Je me Soucie de Toi (I Care for You)

by SteeleStingray

Summary

Erasmus was born an omega and was sold into slave gardens by the seaside. His only consolation is his dearest friend Kallias and his hope for a better, safer future, something he believes a kind and gentle master will provide. However, when Akielos' king, Damianos, marries the second prince of Vere, his future is thrown into jeopardy as Prince Laurent intends to abolish slavery. Never did Erasmus think the prince would become his trusted friend or that he would be a catalyst for change in all of Akielos. All he wants is someone to care for him and it may come from the unlikeliest of places.

Notes

Hello friends!

For the past few stories, some people have been asking me if I would ever be interested in doing an omegaverse story. The short answer back then was no. To be honest, I'm not super fond of ABO dynamics and 'The Veretian Flytrap' was already such a masterpiece, but I decided to challenge myself and go a different route with my omegaverse story.
My first thought was that I could never really write Laurent as anything other than an alpha and I had so much fun writing about side characters in my ASOIAF AU that I decided to do some Erasmus/Kallias love!
I might change some tags or up the chapter count in the near future, but expect it to be around 25-30 chapters, updated pretty regularly. Also big thanks to eikyrona, our resident knife queen, who has been reading through the chapters and giving me feedback and also to iggysassou and themys who helped me with the title and the chapter names. I'm not sure how this one will go, but let's see ;)
I hope you all enjoy!
I. Une petite gentillesse

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It all seemed so large to him, the marble entrance carved in a graceful, simple arch with lush, dark green bushes sculpted in the shape of a tear drop on either side. Behind it was the cluster of pale buildings that were to be his new home. The manse was so fine, so much more beautiful than any building he had ever seen before, Erasmus balked at the entrance. In his mind, simple, uneducated, and used to the bitterest poverty, the marble entrance gate looked like a mouth about to swallow him whole.

There was a man too, waiting by the gates although it was past sundown and already a little cold. He was tall and beardless and he smiled down at Erasmus.

“Good evening. Come in, out of the wind.”

Erasmus might have stayed rooted to the spot for the rest of his life had he not felt an insistent push at his back. It was his traveling companion from the past three days, the silent and cold man who had come from ‘father’ to escort him here. So far he had said very little to Erasmus beyond stern commands and Erasmus had developed a fearful respect for him.

“Go on.” Was the command this time, and Erasmus’ fear for the man overcame his apprehension for the place. He walked inside.

They were in a handsome courtyard. The flagstone path was gray-white and smooth under his feet and all around him were perfectly ordered plants the likes of which he had never seen before. There were marble basins to wash the dust from the road off of legs and feet and he could hear the sound of the sea from behind the house. This was to be his new home then.

It didn’t take him long to feel that someone else was looking at him as intently as he had been looking at the house and he dropped his eyes when he met the curious eyes of the beardless man.

“Obedient, isn’t he?” The man murmured appreciatively.

His older companion gave a noncommittal grunt. “I suppose it’s his nature. But it served us well enough on the road. Noisy brats draw bandits and his father paid me to get him here unspoiled.”

“Of course. He’ll do very well here, I think. And his father…is he?”

“He’s an alpha. Of course, it didn’t take though. A mercy, I say, that he let the boy come here instead of turning him loose in the city. Only a fair few ways for his kind to survive there and none with much dignity.” Erasmus did not know what exactly they were talking about, but knew they were talking about him and they sounded displeased. He felt himself blush with shame.

He jerked in surprise as a warm, dry hand cupped his chin, tilting his head up. The beardless man gently cleared the matted curls from Erasmus’ face and turned his head to examine his profile. Even though he was smiling kindly, Erasmus had seen this treatment before in the slaver’s square and knew what would come next after this inspection of his face. He struggled not to piss himself from fear but the whimper of panic did slip through his clenched teeth.

