lost in each other, Laurent’s wandering touch like ownership.

Damen brushed their lips together once, twice, the kiss a suggestion of itself before Damen brought two fingers to Laurent’s chin, tipping his head back and pressing a kiss below his jaw, lighter. Again.

Laurent shuddered, and Damen never separated from the comfort of his heated skin as he let his lips linger along Laurent’s pulse, remembering the way he had discovered this delight of Laurent’s pleasure. Laurent’s fingers clutched on his shoulder, the tilt of his head, much like now.

Each kiss was slower than the last, Damen’s hand making its way down Laurent’s side as light as a whisper, feeling the way Laurent sought to even out his breathing as Damen’s lips found the dip of his collarbone, the line of his shoulder. The first shift of his body, the mindless, instinctual press of his hips, Laurent’s fingers biting into his skin.

Damen felt Laurent’s leg move outward, involuntarily sliding Damen in closer, Laurent letting out a sigh that he didn’t seem aware of. Damen felt spurred on, driven by the memory of the sweet sounds Laurent made, the way he writhed and shifted into Damen’s gentle touch. Laurent was more inhibited now, keeping most reactions latent though his body still reacted to tenderness, the unhurried sweep of Damen’s lips like he was drawn to it.

Damen felt it, gloriously, the first tightening in Laurent’s stomach, the way the breaths seemed to stutter out of him unconsciously as Damen’s lips found the spot below his ear, fingertips grazing the inside of his thigh. Yes, Damen thought. He wanted it. Wanted to follow Laurent into oblivion, to watch Laurent surrender his defenses and see the way he came undone under gradual rocking and light presses of lips.

“Damen,” Laurent said, a single word as they shifted against each other again, slow, mindless rolls. His name was all he said but Damen heard the tone of it, lifting his head with difficulty.

Laurent’s cheeks were flushed, his mouth parted, and Damen waited, body tense like a rope pulled too tight until Laurent said, “I want that too.”

It took Damen a few moments to understand, for his own words to come back to him in a rush, one strong enough that had his own body heating in pleasure, making his way back up Laurent’s body so
that he was kissing him in hard, desperate presses. Laurent responded in kind, the languor from their movements dispensing as they kissed each other with vigor, Laurent’s fingers tight on the back of Damen’s neck as he held Damen close. Closer than they had been in months.

“I missed you so much,” Damen whispered, only half aware that the words had come out in his language, breathless and ragged against Laurent’s lips.

He felt the way the words took Laurent unaware, the slow absorption and understanding of them, his movements pausing as everything stilled. Damen held himself carefully, not allowing himself to breathe as Laurent’s fingers touched his face, grazing his cheek.

“I’m here now,” he said, in clear, unmistakable Akielon.

Damen’s heart felt exposed, each throb and beat visible as he felt it move inside him, blood rushing. Their first time together had been intimate and private, the unknown full of painful secrets. Laurent knew, now. He knew who Damen was and was still here with him, the reality of all that they knew between them. Laurent was beneath him, his body bared to Damen’s hands, yet it was Damen who felt like he was being held down.

They were lost in each other, so closely tangled that Laurent’s heart beat against Damen’s chest. Damen felt bound to him, his own body heaving with the need for the ravenousness inside him to find physical expression, only stymied by the need to give Laurent good things. Damen’s hand curled around his neck as he kissed him deeper, and it was after a long stretch of countless moments that the inevitable problem occurred to him.

“We can’t,” Damen said. “We don’t have-“

“Bedside table,” Laurent replied, his own hands winded around Damen’s neck as he pulled him back in.

Damen’s body pulsated, nearly losing all sense of control over himself. The oil that they had kept before everything had happened that Laurent surely had removed was back, restocked, within arms reach of their bed.

Damen could think about that later, could let that thought soak in and modify him. Now, he had to kiss Laurent. He had to take him in his arms and taste his lips, finding it difficult to break away when Laurent kissed him back like the transfer between their mouths was the only way he could receive oxygen.

Fumbling, not pulling away entirely and never quite so grateful for the length of his arms, Damen yanked the drawer open and pulled the first phial he touched out, the sound of swishing liquid making his head dizzy, his fingers clumsy. Laurent’s eyes were gleaming, lashes golden in candlelight, his hand by his head. Damen felt his blood rush all over as he brought his oiled hand between Laurent’s thighs, his legs falling open.

Damen found tight heat, his own skin feeling too hot as he eased a finger in, the steady backwards and forwards as Laurent moved helplessly against him, slight shifts and fractured sounds as Damen’s free hand smoothed from shoulder to hip, his lips brushing the flush of his neck.

Slowly, he felt Laurent’s body begin to ease against his, the slide of Laurent’s thigh warm against his side as they kissed, Laurent’s arms winding around Damen. Damen’s cock was hard and heavy, aching to be in the place where Damen could feel Laurent opening to him, Laurent’s hold on him tightening with each passing minute.
“Laurent,” Damen said against his neck, mind shattering with the thought of Laurent against him, around him.

And Laurent responded, a low, breathless, “Yes.”

Damen lifted his head, heart hammering in his chest as their eyes met, assent found, and then it was happening, Damen reduced to renewed heartbeats and unsteady limbs as he felt that first long, slow push inside.

Damen heard the first tangled sound Laurent made, sweetly inarticulate as his body took Damen, the breath ribboning out of him. Damen felt the sensation of Laurent clenching around him, fantasy and reality blurring as Damen dropped his head to Laurent’s chest, arms wrapped around him as he just-felt it.

The breath was leaving Damen in pants, his entire body trembling with the effort of restraint, even as he felt Laurent’s hands move down Damen’s back, sweeping each dip and curve. Damen wanted to wait, to hold on a little longer, but their bodies seemed to be operating on instinct because then he was moving, hands unsteady as he felt those slow, deep thrusts.

More, Damen thought, even as he felt the slide of their chests, the press of Laurent’s heel against his lower back, Laurent in his arms. It was a closeness that was not enough, nothing close enough to sate the throbbing ache Damen had felt every day until Laurent had come back to him.

Damen was all the way inside, his entire length moving inside Laurent in a way that revitalized him, Laurent’s choked off breaths and his own groans into Laurent’s skin the only thing he could hear, other than his pounding heart.

Blindly, Damen found Laurent’s upturned hands on either side of him, palms sliding up his wrists until skin touched, fingers interlacing as he pushed their joined hands into the bedding. Damen heard the sound their cuffs made, the very things that represented the wordless promises they had made to their kingdoms. To each other.

The kiss was reforming, altering everything Damen ever thought he knew as he felt Laurent’s lips move against his, uninhibited, kissing like it was finding each other. Like holding on to each other.

Damen felt it creeping up, flaring inside him as his movements became desperate, erratic with the seeking of release. Damen felt the same need in Laurent, the effort of pushing past his body’s denial, of overcoming control. He felt it in the tightening of Laurent’s body, the way he clutched at Damen’s hands, pulling apart so that they saw each other, all barriers broken down.

Damen’s own fingers tightened, his heart on display, feeling like he might fall apart as he felt the first pulsing jerk of Laurent’s body, Damen’s own body shuddering against him.

It happened with their eyes on each other, their names on each other’s lips, foreheads touching. It was almost too much, too intimate and vulnerable, and yet it was nothing in comparison to the surge of encompassing emotion that Damen felt as he let it consume him, chasing the look in Laurent’s eyes as he followed him into ecstasy.
“Hand me that document.”

“I don’t think so,” Damen said, pushing the stack of papers out of Laurent’s reach. He continued to read, pretend to read, but his mind was a continuous cycle of nagging thoughts, his concern an itch that would not be sated. The heat that Damen could feel emitting from Laurent’s body and the continuous sound of sniffling that he was unsuccessfully trying to stifle were not helping the gnawing inside him.

“I can see half of it from here, just let me have it.”

“No,” Damen said. The edges of the parchment threatened to tear between his fingers. He heard the sound of Laurent’s deliberately slow inhale, and he turned his head so he was looking at him, unthreatened.

“This,” Laurent said, “Is not amusing me.”

“I’m not trying to make you laugh,” Damen replied. “I’m trying to make you rest.”

“I am in bed,” Laurent said. “Under the covers, as I have been for hours. Now hand me the document.”

“Would you just-“ Damen covered his face with his hands, rubbing at the skin roughly as he muttered a string of Akielon curses under his breath. He looked at Laurent between his fingers and saw Laurent watching him with a stony look, his arms crossed. His nose was red from the constant wiping and blowing, the skin below his eyes two dark, crescent moons.

“Do you think I’ve forgotten how to read?” Laurent asked. “Have I become so weak that I can’t hold a paper between my frail hands and use my eyes?”

“You’re sick,” Damen snapped, wanting to tear up each and every document and throw them into the kennels. He had brought them into bed with him as an attempt to put his focus elsewhere and distract his mind, but they only seemed to worsen his dour mood.

“I am very well aware of that,” Laurent said, his tone holding the same bite. “Unlike you, I don’t convince myself that I’m in peak condition at all times. That doesn’t mean-“

“It has been over a week,” Damen said. His voice was far too loud. He didn’t care. “And you’re not better.” He closed his eyes, dragging his palms against his mouth again. Realistically he knew that reading something like document revisions was harmless, but nothing else was working. As far as Damen was concerned, Laurent needed to do absolutely nothing, add no strain whatsoever on his body or mind so that he could-

“A week,” Damen repeated, his voice considerably more low, noticeably more empty.

Nothing. Laurent’s returned silence only worked to expand the hollow feeling in Damen’s chest, wedging into his ribcage and pulling it apart. Damen lifted his eyes to him and saw him watching Damen, his swollen eyes focused. Rather speak, he began to push himself up.

“Laurent-“

“I’m just getting tea,” he said, but Damen pushed him back in place gently, lifting himself from the
bed at once.

“I’ll get it,” he said. “I can- just stay. Please.” He made his way over to the table in the main chambers, ignoring how cold the marble was against his feet as he reached for the kettle, pouring the steaming liquid into one of the small, ceramic cups. He picked up a jug of milk and added it in until the tea turned the warm color that Laurent preferred, dropping a sugar cube in. He hesitated, watching the cube dissolve before dropping in another for good measure.

When Damen returned to their bedchambers, Laurent was sitting in the same spot with his legs crossed beneath him, hands in his lap. The papers were still stacked feet away from him. They had not been touched.

He looked so exhausted, so frail in the middle of that large bed, covering his mouth through a low sneeze. Damen wanted to scream. He wanted to hold Laurent against him and breath air into his lungs, to revitalize whatever it was that was making him look so drained.

“Here,” Damen said softly, handing him the cup before taking his spot back next to him. Damen mirrored Laurent’s position, watching as he took his first sip, not minding how it was steaming in his hands.

“Not sweet enough,” Laurent said. Damen let out a desperate breath, shaking his head.

“I will plant you a sugarcane tree in the gardens if it will help you feel better.”

Laurent lifted a brow. “Do you know how to plant anything?”