There was a pat on his head when the gentle hand and prying eyes went away. “He’s a sweet face.
Once he gets cleaned up properly, I’ll get a better look at him. Would you like a tour of the facilities? You are not an alpha, correct?”

Erasmus’ stoic companion shook his head with something like distaste. “I had better not. My instructions were to bring him to a high class establishment and return immediately to give a report.”

The beardless man sighed as though it could not be helped. “I see. Well we are interested in purchase. I believe, as he grows older, his beauty will increase and we do look for only the finest of quality here.” There was a moment of thoughtful silence. “Will you accept three hundred and fifty pieces of gold for him?”

A hiss of dismissal. “We were hoping for seven hundred as a fair price.”

“I would consider four hundred…”

Back and forth they went for some time, the gruff traveling companion arguing fiercely for every piece while the beardless man smiled in his sugary way and hemmed and hawed as if it was a cruelty, an unfair bargain to go up any higher in price.

In the end they settled on a price of five hundred and sixty pieces of gold.

Erasmus could not help himself and watched with shining eyes as the pieces were fetched and counted before being placed in the gnarled old hand. It was more money than he had ever seen in his life. He did not realize a person could have so much money on hand and he calculated what he could buy with such a vast sum. He could buy whichever food he wanted—the sugared figs that made his mouth water, skewers of meat, even the flaky, sticky baklava that the old ladies hawked on the corners—he could buy a house with that money. His very own house? It was unthinkable.

It did not occur to him until much later that those five hundred and sixty gold pieces were essentially the price of his life.

The old man who had been his companion for the past three days did not even offer a word of farewell as he put the money into the depths of his leather pouch and strode out of the main courtyard without a backward glance. And just like that Erasmus was alone.

He was so far from home he didn’t know how he would ever manage to make it home…

He supposed his home didn’t exist anymore.

There was another pat on his head and the hand lingered there, gently sifting curls. The beardless man smiled down at him. “Welcome home, little kit. I suppose we should introduce ourselves before I give you a tour of our villa. My name is Kolnas and I oversee everything that goes on inside. What’s your name?”

Erasmus was too terrified to even open his mouth and the man Kolnas must have realized for he found an alternative. “Oh, perhaps on your papers…” Erasmus must have missed the exchange of papers as Kolnas shuffled through them. “Ah, here it is. You’re Erasmus, correct?”

Erasmus nodded and was rewarded with another pat on the head.

“Excellent. Well, if you follow me, I will show you around, get you to the baths and then hopefully we can find you a bed with the other ones. Come along then.” As he turned, Kolnas’ dark curls spilled over his shoulder and Erasmus saw a circular scar at the base of his neck. It made him shudder.
He was then led on a tour that made his head spin.

His new home was so large, he was sure he would get hopelessly lost trying to navigate it on his own. He could barely keep up with Kolnas’ long legs and commit his surroundings to memory.

The complex was made up of three buildings surrounded by a high wall with a courtyard in between the buildings and a garden in the back.

The rightmost building was where the older boys slept and ‘training’ took place as well as the seamstresses’ quarters where, Erasmus was informed, he could get new clothes the following day. Given Kolnas’ expression at his plain, brown chiton, Erasmus was forced to assume that his current clothes were unacceptable here. It would be his first time wearing new clothes.

In the middle building were the servant’s and the guards’ rooms and Kolnas explained there would be no need to fear thieves or kidnappers as the house had highly skilled guards on patrol at every hour. The dining room was on the main floor of this middle building and Erasmus could not find the chance to explain he had not eaten since the early morning, clutching his growling stomach, as he smelled dinner being served.

On their way to the left building, Kolnas pointed out what looked to be a small house facing the sea.

“That house is where the boys go when they have their heat. That way it doesn’t disrupt anyone else’s cycles.” Erasmus had no idea what he was talking about, though he had heard people in his area of the city talking about heat. His timid mind immediately jumped to the worst possible scenario and he hoped and prayed that he would never be sent to that heat house.