“How are you managing sarcasm?”

“Who’s being sarcastic?”

Damen dropped his head.

“Oh, would you-” Laurent said. He set the tea down on the table on his side of the bed, shifting closer to Damen. “Stop it,” he said. “I’m fine, Damen. Its just a fever, this is in no way uncommon. I truly don’t see why you’re acting like I’ve caught the plague.”

“It’s been eight days,” Damen said.

“Goodness,” Laurent said. “You’re actually counting.”

Of course Damen was counting. Regardless of if Damen was being unreasonable or not, Laurent was in pain, to some degree. How could he not be aware of each passing second of it?

“We could try a different physician,” Damen said.

“You know that’s foolish.”

It was foolish. Paschal had never let either of them down or steered them wrong, but Damen was willing to try anything to see Laurent healthy again.

“You had been stabbed, and I hadn’t reacted like this,” Laurent said.

Damen scoffed, ignoring him. People reacted in different ways, and Damen had seen Laurent’s nerves in those days plainly for what they were. Damen hadn’t been able to scratch his face without Laurent watching him on alert, flinching from each breath Damen took.
Damen inhaled deeply, waiting for it to relieve the pressure in his chest. “I don’t like seeing you ill,” Damen said.

Laurent smiled gently, a barely there lift of his lips as he touched Damen’s cheek. “I’ll be better soon.”

“Promise me,” Damen said, taking Laurent’s hands in his.

Laurent’s smile grew. “You’ll be the first person I kiss when I can.”

Damen groaned, but there was also laughter there, pressing his face into Laurent’s warm hands, letting Laurent’s laughter soothe him.

Laurent remembered the way he had felt as he walked down one of the tallest towers in Arles, his heart quaking in his throat as he made his way down the winding steps, the air damp. The stone had been cool as he dragged the tips of his fingers against the walls, rays of light peering in through the narrow windows, lighting his way in shards.

He remembered stepping out into the courtyard, his pulse abuzz as his feet touched solid ground, the sun warm on his skin, exceedingly bright in his eyes after being enclosed in claustrophobic darkness for so long.

Ignoring everyone around, all bustling servants and soldiers, Laurent had made his way to his private area of flowers and vines, lowering himself to the grass and spreading out on his back as he marveled at the feat he had finally conquered, heart still beating with aftershocks of what he had done. What he never thought he could do. Shaky, unbelieving, happy.

That sensation was possibly a fraction of what he felt now, laying on his back in a bed of smooth silks, unignorable warmth just a handspan away.

Laurent had been ready to push himself out of the bed before his breathing had fully recovered when he heard the shift of the mattress, the bedding tugging under his body as Damen pushed himself up. Wordlessly, Damen lifted himself from the sheets and slipped out of bed, his gaze averted as he stepped out of the room and somewhere into the main chambers, his bare body unabashedly on display.

Moments passed, the movement of Laurent’s chest slowing down as his mind began to take shape, a whirlwind of other thoughts threatening to resurface, pushed down and repressed by Laurent’s breathing and new memories. Good memories.

Unwittingly, Laurent had been given what he had needed. A few minutes of solitude, a space to pull himself back together, reform himself into something unlike the disintegrated version of himself he had just been, a candle burned down to a puddle of wax. Laurent touched his hand to his lips and closed his eyes, and it was when he heard the soft patter of feet that he realized that Damen had known exactly what he was doing.

Damen entered, his gaze intent without prying as he settled his body back on the bed, a damp cloth outstretched. Laurent blinked down at it, a tight sensation taking him by the lungs as he fought the cloud in his mind. He took the rag from Damen, trying to wrap his mind around carelessly toweling himself down like nothing more than a tedious indulgence when Damen turned, pouring water into a shallow cup that he had brought with him as well.

When Laurent had finished with himself he brought a hand to Damen’s shoulder, feeling it flex under his touch as Laurent pushed him down onto his back, wiping Damen’s abdomen in slow,
steady swipes. Laurent saw the way Damen gazed up at him through his lashes as he cleaned him off, trying to ignore it. He didn’t think his chest could feel any more full.

When they were both clean and the cloth discarded, Laurent reach down and pulled the sheet up and over their bodies, leaving it beneath their chests. He observed Damen’s comfortable recline on his side, trying to mirror it as well with slow, purposeful shifts. He felt like he was posing awkwardly, his arm threatening to fall asleep pressed down beneath his waist, but the warmth that grew in Damen’s eyes made everything feel natural for a moment.

“You seem pleased,” Laurent said.

“Pleased doesn’t begin to cover what I feel,” Damen said. His arm was between them, bronzed muscle against cream sheets. “You were always better with words.”

“Are you asking how I feel?”

“Adequate?”

Laurent felt his mouth twitch. “I would think you’d rate yourself a bit higher than that.”

Damen smiled, bringing Laurent’s fingers to his lips. Laurent may have been better with words but he seemed to have lost all usage of his tongue.

His fingers were still entwined with Laurent’s as he set them down on the pillow, sword calloused skin a rough sort of comfort. They were gazing at each other, and Laurent thought he could still hear the muffled sounds Damen had made into his skin, his touch so light it could have all been imagined.

Making himself speak, “It wasn’t what I expected,” Laurent said. He felt the brush of Damen’s thumb. “But neither were you.”

Damen’s expression softened, his throat rolling. “No?”

“No.”

“You weren’t either,” Damen said. “But you already know what you mean to me.”

Laurent closed his eyes through the stirring in his stomach, a horse’s galloping that altered all sensation. He focused on the silence, trying to think of what someone would normally say now, what was appropriate in this situation. When he could think of nothing he simply said, “tell me something.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t care,” Laurent said. He wanted to hear Damen talk.

Damen rolled onto his back, lifting one arm so it was comfortably behind his head, his bicep arching. His hair was a mess of sweat dampened curls, his mannerisms easy like slipping back into a familiar routine. He licked his lips without seeming to realize, eyes moving along the line of the ceiling like his thoughts were there.

“In Akielos,” he began, gazed still upturned, “outside of the capital. There’s a palace built on Artesian foundations. There are riding tracks and gardens that my mother designed when she was queen. There’s a library and stables, and it’s surrounded by the ocean.” His tone was tenuous, a strapped down version of itself that was incongruous to its usual certitude. He turned his head, meeting Laurent’s eyes. “We go there, sometimes. To get away.”
“We seemed to do that often.”

“To be together,” Damen said.

“We’re always together.”

“There’s no one else,” Damen said. “It’s just us.”

Laurent’s lips were pressed together, his mind on all the times he had thought of what it would be like when he was king, when he had needed purpose as motivation. He had never thought it would include being beside someone who laughed with him and took him to foreign palaces and made him believe he was the kind of king his brother would have been proud of.

“We could go back,” Damen said softly. “If you’d like.”

It wasn’t a question of Laurent’s answer that had him hesitating. It was his attempt at calming his thoughts, at formulating words through the impulsive recklessness he was feeling.

“Yes,” Laurent said, knowing he would go. He would go now if Damen asked. “I would.”

He watched as Damen lips parted slightly, spreading into a slow grin like he couldn’t quite believe something and didn’t want to assume, despite the happiness that was slowly crowding in. Laurent understood that all to well.

Damen’s hand went to Laurent’s nape, just leaving it there like he was waiting for the muscles in his neck to tense up, for Laurent to move out of his grasp or push Damen away. When none of those things happened, his smile transformed into something else, the last thing Laurent saw before he was pulled into Damen’s warmth.

The sheets slid, slipping down to their hips as their bodies shifted, turning so they were facing one another. Damen’s arms wrapped around Laurent’s middle, pulling Laurent into him so that their skin brushed, Laurent’s thigh lifting slightly. Laurent parted his lips, letting the kiss deepen into something more as his hand move down Damen’s side, feeling taught skin like polished wood.

It was Damen who pulled away first, though his hands didn’t stray from their spot on Laurent’s hips. “I might need more than just a few minutes,” he murmured.

“I don’t think you do,” Laurent replied, certain that he was already feelings the first sign of stirring against him.

Damen laughed quietly, soft puffs of air against Laurent’s face. His knuckle grazed Laurent’s jaw, his eyes following the line it made before glancing up. “We have a whole lifetime ahead of us,” he said quietly.

Laurent stopped himself right before jolting in Damen’s grip, blinking rapidly as he tried to keep his startled expression at bay. He was flushing, he could feel it from the heat on his face and the hitch in his breath, from the awed way Damen swept his pinky against Laurent’s cheek. He felt torn between disentangling himself so he could breathe and burrowing his face further into his neck, tightening Damen’s arms around him.

After a brief kiss to his forehead, Damen moved himself back slightly so they could better look at each other, their legs still touching. Damen’s cheek was on the back of his hand, his eyes hooded in languor. He seemed to be content with the silence.

Laurent thought of this, how they had gotten to this, the things he didn’t entirely know but was
beginning to piece together. He thought of everything Damen had told him so long ago, their ride on the border and everything that had happened during. The last thing Damen had told him in full was of their battle with Lord Touars and their taking of Ravenel. That had been the extent of their chronology, though he had received bits from what had come next. He knew that he and Damen had allied themselves against their usurpers. While he didn’t know what specific events transpired, he knew they had ended up in Akielos where Laurent’s trial had taken place, eventually leading to the death of both his uncle and Damen’s brother. With them gone, it naturally made sense that that was when they took back their claim to their thrones.

“What are you thinking about?” Damen asked.

Laurent tapped his fingers on the bed, thinking about his words before speaking. “Tell me about my trial.”

Carefully, “why?”

“Because it seems rather relevant to our past.”

Damen looked at the ceiling again, rubbing his forehead as he blew air out of his nose. Laurent waited.

“We were in Karthas,” he eventually said, “having taken the fort after a retreat. A herald arrived and announced that the council had called for your death in result of your supposed crimes and that your uncle was offering you the option of a trial.”

Damen’s voice was mild, any distaste he felt showing through his eyes, darkened in a sense much unlike the way they had been when Laurent had pulled him into their bedroom. Laurent’s eyes shifted to the ceiling as well, his own face set. It was unsurprising, really. An offer of defense, a slew of whiteness to all of Laurent’s accusations, painting Laurent as a traitor so that the disguise of the fairness of a trial would serve justice and work to sanction uncle’s claim and cement his rule. Laurent could laugh if he cared enough.

“What else was there?” Laurent asked.

Damen turned to him. “What?”

“My uncle knew me,” Laurent said. “He knew that I wouldn’t have rolled over and taken that offer when it was an obvious death sentence. What else was he holding over us that forced my hand?”

Blinking, “are you sure you don’t remember this?”

No. Laurent just knew his uncle as well.

“There was something else,” Damen confirmed. He sighed, shaking his head. “A baby. Kastor and I had been involved with the same woman, something I hadn’t known until after.” He spoke with a dethatched voice, neither pained nor careless. “She had remained at the fort when Kastor had retreated with a handful of her maidservants. She had just given birth, the baby taken elsewhere.”