This final building, he was told, was where he would spend his nights up until he was fourteen. But his introduction to his room could wait until after a bath and an inspection to see if he was healthy. Erasmus could not find the voice to explain that he had seen a doctor just before leaving the city but allowed himself to be led into the baths.

He had never seen a bath inside someone’s house before.

They were marble and large enough to accommodate sixty or more people, just as large as the ones back in the city, but these were much cleaner than the baths that cost half a copper piece to use. There were two square baths, pale blue and white mosaic tiles on the floor, and one round bath in the corner that was the very deepest dark blue. Wooden cots were set up in the corners and Erasmus wondered who would take a nap in a bathroom.

Kolnas became a whirlwind of activity in the baths.

First he bustled to a side room to retrieve an armful of soaps, oils, brushes, combs, and a stack of fluffy white towels as well as a long length of white cotton cloth. Then he stripped down to his own loincloth, revealing a toned, golden body, and helped Erasmus unpin his chiton, holding in between his thumb and index finger like it was a filthy dishrag.

“All right, little kit. I’ll wash your hair but soon you must learn how to do it on your own.” Erasmus was too shy to say he had washed himself before. “Of course we have the cold bath and the heated bath.” Erasmus remembered how the old ladies encouraged him to dip in the hot water and then in the cold water to keep his skin smooth. “And the round bath is the warm salt water bath. You can test it out later after a massage. Our patron is kind enough to send over a handful of masseuses every month for all the little kits.”
Erasmus attempted to cover his skinny ribs as he got in the warm water and nearly yelped as Kolnas plunged his head under the water without even a friendly word of warning. He breached with a gasp, but Kolnas seemed not to notice as he began to simultaneously scrub Erasmus and talk without ceasing.

“We must get some meat on you, you’re so slender...Gods, little one, your hair is filthy, but my the curls are just divine.” The curls often became so matted that often people recommended he shear them off, “I wish I had hair that was naturally like this. And the color is so fine too; that perfect golden-brown, very classical.” Erasmus noticed as the water became dirty and cloudy around his body and blushed furiously. “Oh no need to be shy about these things, Erasmus. You are a little doll, I assure you. And of course, I should know better than anyone! When I was your age I was in the same position: a young omega unsure of his future and with no connections in the world. And now I am the main trainer in this great house and a beloved of the wealthy man who owns this house and everyone inside. I am sure you will fit in just fine with everyone here. If you follow the rules, you’ll have a very comfortable life here.” That comforted Erasmus a little, that Kolnas had been like him in the past.

When Kolnas had finished lathering and rinsing Erasmus’ hair, he began to rake through the wet tangles with a fine comb and tears sprang to Erasmus’ eyes at the pain of it all. In the meantime, Erasmus soaped and cleaned his own body to distract from the pain.

Once his body was clean, Kolnas yanked him out of the tub and began to pat him dry with a towel, handing over some flowery body oil that Erasmus could use on his skin while his hair was being dried. Just from one sniff of the oil, Erasmus could tell it was very expensive and he was hesitant to waste it on his body.

“Hurry up, Erasmus, we haven’t got all night.” Kolnas insisted, surveying Erasmus’ wild, half-dry hair. He began to use the softer brush as Erasmus rubbed his clean skin with oil. The oil still rested slick on him when Kolnas deftly wrapped him in the clean cotton robe that fastened with little knots across his chest.

Then Kolnas admired his work. He smiled so wide that Erasmus thought his face might break. “You are darling! I knew your hair would be perfect! And your eyes! Now I can see them properly, I do think you could make your fortune just on your pretty eyes. Now let’s go to get you collared.”

Kolnas was able to put on his chiton while he walked, showing Erasmus to a small room in the back of the building.

It looked much like a blacksmith’s shop, except the floors were much cleaner and...Erasmus felt his jaw drop as he saw the telltale yellow glow of gold. Every available flat surface was littered with circlets of gold that would serve as either necklaces or bracelets. His first impression was awe, in that there was so much gold here, he would never starve again. But then...