Laurent looked at Damen, not having expected that. Damen didn’t have a child, Laurent was confident of that, sans anyone he may or may have not impregnated at the coupling fire in Vask. The child had to have been Kastor’s, but surely they were told otherwise.

“Go on,” Laurent said.

Damen pushed himself up in the bed, leaning his back on the headboard as he ran a hand through his
hair, looking across the room. It was a few seconds of contemplation before Laurent sat up as well, the sheet pooling around him.

“Do you know of the Kingsmeet?” Damen asked.

“No.”

“It is a place of peace,” Damen said, some of what was in his eyes translating into his tone now. “Of settling disputes. Kings and Queens are crowned there, and negotiations are held with the kyros. It is the only place in Akielos where it’s forbidden to commit any act of violence.” He drew in a breath. “We had planned to meet there with the wet-nurse and exchange the woman for the baby, but it didn’t go as planned. You guessed the baby wasn’t mine. You let her go. You went with me to the Kingsmeet anyway and—”

Damen stopped, his voice cutting off like two symbols smashed together. He didn’t want to keep talking about this, that much was apparent through his fists in the sheets and the way he spoke with a tone that was so carefully calm that it had to be fake.

He didn’t have to keep talking. He didn’t have to say anything because all at once, Laurent knew. He knew exactly what it was that sent Laurent straight to Ios and into the death grip that his uncle had over everyone.

Laurent didn’t know if it was what had just transpired between them, making Laurent experience so much at once, feeling more than he had ever thought possible that sparked something inside him. Maybe it was sheer will that had forced his mind to uncover it. Maybe it was the way his heart had been beating so strongly when he had initially made the decision that Laurent felt it again now, two years later in front of the person he had been willing to give everything up for.

Like his brief memories of the okton, Laurent couldn’t yet recall anything before or anything after. However, this fragment was bright as day in his mind, so fresh in Laurent’s memories that it could have just happened. Laurent remembered guarding Damen’s door for hours as he mourned in solitude, just as he remembered the feeling of the stone on his skin as he pressed his head to the wall in resolution, seconds before he had slipped into Damen’s rooms with the resolve of what he was going to do firm in his chest, ready to spend whatever little time they had left together before Laurent gave up his final bargaining piece for Damen’s throne.

He remembered more of what had followed, those memories a jagged dagger to his chest, much like the lung gripping memory of Damen pushed to his knees, a sword at his throat as his arms were restrained behind his back. The memory caused Laurent to feel hollow, cold and drained like the cell he had sat in that night as he waited, the gold adorning his wrist the only thing bringing him any last semblances of comfort.

His recollection ended there, unceremoniously, unable to drudge up anything past the grubby walls of his cell or the thick feeling in his throat. Laurent raised his eyes from the spot on the bed where they had fallen, seeing the way Damen was watching him.

“What?” Damen said, not like he was wondering if Laurent was thinking something but like he wanted to know what it was.

Laurent didn’t want to tell him. While it was slowly happening, growing in frequency and magnitude, Laurent may never get all of his memories back and that was a fact he would have to deal with, and he could. That didn’t matter to him, because he had this. They had this, and their future mattered more than anything else. He had no intentions of dangling hope in Damen’s eyes.
“My trial,” Laurent said. “How did you end up there?”

Damen watched him for a moment before speaking. “How do you know I was not there to begin with?”

Laurent pushed a finger into his thigh. “It was an obvious death trap,” he said, his gaze steady. “You would never come amicably. Something tells me I hadn’t intended for you to be there.”

Damen looked away, giving Laurent a second to breathe. “No,” Damen agreed, going along with the gap in the retelling easily. “You hadn’t.”

Laurent waited, genuinely curious and not just trying to divert Damen’s curiosity or inquiry. The last he remembered of Damen was leaving him behind in the great white hall, held down by eight soldiers as Laurent took continuous steps away from any possibility of a future. Following that was a trial and what Laurent had been told to be his uncle’s beheading and Laurent’s fight with Kastor, Nikandros mentioning that he had saved Damen’s life, but the next actual memory Laurent had of seeing Damen was waking up next to him in bed months ago.

Damen turned himself to face Laurent, his body taking up most of the space on the bed as their knees touched, their gaze leveled.

“I came for you,” Damen said.

Laurent blinked once. “What?”

“You had thought you were alone,” Damen said. “Even after everything we had been through. You thought you had no one, that no one would be there for you, but I couldn’t let you do it.”

Laurent didn’t understand. There were no saviors, no people to come to his rescue, not since the age of thirteen. Laurent didn’t recall all the mechanics of it but he knew he had done what he had done to ensure that Damen kept his life and this throne, and Damen had walked back into everything-

“Why would you do that?” Laurent asked.

“Because,” Damen said, “you had given me everything, and I would have given it all up.” Laurent hadn’t noticed him move, but the space between their bodies was closed, Damen’s hand on his knee. “I would give my kingdom for you. I would give my life for you.”

Laurent could feel the breath leaving him, could hear it in the private space between their bodies, Laurent’s fingers itching to touch Damen everywhere, to confirm that he was flesh and bones and real. He was dizzy with everything he wanted, his mind torn between what he was hearing and what could have been, what he was sure would have been for many long, dark years.

Laurent didn’t want to think about that. He wanted to throw himself into Damen and feel his arms wrap around Laurent, feel him pull Laurent down with him and remind him what it was like to feel as connected to someone as two parts of a larger whole. But for all of his wants, Laurent couldn’t quite dispense of the fact that some things might never be whole.

“If I don’t regain my memories?” Laurent asked. He needed to say it, he couldn’t leave it in his mind.

“Then you don’t,” Damen said. “You could never mean anything less to me.”

“And if I don’t remember you?”

“I’m right here,” Damen said. “I’m the same person I was then, whether you remember it or not. I’ll
Damen’s hand was pressed to his chest as he spoke, an unconscious gesture. Laurent had to feel it, had to slip his hand beneath Damen’s and feel his heart beat against his skin, a drumbeat against his fingertips.

“You came for me,” Laurent heard himself say.

Damen smiled at him gently, any chips of a shield Laurent may have kept falling away with how Damen looked at him.

“You would have come for me,” he said, and he would. Laurent had been ready to give everything up for Damen, and he would do it again.

It was Laurent that brought his arms around Damen’s neck, pulling him down until he was on his back, Damen above him with his arms already around Laurent. There was no sense of pacing as Laurent lifted a leg, hands sliding into hair as Laurent’s mouth opened under his, the breaths of air between them filling Laurent up with life and hope and happiness.

“It has been more than a few minutes,” Laurent said against his mouth, lowering his own so his lips could trace Damen’s jaw. Damen’s fingers bit into his skin painfully, the flair of arousal Laurent felt nearly blinding as Damen took his mouth back in his.

While Laurent might not explicitly remember this or recall all the nights he and Damn had lain there together, he believed it to be true. Damen’s arms around him felt like slipping into a pair of broken in shoes, a well-worn jacket that wrapped around your skin just right. Laurent might not remember, but he knew. He’d been here before, and he had no intentions of being anywhere else, ever again.
They were in their shared rooms in Marlas, the first time they had been back to the fort in months. The last time they were here it was in separate rooms, adjacent chambers separated by a stone wall. Now they stood together, Damen watching as Laurent looped in the last lace by his throat.

Damen smiled as Laurent looked up from his hands at his jacket, his own lips lifted in a soft sort of disbelief. Laurent reached out and adjusted the pin at Damen’s shoulder for him, the edge of his red cloak between thumb and forefinger before lowering his hands, gazing up at Damen.

“We have to go,” Laurent said.

“We will,” Damen said, just wanting a few more minutes alone before he had to share Laurent with the rest of the kingdom. “Soon.”

“That’s irresponsible,” Laurent said. “I can’t be late to my own ascension.”

He spoke with assertiveness and seriousness, and behind that, a bit of youthful pride that he couldn’t quite hide from Damen, his eyes glowing with it. Damen felt it himself, nearly overwhelmed as he looked at Laurent, the vision of ivory silk and gold that he created like a beacon of light.

The royal procession was waiting; silk-clad standard bearers and horses with jeweled saddlery, heralds with starburst banners and guards of blue and gold livery surrounding them all. It was a beautiful day, the sun shining down on the streets where thousands of people stood crammed together on roofs and the roads, peering out of wagons and balconies from every inn and lodging the town had to offer, everyone straining for a glimpse of their new king.

While typical for Veretian royalty to be crowned in the capital, it was Laurent who had insisted that his coronation would take place in Marlas. He had told Damen first, in a voice that said he had made his decision and would accept no refusal. Damen had no disputes, just a heart so full that it threatened to overflow.

Because of the impracticalities of the location, Marlas was overfilled with councilors and kyroi and nobility from both Vere and Akielos, one of the first official joinings of the two kingdoms that were finally one again.

Damen had laid next to Laurent that morning, the glow of sunrise streaming in through the window onto their bed, streaking Laurent in radiance. Damen had allowed himself to linger in place, arms wrapped around Laurent whose body was turned into Damen’s, face pressed into his neck. His chest had moved lightly with sleep, light puffs of air against Damen’s skin. Eventually Damen had shifted, lowering one of his arms so that it was at Laurent’s back, the pads of his fingers grazing the notches on Laurent’s spine.

“Laurent,” he had said, a soft breath of air in his ear. Laurent had made a soft sound, breath hitching for a moment before evening out again.

Pressing a kiss to Laurent’s forehead, he swept the hair out of his face, his hand resting on his nape.

“Wake up,” he whispered, his fingers moving in small circles on his skin. “My king.”

He felt Laurent begin to shift against him, a drowsy sound of sleep filled pleasure, and then his lashes were fluttering, eyes clouded with a dreamlike haze as he gazed at Damen through his sleep fog. Damen smiled, his thumb light as it swept along Laurent’s lip. He watched as Laurent took a
few seconds to remember where they were and what day it was. And when it finally registered in
Laurent’s mind, his eyes open and bright, he smiled.

Now they stood across from each other at the entrance to their chambers, minutes away from when
they would walk out and into the chaos, Laurent’s horse waiting for him where he would ride
through the crowded streets with all the cheers and grandeur. His chin was raised, a giddy sort of
anticipation strapped down so that Damen only saw it in his eyes, nerves and excitement and peace.

Damen reached around them and towards the table, feeling the thin gold in his hands, his own
fingers a little shaky with the importance of that moment. He looked at Laurent with a gentle
expression, Laurent’s own face mirroring the same emotion as he dipped his head, allowing Damen
to crown him with his circlet. Laurent looked up at him after, the vision complete, the promise of
what would soon replace it. The promise of a future.

“Are you ready?” Damen asked.

“Yes,” Laurent said.

It was time. They had to go, a long string of days and celebration ahead, their people waiting for
them. Damen knew it was time to go, but there was something he had to say first.

“Your people are very lucky,” Damen said, Laurent’s hand in his. “You will be the greatest king
they’ve ever had.”

Laurent smiled brightly, his fingers closing around Damen’s slowly. “Our people.”

Taking a step closer, Damen looked down at him, at all his strength and splendor, his own throat
thick with emotion.

“Your brother would be proud of you,” he said.

Laurent’s smile altered, his eyes wide and unblinking at he gazed up at Damen, lips parted slightly.
Damen felt his fingers tighten, the space between them silent as he closed his eyes, a moment of
simple thought and acknowledgment.

Eventually his eyes were open, fingers twisting so he was grasping Damen in a stronger hold. He
pulled slightly, whatever space that was between them closed as they stood against each other.

“Come,” Laurent said. “It’s time.”

Damen woke slowly that morning, the sensation similar to that of stepping out of the ocean and into
the light, water rolling down your back in rivulets as the sun warmed your bones, dripping down in
warm shivers. He blinked drowsily, his mind taking a moment to catch up with his heart as he
became aware of the weight in his arms.

Damen felt as consciousness took him, clarity coming to him along with a tangle of memories from
the previous night. Coming to Laurent in fear and hope. The two of them surrendering to the other,
losing themselves in each other. Talking after, their conversation both painful and healing, reaching
into a vulnerable hidden part of both of them.

Laurent pulling Damen into him, baring himself to Damen a second time. The way they had-

Laurent was shifting against him, each inch of their skin pressed as Laurent’s head moved, his nose
brushing against Damen’s shoulder. Damen felt the tickle of his hair, breath hot on his skin from his
slightly parted lips, long lashes fluttering as slowly, drowsily, he came awake.
Damen couldn’t help his smile, the way the backs of his fingers grazed Laurent’s cheek, watching as Laurent watched him. Damen’s heart felt larger with each pulse, a part of him still unable to believe that Laurent was looking at him the way he was, blue eyes full of light tenderness.

“Damen,” he said, his voice soft, timid, happy. He became aware of their surroundings as Damen had, the sheet low on their hips, their heads on the same pillow, Damen’s arms around him.

“Laurent,” Damen said. And then because a part of him, a small, insecure part of him still remembered the way Laurent had looked at him when everything had begun, said, “you’re here.”

The skin around Laurent’s eyes softened, his lips pressed together as he turned, just so, bringing his face even closer to Damen’s. “Where else would I be?”

Damen felt every individual beat of his heart, each one more drawn out than the last. Even now he held himself still, breath bated as Laurent reached out a hand and set it on Damen’s chest. His eyes followed it, moving with it as he brought his fingers up heated skin, along Damen’s neck until he cupped his cheek, their eyes never separating.

Lauren’s lips were soft and pliant under his, their mouths open and panting as their hands wandered, the ability to touch freely a delight that Damen struggled to wrap his mind back around. Damen felt Laurent drag a finger down Damen’s back, along the flexing curves of his body and had to pull away enough to just breathe.

“We have to leave this bed eventually,” Damen said, over aware of the way their legs had tangled together.

“Do we?” Laurent asked, lifting himself onto an elbow as he rested his cheek on his palm. He had a hand on Damen’s chest, nails grazing through the dusting of hair in a way that had the breath shuddering out of Damen. “Our options as kings must be quite limited.”

“There are,” Damen replied, feeling Laurent’s hand smooth down Damen’s hip, “things that need to be done.”

“They were,” Laurent said. “Twice.”

Damen found himself with his face pressed between Laurent’s neck and shoulder, a noise leaving him that was somewhere between a laugh and a groan, and a sound of incredulous happiness.

“You won’t be able to walk,” Damen said, trying for practicality.

Laurent shifted so that it was his chin on his palm, the position somehow more casual. With a lift of his brow he said, “I could always fuck you instead.”

Damen knew that Laurent likely said it to challenge him, more curious over the reaction it would derive than anything, yet he still felt himself flush, face coloring as the force of Laurent’s proprietary gaze caused his cheeks to burn with some foreign sense of shyness. Laurent’s mouth twitched as he noticed, remaining silent as his lips spread.

“We can,” Damen said. “We have.”

Damen watched as it was Laurent who was taken unaware, blinking rapidly as the growing smile on his face vanished, lips parting minutely as his eyes moved down Damen’s body. His own cheeks flushed, hard, and Damen felt his stomach clench in want.

“I,”
Damen pushed himself up, lifting himself back on his elbow as well so that the sheet slipped away, so that Laurent could see his want. Laurent’s eyes moved with the sheet, finding its way along Damen’s body before meeting his eyes. Damen said nothing, letting the silence speak for them instead.

“You seem to possess,” Laurent said, speaking carefully like picking each word out of his selective vocabulary. “A notable capacity for taking me by surprise.”

Damen felt something well inside him, some emotion making his body feel light and his blood hot, though he couldn’t be sure what it was in that moment, his mind already feeling so much at once. He brought a hand to Laurent’s shoulder, smoothing his palm down the curve of bone and each taught muscle as he relished in the feelings of touch, in the way Laurent reacted to it.

“Is there something you want?” Damen asked, helpless to the way he shifted his body back into Laurent’s, each contact of skin both new and familiar in a heady way. It was Laurent who finally closed the distance, his palms on Damen’s shoulders as he pushed him down onto the bed, his body a welcome weight against him as they kissed, Damen’s own hands moving to wrap themselves around Laurent.

Not for the first time, Damen thought of that moment so long ago where he had been ready to give up an entire kingdom for this.

He would make that same decision now.

Damen was leaving one of the finer chambers a while later, a stack of papers clutched in his hand. He had just met with Berenger after having finally pulled himself away from Laurent, the two of them getting dressed and going their separate ways to attend to the day’s business. Berenger typically stayed in Arles as one of their primary overseers and was visiting Delpha for the week as he frequently did, going over matters that required more than correspondence through letters. Namely, he was in charge of supervising the pet system and insuring that the new regulations that Laurent had put in place were being maintained.

“Have these brought to my chambers,” Damen said to a servant passing him in the hall. He wanted Laurent to have the option of looking them over if he returned to their rooms before Damen saw him. “Leave them with the guards.”

“Exalted,” he said, lowering his head before turning the other way.

While Damen would have loved to spend the day dallying with Laurent, he needed to be pragmatic. They were to meet later with some of the palace’s greatest educators to go over the classes and schedules for the school, wanting to get all the little details in order before the news became public. Until then they had things to see to individually, Laurent mentioning something about speaking with the kyroi that had yet to leave the palace for the games. Until then, Damen found himself in the training yard.

He stood by one of the trees with his shoulders comfortably on the bark, watching the lines that the men made, the formation that they held throughout the calls and orders that went over their heads and throughout the courtyard. Damen listened to the sounds of unsheathing and the impact of steel against shields, his arms crossed against his chest. His presence was not known by the men, and he luxuriated in the reprieve of being able to watch them and their efforts without the impact of his authority serving as a distraction.
“Exalted.”

The honorific was said calmly, an amount of comfort behind it that suggested respect with an undertone of familiarity. Damen turned his head and saw Nikandros approaching, Jord in tow. Jord’s hair was tousled with the signs of training, his hand on his hilt instinctively as if that was where it belonged, despite the fact that he was now separated from the fray.

Damen nodded his greeting, motioning to the men with his chin. “How are things today?”

“Good,” Nikandros said, his eyes passing over them as well. “One of the lines were a bit weak earlier, but we switched some of the men around and it seems to be going smoother.”

“Good,” Damen said. He looked to Jord who seemed to want to say something.

“Enguerran has a few suggestions that may make things more efficient,” Jord said. “And I have an idea on how to implement them. We would like your assistance, when you are able.”

“Alright,” Damen said, feeling as if there was more to the pinched nature of his features. Training and soldiery were Jord’s area of expertise and not something that would incite such an unsure look on his face. “Was there something else?”

Jord hesitated, only speaking when Damen nodded his head.

“If I may,” he said. “How is he these days?”

Damen paused, a few beats of silence passing in which Nikandros looked at Damen similarly, expectantly. Damen thought of the familiar way he and Nikandros had begun to act around each other again, another bit of their past seeping back in.

“He is well,” Damen said, schooling his features into something kingly rather the unabashed elation he felt inside. Well seemed to be the least appropriate word he could have used, but there was no possible response that could encompass what Damen really wanted to say. “Better.”

Jord trained with Laurent nearly every day, he had to have noticed the change in him over the past few weeks. No doubt Laurent’s earliest feelings would have translated into their sparring sessions. He nodded his head now, a look of something akin to joy on his features that he managed to respectfully strap down into relief. Damen was well accustomed to that look from their months on the road to Ravenel when they had gotten to know one another properly, or as properly as circumstances allowed.

Damen’s eyes shifted and he saw Nikandros looking at him knowingly, but there was something else there as well. Similar to the look in Jord’s eyes, elevated by years of friendship.

“Come,” Damen said, stepping towards the yard. “Let’s go over the drills.”

Damen had been on his way to the council room later that day after having trained with the men and bathing with Nikandros, ready to meet with Laurent and some of the people appointed to the school. They hadn’t set an exact time, only saying they would take a few hours to sort out their own matters before meeting in the corridor. Damen had tipped his head back on the wall and waited, unsure how long he stood there in silence until he heard the familiar click of boots against marble. He opened his eyes and smiled.

Now they entered the Great Hall together, matched in stride as they approached the high table, taking
their seats at the head. Nikandros was at his usual spot at Damen’s right and Vannes at Laurent’s left, the seat beside her vacant for Berenger. Damen could see him standing by one of the entryways with his pet Ancel who Damen had seen sparingly in the past two years, on Berenger’s travels to Delpha and their sparse trips to Arles.

Typically, pets no longer sat at the table with their masters, at the very least not during banquets or feasts. Damen assumed they were spending time together before separating for the meal. He noticed Laurent staring at the empty spot and leaned in towards him.

“His name is Berenger,” Damen said softly, flicking his eyes towards his direction by the wall briefly. “A lord. He had offered you funds and passage through Varenne after you had your revenue cut.” Laurent had told Damen about his secret meetings with Berenger when they were still in the palace at some time during Damen’s bed rest in Ios. “He was one of your first supporters, siding against your uncle.”

Laurent’s eyes were on Berenger more intently now, unlike the cursory glance he had given him when Damen had first mentioned his name. “Right,” he said.

Eventually he tore his eyes away, focusing them on the platters of food that were being set out on the table. At some point Berenger joined them, pulling his seat out and turning to Damen and Laurent as he sat.

“Exalted,” he nodded politely at Damen. “Your Highness,” he said, having not seen Laurent yet. “It is an honor to be back.”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” Laurent said. “How were your travels?”

“Untroubled,” he replied. “Ancel’s riding has much improved since our last visit, he enjoyed most of the ride.”

“It’s a shame that you only arrived now,” Nikandros said, selecting a sliver of meat cooked in a spiced sauce. Damen opted for the same, Berenger and Vannes both reaching for the platter of sliced chicken. “You just missed the games.”

“Yes,” Berenger agreed, lifting his goblet. “I’ve heard much about them already.”