He remembered who wore these collars, remembered the circular scar on the base of Kolnas’ neck and remembered the screams from the slaver’s square as hot brands were placed against helpless squirming flesh. The thought was so terrifying, he felt he might faint.

As Kolnas brushed past him, Erasmus tried to force himself to run but, like a young rabbit, his fear kept him rooted in place, trembling hard. This was a slave garden. Kolnas had been a slave. Erasmus was a slave. He was a slave.

Completely unaware of Erasmus’ fear, Kolnas selected a wider circle for the throat and then two long, small pieces for the wrists. He was smiling. “Now then, time for you to get these in place. We’ll replace them when you outgrow them but this one for your neck will keep anyone unwanted
from biting your neck.” He picked up a thick, stained towel and steered Erasmus over to a seat. “Now hold still, little one.”

With strong hands, Kolnas separated the gold semicircle so it was wide enough to be put around Erasmus’ throat and then stuffed the padding in the open gap. Erasmus recoiled as Kolnas pulled out a hot poker and a hammer, but a firm hand restrained him by the shoulder. Erasmus closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, hoping he wouldn’t piss himself.

It was not until his bracelets were on that he realized the process here was quite painless. The soft gold had been melted so that the bottom half of his neck and nape and both of his wrists were covered with gold. He had not felt anything more than slight warmth.

The heavierness of the gold he would have to get used to...

“Very fetching!” Kolnas proclaimed. “The gold brings out the yellow in your hair. Now it’s off to bed with you! The other boys will have finished their nightly ablutions and you will all have an early day tomorrow.”

It was a short walk up the stairs to the boy’s quarters and Erasmus was faced with a long room populated by several dozen beds that lined the walls. On each side was a balcony, with one overlooking the main courtyard, the other looking down at the gardens and the sea.

“Now, you won’t have a bed of your own during your time here but…” Erasmus drowned out the rest of Kolnas’ explanation. He had never slept in a proper bed, much less had one of his own. A firm hand pushed him forward and steered him towards one of the beds. “You can share this one. Now tuck in, Erasmus. I need to go fetch the other boys before they make mischief. We’ll get you properly settled tomorrow.”

Erasmus nodded and got into his bed, reveling in the feeling of cool sheets on his skin.

He nestled in deeper, touching the golden fortune around his neck and wrists. Being alone like this he was more at ease. He could relax and simply focus on the soothing sound of the tide. It wouldn’t last long.

Erasmus was afraid to turn over or move out from under the sheets as he heard the bell-like voices of the boys turn to murmurs and whispers at the sight of him.

Back in the city boys were wild and loud and aggressive. They fought under the shade of the buildings, chased stray dogs, and stole treats from street vendors, laughing as they were chased away. They had never particularly cared to make friends with someone so shy as Erasmus and he was too intimidated by them to make an overture.

Now in such close quarters, he feared he might be beaten by these boys, boys who could probably smell weakness on him. He longed to shrink away until he was invisible but that seemed unlikely.

He felt someone poking at his shoulder.

“Hey, hey. Who are you? What’s your name? Why are you in my bed? Hey. Hey!”

“Enough!” There was the sound of Kolnas as he bustled into the room and clapped his hands for attention. Erasmus heard the boys’ running to their bed, the slap of their small feet on the floorboards, and then the creak of the wooden beds under their high-pitched giggling as they jumped onto the sheets. “Listen up, little kits, this newest is Erasmus. He’s just come from the city and he’s a little frightened by the change. Be kind to him; you all remember how it felt to be the new one in these chambers. And if I hear any word of any of you teasing him, I will slap your feet
with wooden boards. Kallias! Get into bed.”

“Yes sir,” the chorus of soft voices went up and Erasmus felt his bed dip slightly with the added weight of another boy.

Before he could build up the courage to turn over and look at his bedmate, the candles were snuffed, plunging the room into darkness, and Kolnas bid them good night in his syrupy voice.

There were familiar sounds that lulled him into security.

The murmurs of conversations under covers, the sound of the wind through curtains, and the steady hum of bugs. Above all of this were the pump of his heartbeat and the foreign whoosh-whoosh of the sea, matching his heart.

Too full of excitement from the evening’s activities, Erasmus could not easily fall asleep and waited until his eyes adjusted to the darkness and the muted conversations turned into fluttering, sleepy breathing. Only then did he feel safe turning over to get a good look at everyone around him.

He almost screamed when he rolled over and found someone staring at him unblinkingly.

The boy smiled at the look of shock that must have been on Erasmus’ face and his front two teeth were missing, giving him an impish look. “Shh, don’t yell!” He whispered, his ‘s’ making a ‘th’ sound thanks to his missing teeth, “If you wake up the other boys the masters will be angry. They’ll say we can’t have breakfast or make us do extra chores. Understand?”

He was so passionate and serious about the punishment that Erasmus swallowed his scream and nodded.

Under the cover of night, Erasmus allowed himself to be a little bolder than he was during the day and did not immediately avert his eyes. Instead, he looked at his bedmate, the boy with the lisp, who was bathed in soft moonlight. He looked nothing like any boy Erasmus had ever seen.

His skin was smooth and features were fine, hinting that one day he would be a very great beauty. His thick hair was long to his chest, wavy, and very, very dark; Erasmus thought it might be blacker than the night sky, like someone had spilled ink over his thin shoulders. He looked more at ease with his own gold collar and there was a beauty spot just below his bottom lip. But by far his most striking features were his eyes.

They were shaped like almonds, or like crescent moons and they glittered as Erasmus looked at him. He grinned his gap-toothed grin.

“You’re Erasmus, right?” Erasmus nodded. “I’m Kallias. Where are you from?” When Erasmus did not immediately supply an answer, Kallias scrunched his sweet face in a look of slight irritation. “What? Don’t you know how to talk?”

Erasmus didn’t think he had spoken since he had been led to see his ‘father’ and even then it was simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. He had probably not spoken in a week or more and wondered for a moment if he did remember how to speak. Oddly, he did not want to disappoint Kallias. He was the first boy who ever tried to protect Erasmus from punishment and Erasmus rather liked his cheeky, gap-toothed smile. He opened his mouth.

“I don’t know.” He felt a little stupid then but he honestly didn’t know where he had lived up until this evening. “I lived in the city.”
Kallias nodded sagely. “How old are you then? I’m nine.”

“I am too.”

Kallias lit up. “Good! That means we’ll be in the same room for the rest of our time here. What… what are you?” Judging from his tone, there was only one meaning behind his secretive phrasing. Normally people did not go around asking this question but Erasmus did not want to lose someone so friendly so soon after their introduction.

“I-I’m an… omega.” He whispered.

There. It was said.

Erasmus had been instructed in deathly serious tones to never let strangers know of his omega status once it was discovered not long after his ninth birthday. He was told monsters would take him away and cruel things would be done to him. The stories had been effective for someone so shy and had not told a soul, save for his ‘father’.

Even though he had no idea what an ‘omega’ was, he knew it was something shameful. That was probably why the man who claimed to be a father looked so disappointed when he was told. That was why he had been taken from the poor house he had known to come here.

But Kallias was small and pretty and did not have long scary teeth. Surely there could be no harm in telling him.

Kallias nodded again as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “Most of the boys here are omegas. I’m one of the only betas. They let me in because of my eyes, but I’ll never smell as nice as you.” As if to drive home his point, Kallias leaned forward and sniffed the spot just below Erasmus’ new golden collar. He seemed undeterred as Erasmus shrank back. “You smell like orange peel.”