“The two of you disappeared rather quickly,” Vannes commented, motioning towards Damen and Laurent with her fork. “You missed the climax of the events.”

“Not quite,” Laurent said.

Damen felt the spice of the meat tickle the back of his throat, causing him to sputter into his fist. Nikandros set his goblet down, reaching for the pitcher of wine and refilling his glass.

“Your Highness,” Berenger said, calling Laurent’s attention as he spooned salad onto his plate. “Have you found the time yet to read Tithonus?” Damen hadn’t known that Berenger had recently recommended Laurent a novel, something he knew the two of them had done before.

“Yes,” Laurent said, reaching for his linen napkin. “It was as moving as you said it would be.”

Damen smiled to himself, always awed by how easily these lies and attempts at masking his loss of memory came to Laurent.

“I’m pleased you think so,” he said, selecting a roll of bread from the basket and setting it down where the others could reach. “The rest of her works are just as poignant, you would much enjoy
“And how is your prized pet these days?” Vannes asked, fingers trailing the edge of her plate. Vannes was notorious for having a vast appetite and frequenting between multiple different partners, the very concept that Berenger’s interests were singular to one person was most likely peculiar to her.

“Ancel is doing just fine,” Berenger said.

She arched a brow. “Is he now?”

Berenger shook his head. “Lady Vannes-“

Vannes laughed softly as she reached for her wine. “Don’t strain yourself,” she said. “I’m only joking.”

Laurent wiped at his mouth, setting his napkin down beside him after. ”How is your newest bay mare?”

Damen’s fork paused on the way to his mouth, his brows pinching together as he looked at Laurent oddly. Before he could comment Berenger set his water down, his hands on top of one another. “Excellent, Your Highness.” And everything carried on from there, the conversation changing every few minutes as everyone chimed in at different moments.

Eventually the platters were cleared off, most of the seats vacating as everyone excused themselves and went their separate ways, off to their respective rooms or to the center of the hall where many people were gathered in mixed conversation. Damen turned in his seat, watching the roll of Laurent’s throat as he took his last sip before speaking.

“Come,” Damen said. “Walk with me.”

Laurent set his goblet down, turning to Damen with a skeptical look as Damen pushed his seat back. Laurent opened his mouth to speak, pausing when he felt the touch of Damen’s hand on his, blinking down on their slowly interlacing fingers.

“Lets walk in the gardens,” Damen said. Laurent looked over Damen’s shoulder towards the open archway for a moment before he nodded his head, just as slowly, pushing back from the table as well.

They walked out of the heated room and into the open air with their hands locked, the noise feeling far away as a cool breeze greeted them, the crisp scent of night blossoms and autumn air. Damen led them down a secluded path that was sectioned off by lanterns, passing the circular fountain and the vines that twirled around long, coiling branches.

“What did you think of the meeting today?” Damen asked, looking down at Laurent as they walked past a group of courtiers, strolling together in arms.

“I was pleased,” Laurent said. “We can look over the list in a few days with a fresh mind, but I found their suggestions satisfactory.”

“I agree,” Damen said. From the corner of his eye he saw a head of glowing red hair illuminated by a torch, a sleek mane that fell down one shoulder. Peaking out of the tendrils he noticed a long dangle of emerald stones, delicately arranged like leaves swaying from a branch. Damen watched as Berenger’s finger twinkled them, his eyes on everything but the swinging gems, his lips spread in a gentle smile.
“Where were you before we met today?” Laurent asked, pulling Damen’s attention back to him.

“In the training yard,” Damen said. “I was observing the new drills. Enguerran and Jord required assistance.”

“Nikandros mentioned something about that when I spoke with him earlier,” Laurent said. “Tell me about it.”

So he did, Damen recanting all that they had done, Laurent nodding along to everything he said and occasionally asking a question, offering an alternative. A surprising amount of what he suggested made sense considering the fact that he had not actually seen the maneuvers and Damen intended for them both to return the following day and implement everything Laurent had said.

At some point throughout their conversation they had sat on a wide bench, turned so that they faced each other, Laurent’s leg crossed along his knee. Damen’s weight was rested on one palm, his other hand trailing Lauren’s knuckles in a mindless gesture, Laurent not showing any response like the touch was a natural thing.

When Laurent looked at the grass with a languid expression, his eyelids drooping just slightly Damen smiled, knowing that he was tired and would likely not show it. He felt invigorated himself, an odd amount of energy coursing through his veins. He breathed the fresh air in, Laurent turning to look at him inquisitively.

“What?”

The edge of Laurent’s mouth lifted. “Nothing,” he said, shifting his weight back on his arms, mirroring Damen’s position. He looked at him, seeming to be waiting for Damen to speak or to make some move. When Damen remained motionless he tilted his head. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Well, how long do you plan on acting like you’re not eager to go already?”

Damen blinked, reminding himself that things were very easily misconstrued and to not jump to any sound conclusions. He looked at Laurent’s face, waiting a beat before saying, “go…”?

“Do you think acting obtuse is charming?”

Carefully, Damen said, “You’ll have me back in our chambers again?” His heart was behaving strangely, pounding differently with each word, each gust of wind as Damen waited for his response.

Tilting his head the opposite way, “You thought it was a one time occurrence?”

“Three times,” Damen couldn’t help saying, and couldn’t help the rush of pleasure he felt from the way Laurent’s cheeks went pink like pomegranates, his own cheeks lifting with his grin.

Laurent stood from the bench, his expression otherwise smooth as he outstretched a hand, the command of a king.

“Come.”

Damen was on his side, his body warm against the sheets as he listened to the sound of Laurent’s rhythmic breathing, each one in time with the rise and fall of his own chest. Damen had lost track of
how long he had been awake as time blended together, his focus instead on the soft puffs of air that left Laurent’s nose, tickling Damen’s neck.

Damen smiled to himself, skimming Laurent’s cheek with the pads of his fingers. Laurent’s face twitched, his eyes scrunching slightly before the muscled relaxed again, his face pressed into the pillow.

Laurent rarely slept after Damen, and certainly not this heavily. There was nothing pressing for him to attend to that day and he saw no reason that Laurent couldn’t sleep in a little longer. Damen pressed a chaste, barely there kiss to Laurent’s forehead, whispered lightly in his ear, and removed himself from the bed as silently as he could manage.

Damen dressed in the main chambers as quiet as possible, sure to make minimal sound as he slipped his boots on, doing the laces up quickly and mindlessly. He could feel from the chill coming in from the balcony that it was too cold that day to justify a chiton, even inside the palace. Damen had a feeling that that was how it was going to be for the next few months, his selection of Veretion clothing his only option for a while.

Casting the bedchambers with one final glance, Damen took in the way Laurent was sprawled on the bed, his hand stretched out to the spot Damen had been in, fingers in the sheets like searching for the vacated body. Damen’s head was light, fighting the urge to get back in the bed as he stepped away, making for the door and shutting it as softly as possible.

“I will be in the second set of chambers,” Damen said to the guards, only telling them so they knew what to say if Laurent asked. There were a few things Damen had moved over to the rooms he had claimed as his own those past months, and it was with a flood of glee that he told himself that he could now collect them, finally coming back to his and Laurent’s private space, officially.

The walk to the chambers was quiet, an odd reflection of all that had happened, all they had managed to get through. It was a bittersweet reminiscence, both a time he wished to forget and a reassurance of sorts. Damen’s mind was still whirling with thoughts as he entered, looking around the place that had been his own in technicality only, his heart and mind always with Laurent in their chambers.

Damen hadn’t been there in three nights yet he could still tell that the servants had been there daily, tidying the rooms up, fluffing pillows and sweeping floors. Damen made his way though the main chamber first, ignoring most things and setting the few aside that he needed. Some documents, a jacket, one of his daggers that he kept in a couch cushion.

Deeming his sweep complete, Damen made his way into the bedchambers, paying it the same thorough, detailed attention. He didn’t think of the passing time as he riffled through the bedside tables, the closet, the vanity where he pulled out the laurels he wore to dinner a handful of nights ago. He had circulated the room twice, briefly checking the balcony as well before finally making his way through the desk.

Damen was hunched over, two drawers down and concentrated when he heard a door slam, causing him to jolt in his spot. Damen stopped, one hand still slipped beneath a stack of papers as he glanced at the bedroom door, waiting for another sound. When nothing came, nothing appearing, Damen removed his hand from the desk and pushed the drawer closed, frowning slightly.

Damen was pushing himself upright, just straightening himself when Laurent came running into the bedchambers like being chased, or like chasing after something. His hands were clenched.

“Laurent?” Damen said in confusion, noticing first the way he was still wearing a bed shirt,
haphazardly tucked into pants, the ends shoved into his boots. “Why are you—“

“Damen,” Laurent said, stopping in his place when his eyes fell on Damen.

“I told the guards to tell you where I was,” Damen said, not understanding why Laurent seemed so shaken as if Damen had snuck away in the middle of the night. “I was just gathering my things. I- is everything alright?”

“Damen,” Laurent said again, spoken like it meant something, like it should mean something right then, more than a word and more than a name.

“You—“ Damen stepped around the desk, his own face surely contorted in puzzlement as he took in the way Laurent didn’t seem to be blinking, looking at Damen like he was seeing him for the first time in months. Damen saw him swallow deeply, with effort, and then all at once he was moving, coming at Damen in three quick strides like Damen wasn’t moving fast enough.

“Laurent,“ Damen said in surprise, nerves muddling inside him as Laurent took Damen’s shirt in his fists, tugging Damen forward so that his face was buried in Damen’s neck, his breath hot and damp on Damen’s skin.

“It’s fine,” Damen said, not entirely sure what exactly it was that he was reassuring as he brought an arm around Laurent. “I’m here, it’s alright.”

Nothing Damen said seemed to matter, Laurent stuck in some stupor as he clunged to Damen like holding together a bleeding wound, murmuring incoherencies into his neck. Damen simply rubbed at Laurent’s back, muttering his name and that whatever it was that had shaken him was going to be fine.

Eventually Laurent’s hold on him loosened, releasing Damen’s sides so that his nails no longer threatened to break skin. Damen waited as patiently as possible as Laurent disentangled himself, drawing in a breath that seemed to push at his chest as he looked up at Damen, eyes wide and dark like seeing something with clarity for the first time.

THE END IS HERE AND I AM A MESS
this fic has been a incredible pleasure to write and i've loved sharing it with you all so much. the reads, comments, kudos, messages and asks have brightened my days immensely and i couldn't thank you enough. i know the fic was tough at times so im so glad you all stuck with it and i hope you feel it paid off in the end. i promise the next one is shorter and less painful lol
enjoy this last chapter! i love you all <3
ps damen and laurent invented love

Damen stood a few paces behind Laurent, standing at the base of the dais three steps down from him. He had one foot up on the first step, his hands on his knee as he watched Laurent walk slowly, head craned back as his eyes scrolled the thick flow of blue and red cloth that came down from the ceiling and pooled at the ground. He had a hand out, fingers grazing the frays of the large tapestry, the embroidery of the lion protruding from the starburst. The throne room was in complete silence, all of the guards that wood soon line these walls now vacant, Damen and Laurent the only two in there.