Erasmus blushed, forgetting he had had a bath earlier in the day. Normally he was filthy and probably smelled like garbage. “I’ve…never had an orange before.”

Kallias’ dark eyes lit up with excitement and he could barely keep his voice down. “We have orange trees here!” Erasmus shushed him and he repeated himself, moving closer. “We have orange trees here! When they are in season, I’ll climb the tree and get us some. They’re my favorite.”

“You will?” Erasmusmoved closer out of sheer excitement, “Aren’t the oranges very high up?”

“I will. I’m not afraid. And I always get oranges for my friends.”

Erasmus smiled. He had not smiled in so long. But then again, he had never had a real friend before.

At the thought of eating anything, Erasmus’ stomach growled and there was a sharp pang of hunger. Kallias looked at him in wide-eyed surprise.

“Are you hungry? Did you not eat dinner?”

Erasmus shook his head.

Kallias’ look became overtly wicked and he looked around. “Are you so hungry you could die?” It was a little extreme, but Erasmus was caught up in Kallias’ excitement and nodded. “Then we can
go down to the kitchens. There’s always apples and cheese and vegetables down there and we can eat a couple so long as we’re quiet.” Erasmus had not even finished nodding when Kallias slid out of bed. “Follow me Erasmus, come on.”

The torches were lit and Erasmus tried not to be startled by the moving shadows as he followed Kallias’ slim form through the empty halls.

The kitchens were in the center building and Kallias had not lied about the food. There were fat cloves of garlic and dried herbs hanging from the underside of the shelves and a wooden bowl of red apples sitting on one of the counters. Kallias tossed him one and Erasmus bit into it as Kallias went looking for cheese. The apple was sweet and juicy. It was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted.

“I found the cheese.” Kallias whispered in delight. “Want some?” Erasmus nodded.

They sat on the floor, Erasmus eating while Kallias sliced off pieces of white cheese to give him. “So you’re an omega right Erasmus? Which of your parents is an omega?” Erasmus was silent as he chewed, unwilling to admit that he didn’t know. “Are they…gone?”

Erasmus looked up and saw that Kallias was looking at him with a grave expression that could only mean one thing. He nodded.

He supposed it was true. He had had no idea who his ‘mother’ was and the man who had claimed to be his father did not exactly want him. So this was easier to explain in any case.

“Oh…me too. They got really sick and I chose to come here after…”

“You chose to be a slave?” It burst out of Erasmus before he could stop himself.

Kallias shrugged and popped a slice of cheese into his mouth. “Being in these gardens isn’t so bad. We’re safe from bad people, we don’t have to sleep on the streets, and there’s always stuff to eat here. Also since I didn’t cost them money I can be a little wilder. There’s nothing so bad about that.” When Erasmus didn’t reply, Kallias leaned forward and patted his hair. “Are you afraid?”

“Yes.”

“It’s ok. Don’t be scared.” Kallias insisted, pushing another piece of cheese into Erasmus’ mouth. “You’re my friend now so I’ll take care of you, ok Erasmus?” The moonlight illuminated his delicate face and Erasmus felt his mouth drop open.

“Y-Your eyes! They’re…blue.”

It was that deep velvety, night blue; it was the same color as the deep salty water in the circular tub. Kallias smiled again.

“I’ll take care of you, I promise.”
Hello to the small cluster of people reading this! Haha I think maybe because it's a less popular pairing but I appreciate everyone who is giving this a try ;) I promise Damen and Laurent will come in a couple of chapters but first I have to build up a foundation for Erasmus!

In any case, today is the chapter that inspired the title. I always think 1,000 times harder about my story titles than the plots and this one came about because I wanted Kallias to call Erasmus 'Sussie' (which is how soucie would be pronounced). He's going to take care of Erasmus and this is the first chapter we really see his resolve in action.

I always loved the idea that Kallias was a budding schemer to rival Jokaste and possibly Laurent ;)

And poor Erasmus; I swear he will get stronger as time goes by but for now...he's a shy guy.