“Well?” Damen said. “What do you think?”

It was what the two of them asked each other with each part of the palace that they swept through, usually through a smile that was an exact reflection of the other; wide, helpless, unbelieving.

They had been through most of the halls and secret passageways that they had had implemented, something only a select few were privy to. Long, winding hallways of marble that looped around the palace and led through archways, openings and stairwells. The council room, a large oak table in the center surrounded by plush chairs, piles of treaties and history archives stacked on the mantel surrounding the room, the two largest chairs at the head of the table. Ballrooms and the Great Hall where banquets and celebrations would be held, one entire wall carved with an archway that led out into the open air, vines and blooms looping through the pillars.

They had toured the gardens, fingers interlocked as they took in all the fountains that they had designed together, the paths that crossed through the trees and buds that were already in full blossom, one area sectioned off with flowers that Laurent’s mother had gardened herself in the palace at Arles, the seeds imported all the way from Kempt. The entwine of their fingers changed into something else as they took the long path together to the end of the gardens to the tall, proud statue waiting for them.

They had seen the kitchens and the baths, the Akielon white marble blending into the Veretian colors, intricate patterns lining the ceiling and giving the walls life, the room already filled with the fresh scents of soaps and lavender oils. They had been to see the training arena and the courtyard, the dungeons at the bottom of the palace.

They had gone to the library, thousands of books lining the shelves around them, the ceilings in there made entirely of glass so that the marble shelves and winding staircase glowed like the look on Laurent’s eyes as he stood in the center, turning slowly so that he took it all in. There had been an
interlude of their mass tour in which Damen allowed his back to be pressed against a bookcase, Laurent’s hands on his cheeks as Damen ran a hand up the side of his thigh.

Their chambers had come next, light shining in through the open balcony, gauzy curtains pulled aside and swaying in the breeze, the rooms already furnished with all of their belongings that they had had sent over. That location had led to an interlude in which Laurent allowed himself to be pushed down onto their new bed, laughing into Damen’s mouth as he climbed onto him eagerly, hands tight around Damen’s neck as he pulled him down against him.

Now they were in the royal throne room, walking the long, seemingly endless hall together as they looked around in equal awe, excitement and pride stirring inside Damen along with the feeling of being absolutely, undoubtedly ready to rule with Laurent at his side.

“It’s good,” Laurent said now, a hand on the top of the throne as he turned to look at Damen, still a few steps below him. “It’s all so good.”

He had a new look in his eyes, one that Damen hadn’t seen quite so poignantly since Laurent had stood in Ios in the great hall, each member of the council on their knees before him, declaring Laurent their king.

But the look was different, widening, enhanced by months of having Damen at his side, the possibilities of all that laid before him as king of Vere and Akielos leading them to this moment where they entered their new palace, their new home for the first time.

Taking the few steps that brought them to the same level, he brought one hand to Laurent’s shoulder, the other taking Laurent’s hand in his. Laurent accepted the touch, lacing their fingers together.

“It’s better than good,” Damen said, sitting down on their twinned thrones for the first time, pulling Laurent down with him. He felt the solid weight of it at his back, his mind flooding with thoughts of all there was to come: receiving news, passing judgments, greeting guests, working together as the united force that they were. “It’s ours.”

“Ours,” Laurent said, his thumb sweeping against the back of Damen’s hand as he looked around the large room, ceilings so high and far apart that their voiced echoed. His hand smoothed down the armrest of his throne, his eyes fixed on the space before them like he could see something Damen could not. He turned to Damen, expression set.

“We’re going to help them,” Laurent said, blue eyes resolute with a promise. “We’re going to make a change. We will be more than just another set of names on a long list of rulers.”

“Yes,” Damen said, his hand tightening around Laurent’s as his mind overflowed with everything they were already setting in motion, everything they had planned for the future. It would not always be simple, uniting two warring nations never could be, but slowly, things were changing, and their new palace on the border was the first mark of it. The alliance set in stone, a symbol that would always stand as a testament to their union. Both with their countries, and with each other.

As someone who had always believed that he had everything, it was a wonderful remembrance to Damen every day that he woke up next to Laurent that he was everything Damen didn’t know he needed. Each time Laurent looked at Damen, each time he shared his private thoughts or added on to Damen’s own, it was a constant reminder that they were made to rule together, to be together. They balanced the worst in each other and reflected the best, and there, in that spot on their joined thrones, Damen saw his future. His kingdom, flourishing under the new rulership with Laurent beside him, for the rest of his days.
It had started with a dream.

Laurent didn’t dream often, not for a while now. He had quite frequently when he was younger, though now they were more so flashes and snippets, not the vivid recurrences of the things he had lived through. It had been years since Laurent had such a lengthy, lifelike dream that made him think and feel and remember. That night, Laurent dreamt.

Laurent dreamt of vast fields, a tumble of grass and wildflowers darkened by the night sky and a tumble of clouds, crumbled stone and fragments of fallen kingdoms. He dreamt of himself, leading his horse through the ruins and to the edge of the field, dismounting swiftly. He unlaced his jacket in quick, graceless jerks, throwing it down onto a stone and sitting himself down, his eyes on the sky as he thought of everything, alone and in silence until he heard the approach of another.

The sounds of horse hooves came next, transitioning the dream into the next in that fluid, unexplainable way dreams did. He saw swords clashing and clanging, benches being kicked and daggers thrown, Laurent’s body thrashing in angry desperation. Laurent could feel the determination, the frustration and pent up helplessness as he pushed hard, harder, throwing everything he could into that moment.

And then, the dreams continued, the hysteria of the first two smoothing out into something else, something new, Laurent’s body relaxing further into the sheets as gritted words and the loud impact of his body against the wall faded away, ebbing into a cosmic sweep of stars and the feeling of two people laying next to each other. The dream felt close, the words spoken familiar and personal in a way that Laurent thought he might still feel the night breeze on his skin, the sound of the river rushing in his ears.

The sight of the stars changed, altering, the midnight glow of white turning to orange flames, wavering off thick stone walls and darkened glass. The bedding spread out beside the fire, the thump of his heart in tandem with each flicker of the candles lining the mantle as the door opened, the person Laurent had been waiting for stepping in. Laurent thought he might still be able to hear the shut of the door behind him as his eyes opened against the pillow, slowly.

The space beside Laurent was empty, that had been the first thing Laurent noticed as he stretched out, rolling into the spot beside him and shifting against the sheets as he thought of Damen stepping forward, looking around in hesitation as Laurent approached him, hands going up to Laurent’s waist as he pressed against him. They had kissed, deep, heated kisses until Damen was gone, off in the antechamber to bathe as Laurent waited for him expectantly. Pressing his face into the pillow, the sheets smelled like Damen.

Laurent thought of Damen as he had come out, his upper body bare and flushed from the steam, a white towel looped around his waist. Laurent’s stomach had been in knots, his breath wavering as water dripped down from the tips of Damen’s hair and down his shoulders. He thought of Damen stepping back at his command, hands on either side of him on the wall as Laurent requested, only moving one hand to his waist when Laurent told him to.

It was during the memory of the towel unwinding from his hips, falling down to the floor that Laurent’s eyes snapped open, his heart feeling like it had lodged itself between his ribcage as Laurent realized that he was no longer asleep, the memories from his dream following him into consciousness. Laurent was completely, entirely awake, and he remembered that day.

Mellos. The inn had been in Mellos, on the road between Heston’s estate and the Kingsmeet. That was the next thing that had come to mind, entering Laurent’s head like a random thought that slipped itself in amongst everything else. Laurent was suddenly up in bed, his throat feeling thick and tight as the rest of the memory unfolded, ending with Damen and Laurent tangled together in the bed,
Damen telling Laurent that he wasn’t alone.

The Kingsmeet. Laurent had remembered the Kingsmeet two nights ago, just as he had remembered the story of the baby, of the ultimatum Laurent knew he had been given. He saw Jokaste now, seated in her solar with her skirts flowing and her hair pinned high, telling Laurent of the child that had caused him to turn around in surprise, Damen standing on the other side of the bars with his expression wide, his tattered heart in his eyes.

Bits began to come back to Laurent, some miniscule like Damen’s favorite fruit and some massive like the gambit of giving up his life to save Damen’s. It all began to come back to him, slowly and then all at once like rain that started out as a gentle patter and progressively increased into continuous falls and drops, battering against the window and combating the sound of your pulse in your ears.

The first time he had seen Damen, bound and gagged on his knees, looking up at him with an untamable fury that Laurent felt bright and alive in himself. Everything at Arles, the bad and the painful, the confusing and the challenging. Everything he had seen signs of these past few months but could now piece together himself, everything coming together like one large, jarring puzzle. The baths, Torveld. His horse. Daggers from Sicyon and chalis, Damen being there for him for the first time, but not nearly the last.

He remembered leaving for the border, night after night alone with Damen in a tent where he gave him counsel, taking everything Laurent said and thought, throwing it back at him in a way that made him see everything differently. Laurent’s mind felt light, the veins in his head throbbing with the ceaseless memories that flowed like a current, river water smashing through a broken dam.

Everything Damen had told him those earliest nights in their chambers, every story and recollection was there with him now, vivid in Laurent’s perception like it had just happened to them. Nesson. The faction attacks and Damen’s advisement throughout it, the victories he had won him. Laurent remembered the first stirrings of confusion he had felt in those days, staying with him and only growing the more time they spent together.

Vask. Breteau. Their trek south, deep into the woods in search of encampment and what they had found instead, the Akielon troops closer than they had thought. Laurent remembered sitting on his horse by the stream, Damen on the opposite side, their eyes locked from a long stretch away. It had been quiet, peaceful, the sound of water lapping against the rocks when Laurent heard the hiss, the rustle and swish of an arrow in the air. Laurent’s horse had reacted violently to the sudden motion, the only thing Laurent noticed as its hooves skidded against wet stone. He had fallen, thrown from impact and smashed against the ground, his imminent end near.

And then, again, Damen. Damen, the only thing on Laurent’s mind as he threw himself from the bed.

It was like every emotion, every sensation that Laurent had felt during that time was hitting him now, his head overflowing with thoughts and memories and feelings. Laurent hardly felt the moment he stumbled across the room and pulled on his pants, shoving his feet into his boots messily, tugging his shirt in with half a mind. The only thing he was aware of was Damen, that he remembered Damen, and that he needed to be with him immediately.

Everything after that was a flash and blur, demanding an explanation from his guard as he made his way down the hall in a rapid sprint that would likely be degrading for a king if any part of Laurent cared about anything else at that moment but the man he needed to see. Distantly Laurent felt the press of wood against his palms, the impact of doors slamming shut as they closed behind him. He had looked around the main chamber in quick jerks of his head through heaving breaths, only sparing the room with a glance before rushing into the bedchambers.
Damen was the first thing Laurent saw, the only thing he saw, rising up from behind the large marble desk at the opposite end of the room. “Laurent?” He said. “Why are you-“

“Damen,” Laurent said, the name leaving him on a breath. Laurent didn’t know why he felt like he hadn’t seen him in so long when it had just been last night that they were together.

“I told the guards to tell you where I was,” Damen said, looking at Laurent with a twist of concern that almost brought Laurent to his knees. “I was just gathering my things. I- is everything alright?”

“Damen,” Laurent exhaled, trying his best to hold himself back from hurtling himself at Damen. Damen had been there with him all this time, treating Laurent with more courtesy and affection that anyone could possibly deserve, and he had done it with an open heart, that same genuineness in his eyes now. Laurent looked at him, trying to wrap his mind around all that they had been through, all the tests they had faced. Laurent looked at him and remembered the way everything between them had evolved two years ago, the way Laurent’s heart had begun to beat for Damen, the way it had the same exact way those past few months.

“You-“ Damen began to say, moving around the desk and towards Laurent. It wasn’t fast enough, Laurent moving towards him like some invisible force was tugging them together, Laurent’s name leaving his lips on a surprised gasp as Laurent took his shirt in his fists and pulled them together, his face buried in Damen’s neck. He was saying something, murmuring Laurent’s name and continuous reassurances in his ear as one arm was wrapped around him, the other one rubbing at Laurent’s back in circles. Laurent didn’t know. All he could hear was the sound of Damen’s voice and the steady beating of his chest against Laurent’s.

Laurent wanted to climb inside him and stay there forever, and it was with an inhumane amount of strength that he drew in a deep breath, pulling away reluctantly. Damen looked down at him with wide eyes, his face etched in tenderness as Laurent placed his palms on his cheeks.


Laurent watched as Damen’s brows made a slight V shape, the skin between them crinkling as he blinked at Laurent. “You… what?”

“Damen.”

“Laurent,” Damen shook his head, one hand going up to cover Laurent’s. “I don’t-”

“I remember,” Laurent repeated, his voice firm. He could feel the way his fingers were digging into Damen’s cheek, stubble rough and coarse against his skin. Damen didn’t seemed to notice, his eyes continuously moving against Laurent’s face like he was trying to make sense of what Laurent was telling him, like he couldn’t believe him.

“Do you hear what I’m telling you?” Laurent said, his voice rising with his exasperation at Damen’s silence. He waited, and as the silence between them grew, so did the unease in Laurent’s stomach.

It wasn’t that Damen couldn’t believe him. It was that he didn’t.

Like he could read Laurent’s thoughts or see what he was thinking, Damn’s gaze softened as he lowered his hands, clasping Laurent’s in his. “I told you,” Damen said gently. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“I’m not-“ Laurent said, squeezing his eyes shut in frustration. He drew in a tight breath, letting it settle inside his chest as he thought, scrambling for whatever it was he could do to make Damen believe him, to believe that Laurent remembered him. Action wouldn’t work, Laurent had already
given Damen everything that he had given then, nothing left between them to exchange that would suggest anything more. All there was were words.

“You have a scar,” Laurent blurted, eyes snapping open. He removed his hand from Damen’s and pressed it against Damen’s abdomen, trapped beneath his shirt. “Here.” Of course Laurent would now know about his back and the scar Auguste had given him, even the stab wound he had received after Laurent’s trial, but Damen had not in those past months told Laurent about this scar. “From Kastor,” he continued, looking at Damen as he dragged his hand beneath the thin material of Damen’s shirt, feeling the smooth, puckered line. “You were thirteen,” Laurent said. “You were sparring with him.”

He could feel the way Damen’s stomach was moving against Laurent’s palm, eyes widening a fraction.

“When you were younger,” Laurent went on, “Nikandros served at the Kingsmeet for two years. You were jealous.”

Damen’s lips were parted as the words began to catch up with him, his chest moving unsteadily now as Laurent moved his hand up, his fingers steady on Damen’s ribcage.

“You came to me,” Laurent said. “After I lost Nicaise.”

“Laurent,” Damen whispered.

“You kissed me,” Laurent said. “On the battlements of Ravenel. And I was terrified, because I wanted you to.”

“Laurent,” Damen said, his hands on Laurent’s face as he pulled Laurent into him, Laurent hands going up as well to hold Damen against him as he kissed him. Hard, desperate kisses, the two of them gasping for air between each press of lips, hands moving like they could touch every part of the other all at once, like clutching each other would erase all the pain and separation that they had been through.

Laurent felt the desperation in Damen, the very same that he felt in himself. He was trembling against Laurent, unsteady like he was going to shake out of his skin. And while Laurent was the one who had been through the ordeal, he still found himself holding Damen against him.

“You came to me,” Damen said, the name ragged and half muddled like it was pulled from him. His face was pressed against Laurent’s chest, both of his arms against Laurent as he held him tightly, his fingers digging into his forearms so hard that they might leave marks, nails biting into skin as he breathed Laurent in. Laurent had a hand around Damen’s shoulders, his other hand holding Damen’s head as he closed his eyes, focusing on Damen’s breathing in hopes that it would even out his own.

It was overwhelming, rattling, having Damen in his arms with all the knowledge of everything they had been through in his mind. The summer palace, their time on the road with Charls in search of Makon. Damen’s time on bed rest and the first time they had toured their new palace on the border. Banquets and birthdays and all of the first things they had experienced together, all bright before his eyes now, impossibly real and no longer just a story.

Damen raised his head to look into Laurent’s eyes and Laurent couldn’t help carding a hand through his hair, some semblance of a laugh leaving his lips as Damen grabbed his hand like he couldn’t help it, pressing a kiss to Laurent’s palm. Laurent shut his eyes and just felt Damen against him, drinking in his heat as he felt Damen take is face in his hands.
“You remember?” Damen asked, his voice soft like he still feared a different answer, despite what Laurent had said. “You remember me?”

“Yes,” Laurent said. “Damen, yes.”

Laurent’s hands were on Damen’s face, helplessly, his fingers skimming the line of his cheekbone and jaw, trailing beneath his eyes and along his dark brows. He touched his neck, his collarbones, fingertips light on every available line of skin like he was trying to commit it to memory, terrified of ever forgetting it again.

“Not here,” Damen said suddenly, taking Laurent by the wrist and pulling him to the direction of the door. “I don’t want to be in here any longer.”

Laurent nodded, grasping Damen’s hand in his as they left the room behind, ignoring all eyes as they made their way through the hall, paying the guards no mind as they entered their chambers, door soundly shut as they turned to face each other. It was brighter in the room than when Laurent had woken up alone, the sheets still tangled, pillows tossed from where Laurent had pulled himself out of the bed rapidly.

“What happened?” Damen asked, no longer touching Laurent but standing close like any small amount of distance would reverse things. He didn’t specify his question, Laurent understood.

“I,” Laurent shook his head. “I don’t know. I dreamt last night. I hadn’t dreamt so intensely in a while. When you came to me at Marlas, our swordfight. Our time on the road in Ios, the inn at Mellos.” He rubbed at his face, feeling drained to the bone with everything. “I woke up and the dream continued in my mind until I realized that I was no longer dreaming and was entirely awake. After that everything was simply- back in my mind, like it was never gone.”

“It was gone,” Damen said, his expression twisted in a way that made Laurent’s heart ache inside him. “Everything was gone. You forgot everything, Laurent.”

“I know.”

“Our kingdom,” Damen continued, eyes glazed, unfocused. “Our history. Laurent, you forgot—“

“I know,” Laurent said. His lips pressed together, the magnitude of everything that had taken place in those months heavy on him now, heavy on them both. “Damen, I’m sorry.”

“No,” Damen said, closing the miniscule distance between them. “Don’t apologize to me. None of this was your fault.”

“How can you be so noble?” Laurent said. Of course losing his memories wasn’t his fault, that was an unfortunate accident. That wasn’t what he meant and they both knew it.

“We have spoken about this,” Damen said, voice pitched deeper now, the softness of disbelief gone, replaced with the surety that came so naturally to him. “Just the other night. Have you forgotten that now?”

The heels of Laurent’s hands were pressed into his eyes. It was different now that Laurent remembered everything, now that he was truly himself again. It had to be.

“You forgot me,” Damen said, as if Laurent didn’t already know. He pulled Laurent’s hands away, forcing him to look at Damen, to watch him as he spoke. “And it wrecked a part of me, but I understood. If you know me at all, then you know that I understood, despite how hard it was. There’s no changing what we’ve been through, now or then. There’s only changing what we make
of it, and you came back to me, Laurent. We came back to each other.”

Of course he had. Laurent didn’t think a world existed in which Laurent wouldn’t find his way to Damen. He knew that, but all he was seeing was the look on Damen’s face when Laurent had woken up beside him, wrenching himself away like Damen’s hands were made of poison.

“You were so patient,” he said.

“And you wouldn’t have been with me?”

Exasperatedly, ”That would not be the same thing.”

“No?” Damen asked. “You don’t think my forgetting you would have torn your heart from your chest?”

All at once Laurent could feel his insides crumble, something in him snapping as he dropped his head, taking every effort possible to not disintegrate into the floor as he put his head in his hands. He knew. Of course he knew, that was the whole issue. But it was another thing to hear the words leave Damen’s lips.

He watched as Damen’s expression mirrored everything Laurent felt, eyes softening immediately as he shook his head, his hands on Laurent’s neck. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s exactly what happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Laurent didn’t reply. He couldn’t. He didn’t want to talk, just wanted to feel Damen’s arms around him, to hear the sound of his breathing in his ear.

And so he did, because he was selfish and he needed him, stepping into Damen’s embrace and allowing himself to revel in the way Damen opened for him. Damen’s arms closed around him, his lips at his forehead as he held Laurent like he was a part of him, like they were both a part of each other. Slowly, Laurent could feel his heart rate starting to settle, evening out into something that resembled a normal pace, everything temporarily better because he was in Damen’s arms.

“I missed you,” Laurent said, his voice a soft murmur against his skin, remembering the words that Damen had said to him two nights ago when there had been nothing between them but their exposed hearts. He had felt so sure, so safe, as much as he’d been every other time they had been together, even if Laurent hadn’t remembered them at the time. Laurent was always safe with Damen. He looked up at him, tenderness swelling inside him when he saw the way Damen looked at him, like he had looked at him those last few months. Like he had looked at him those last two years. “You’ve been so... but I still...”

“I know,” Damen said, his forehead pressed to Laurent’s. “I did too.”

Hours later they sat on their balcony, the two of them on opposite ends of a large chair, their backs on the armrest so they were facing each other, Laurent’s knees pulled up to his chest. Damen had one leg up, his elbow resting on the backrest. By that point in the day the golden glow of the early morning was gone, the two of them streaked in orange and pink, trees rustling around them from the wind.

“Did anyone else ever feel familiar to you?” Damen asked, biting off the last grape and throwing the
vine down on the platter beside them. He swallowed after a few bites, washing it down with water.

“No,” Laurent shook his head slowly. “No one that I hadn’t already remembered to begin with.”

“The Patrans when they came to the palace for the wedding?”

“Your first time meeting Torveld in Arles was my first time as well,” Laurent said as response. Damen nodded.

“Perhaps Pallas,” Laurent said in consideration after a moment, shrugging his shoulders. “His involvement in the okton was of the first things I had remembered. I suppose he seemed more familiar after that.”

Damen nodded again, and Laurent caught the moment in amusement when his head jerked to a stop after a few seconds. “‘First thing’?”

Laurent smiled slightly, looking onto their view of the courtyard. The sun was slowly dipping behind the trees. “I may have remembered a thing or two after that.”

Damen looked like he was considering throttling Laurent, a hand dragged down his face as he blew our air between his fingers. Laurent had explained his reasoning for keeping some of his memories private before, and while possibly unfair, it was the decision he had made.

“What other things?” Damen asked, dropping his hand to his knee.

“The Kingsmeet,” Laurent said, watching as Damen’s expression shifted. “Some of the factors leading up to it.”

Damen opened his mouth, looking as if he was going to speak, but Laurent shook his head once. Not now.

“Berenger,” Laurent added, before Damen could argue.

“Berenger,” Damen repeated, his face blank. “You remembered Berenger last night?”

“Eventually.”

A similar look crossed Damen’s face, but it was more incredulous than anything. He closed his eyes, this time huffing out a laugh. “Tithonus,” he said. “His horse. I had a feeling.”

Laurent smiled, and he couldn’t help leaning forward and taking Damen’s face in his hands, kissing him the way he always used to, the way Damen had begun to again once Laurent had let him back in, never pushing Laurent in any way, just like when they had first begun to know each other. Damen’s arms were around Laurent immediately, and Laurent felt so light that he might have thought he was dreaming again.

Eventually Laurent pulled back, a hand against Damen’s chest as he pushed him away gently. Damen smiled at him softly, the look almost shy, and Laurent brushed his cheek with the pad of his thumb before he stood up, walking back into their chambers. He heard Damen walk in after him, and he felt the way he hovered behind him as Laurent rifled through the bedside table on his side of the bed, pulling out the stack of papers tethered by a blue string.

“I hadn’t remembered these at the time,” Laurent said, holding the letters up. He wasn’t exactly sure why he was mentioning them now, but they had come to Laurent’s mind when Damen had asked him about familiarity. “But I had come across them a while ago when we had come back from the
Damen took the stack from Laurent, unlooping the string and dropping it on the bed as he unfolded the papers, skimming through them quickly. As his eyes roamed over the words, Laurent saw the smile that grew on his face as he glanced at another page. “I knew you kept these,” Damen said, the smile now evident through his voice as he looked up from the papers.

Laurent’s lip quirked, shifting his weight to one leg. “I’ve looked through your drawers as well,” Laurent said. “I’ve seen what letters of mine you’ve kept.”

“Which ones?” Damen asked.

“You know precisely which ones,” Laurent said, his smile growing at the sight of Damen’s flush.

Damen flicked his eyes back to the stack, looking at the last pages. “The summer palace,” he murmured. He folded them, refastening the string before putting them away. “We can still go,” he said, looking at Laurent through dark lashes. “If you like.”

“If you like,” Laurent said. “It’s my palace as well.”

Damen’s smile could have made Laurent do nearly anything. “Yes.”

Laurent smiled back at him, and he was still smiling as Damen brought their lips together, his hand at the back of Laurent’s neck. Laurent’s hands went up to grip Damen’s arms, his fingers spanning muscle as he felt Damen’s tongue against his.

“There are things we should be doing,” Laurent said against his mouth.

Damen shook his head, his hand smoothing down Laurent’s spine. “I just got you back.”

“You’ve had me,” Laurent said, his heart thudding anew, swelling with warmth. “For a long time now.”

“Laurent,” Damen said, and then nothing else needed to be said because Damen was kissing him. Long, surging kisses that redefined the word, giving Laurent that same lightheaded feeling that he had every time Damen touched him like this.

A push, a step and they were on the bed, Laurent on his back with Damen above him, his own leg lifting up and around to hook Damen, to have him as close as possible. Damen’s hands were moving against him, up his chest and around, one large hand moving down his back until he was palming the curves there, Laurent’s mouth going a little slack as Damen kissed him with more intent.

“Wait,” Damen said, pulling back as Laurent carded a hand through Damen’s hair. “Now? We-“

“No,” Laurent said, putting a finger on Damen’s lips. This wasn’t that, they had all the time in the world for that. “I…”

While two years together helped Laurent find the comfort in voicing his wants, sometimes action was simply better. He brought a hand to Damen’s shoulder and pushed, shifting so they were both on their sides, an arm around each other, Laurent’s fingers cupping Damen’s chin so he could pull him in. They would have the time to talk and do more later. For now, Laurent just wanted Damen to hold him like this.
Later, they laid in that same spot, the sun entirely gone so that the room was bathed in darkness. Neither of them had lit the lanterns or called for the servants, not wanting to leave that spot or each other’s arms. They were on their backs, Damen’s arm extended across Laurent’s pillow so that Laurent’s neck was resting on his bicep, his fingers trailing Damen’s thigh.

“Is it strange?” Damen asked softly, turning his head to look at Laurent. His hair was still a tousled mess from Laurent’s hands. “To remember everything again.”

“No.” Laurent said, after a moment’s hesitation. “It feels—natural. Absolute. What’s strange is thinking now about how I felt before, looking at you and not knowing you.”

Damen smiled sadly, turning back to gaze up at the ceiling. “I tried,” he said, seeming to be searching for the right words. “Not to be—”

“You weren’t,” Laurent said. “You were…” But he didn’t have the words either. He thought of his mindset those past few months, the way he had feared Damen at first, hated him like he hadn’t in so long, his stomach coiling at the thought alone.

His fingers found Damen’s, the slow interlacing a comfort that soothed the twist he felt in his chest, smoothing it down and allowing him to breathe through the thoughts, bringing his mind to the changes, those moments where he would look at Damen or catch him looking at Laurent, feeling something spark inside him that he couldn’t understand. He thought of the way he had begun to anticipate that feeling, part of his mind working to understand it and another part not caring enough to do more than feel. Looking back at his confusion with everything that he now knew and remembered, it was almost comical to him. The way things had played out almost like they had the first time, like there was no path the two of them could take that wouldn’t lead them to each other.

As Laurent felt Damen’s thumb brush over the bumps of each knuckle, he thought of the other things he had forgotten. He remembered that morning at Ravenel where he had forced himself to leave Damen, struggling to pull himself away as he stole a few extra minutes to watch the way the sun bathed him in glowing bronze, his brows scrunched in sleep like he already knew that their time was over. All those nights he had lain awake, trying not to think about the notable absence from his tent, his fingers curled around his new cuff that felt like it might still hold the warmth of another wrist. The mornings he would sit up in Damen’s bed in Ios as Damen slowly healed, waiting for him to wake up, waiting for the moment his lashes fluttered open and that smile spread across his face like he couldn’t believe Laurent was still there with him, as if Laurent could be anywhere else.

“What?” Damen asked.


Damen pushed himself up, waiting for Laurent to sit up as well, turning so they faced each other. “I’m sure it might be jarring at first,” Damen said, slowly, like considering each word. “To be thrown back into everything, your understanding different, but it will be okay.”

“I know,” Laurent said, looking down at their hands. After a moment he smiled, gazing up at Damen through his lashes. “You tried to court me.”

Damen smiled back at him, lifting his shoulder in a bashful gesture. “Did it work?”

“You know it did,” Laurent said. Damen’s smile deepened so that his dimple showed, lifting their clasped hands to his mouth so he could kiss Laurent’s fingers.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s call for food.”
They stepped into the main chambers, Damen leaving for a moment so that he could lean out of the doorway, murmuring to the guards. Laurent leaned on the table and looked around, thinking about everything that had to be done the next day when Damen walked back in, fitting himself next to Laurent.

“You should see Paschal in the morning,” Damen said. Laurent nodded in agreement, turning to him.

“I can’t believe I forgot about the school,” Laurent said.

“You forgot quite a bit more than that.”

“Do you remember when we first spoke about it?” Laurent asked, thinking about the time he had sat in their bed with his thoughts on the children they had seen in the village, Damen immediately knowing something was weighing down on him. “And now it’s happening.”

“I remember,” Damen grinned. “It’s been a while since we’ve gone, we can go this week.”

“Aright,” Laurent agreed. He looked across the room and thought of all the nights he had spent here alone, standing in this very spot and trying to work through all that he couldn’t understand, the things that were so clear to him now. The things that had unsettled him, unnerved him, made him long to break through the barrier that his mind had created.

It was the knock on the door that pulled him out of his reverie, his head rising at the sound. Damen left him to open the door and let the servant in, and it was as Laurent looked after his retreating figure that it came back to him, reminding him of something he hadn’t thought about since it had happened. He left his spot and the table and made for one of the chests in the side of the room, pulling it open. He heard the sound of dishes and glasses being set down as he rummaged through it, and it was when the door shut again that he found what he was looking for.

“What is that?” Damen asked, his hand on the back of one of the chairs as Laurent stepped forward, balancing the large weight in his hands. He set it down in front of them, a fluttering sensation in his stomach as he took hold of the sheet covering it from the corner, pulling it off in a swoop.

They looked together, Damen’s fingers light on his shoulder as Laurent looked at the portrait of them like he hadn’t before. When it had initially been brought to Laurent he had been confused, displeasure coursing through him as he tried to make sense of it, of the way they were holding one another, looking into each other’s eyes like they were helpless to it. Laurent felt now like he had felt when it had been created. Happy. Complete. Over brimming with emotion that no words would do justice to.

He turned to face Damen, smiling when he saw that Damen was already looking at him, his hand moving to Laurent’s cheek, the touch light and searing. Damen was looking at him like he had on the floor of the baths at Ios, his heart in his eyes when Laurent said it had been one kingdom once.

“I want to put it up in here,” Damen said.

Laurent tilted his head slightly. “It is customary for royal portraits to be put in one of the halls,” he said. “For lineage.”

“I don’t care,” Damen said. “I want to see this every day I wake up next to you.”

Laurent’s fingers felt unsteady as he lifted them to Damen’s face, touching him in a similar way. His breaths were shaky; his heart so full that he thought it might change shape.

“I want that too,” he said.
Laurent didn’t know how long they kissed, how much time passed as they held on to each other, everything else slipping away, fading into nothing so that all that mattered was them. The feeling that they would risk lives and let empires fall if it meant that they could hold on to this.

“Thank you,” Laurent said when they finally pulled away, Damen’s hands on him like a promise. “For waiting for me.”

Damen smiled at him gently, sweetly, and Laurent was never so sure that this was where he was meant to be.

“I would wait my whole life for you.”

End Notes

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