To all of you reading and commenting, I love you and thank you! It really makes me want to keep writing! I am going to try and update every 5 days.

Enjoy!

Erasmus folded his legs beneath him and stretched his torso out so it was completely parallel with the ground. The afternoon sun beat down on his bare back and shoulders and he knew another crop of freckles would appear by nightfall if he was uncovered for much longer. Despite the discomfort the position caused him, he kept himself steady until Kolnas called out to him.

“Excellent Erasmus!” Came the cry of delight and Erasmus slid back languorously to a sitting position before he allowed himself to get to his feet. Kolnas was practically glowing as he looked from Erasmus to the other boys. “I want you all to copy his fine form. His movements are smooth and perfect. It is something you should all aspire to.”

Flushing with pride Erasmus moved back into the shade with his classmates.

Two years he had been in the gardens and he had learned so much.

Though he was still just as shy and obedient as his first days in the gardens—something Kolnas praised him to the stars for—he was no longer terrified of his life here. It was safe, the people were gentle, and he did not have to fear hunger or branding. Kolnas had been appalled when Erasmus worked up the courage to ask about it. The gold cuffs were their brands, he had responded, only common prostitutes and house slaves in the city had their skin marred so horribly. He need not fear such a thing.

They had fed him, clothed him, given him shelter and allowed him to make friends here, for which he was grateful. But they also taught him about his body.

He had been woefully ignorant of the world until he had arrived in the gardens. He knew nothing about his own body until Kolnas and the others had sought to educate him. Omega… His whole
life determined by that one thing.

Three separate sex genes, and Erasmus had gotten the least likely of the three. The man who had fathered him was in all likelihood an alpha who tried to sire an heir on an omega, Erasmus’ ‘mother’. There was a fifty percent chance he would have been born an alpha. But that was not to be his fate.

His fate was a body to burn with heat, to attract alphas, and bear children that would have the same chance as he did. Fifty percent.

The gold cuff at his neck served to protect him and he no longer feared the heat house. Many older boys had gone in and come out unscathed, though a little tired from the ordeal since none of the slaves could touch themselves and alleviate the heat.

It would happen to him one day, he was told. Completely natural and nothing to be fearful of.

And finally on the day his training was complete, he would be assigned a good, kind, and wealthy master who would allow him and his children to live in luxury. Never again would he starve in the back alleys of the city.

Already potential matches were being thought of for the day he would finish his training. Kolnas had even mentioned the seventeen year-old Crown Prince of Akielos himself as a possible match. The alpha prince apparently had a penchant for courting people with golden hair and Erasmus had been so overwhelmed with the thought that he began to add lemon juice to his beauty routine. He combed it in his hair before going outdoors so that the blond in his curls would become more pronounced.

He dedicated himself to being the best, to maintaining his smooth skin and graceful form, to listening and watching while appearing not to, and pounding the uncomfortable forms of subservience into his muscle memory.

Kolnas was calling another boy forward to inspect his prostration when Erasmus saw a flash of night, inky black out of the corner of his eye.

“Sussie!” Came the familiar call.

Kolnas twisted his lips in disapproval as Kallias’ lean, leggy body collided with Erasmus’, his face cuddling into the gold-clad crook of Erasmus’ neck where he said it smelled most strongly of oranges. “Kallias! Retain your dignity, even during training! Please.” Kolnas begged but it fell on deaf ears. Kallias was untamable as the ocean; he was only soft and courteous when he wanted to be. “And do not torment Erasmus.”

“Pray carry on, teacher.” Kallias said, squeezing, “I can hear better with my arms around Sussie.”

His front teeth had grown in and he grinned wide and white up at Erasmus. Erasmus could not help himself but smile back.

Kallias was a welcome constant in his life as well.

He was Erasmus’ best friend, his bedmate and confidant. He could tell what Erasmus was thinking without Erasmus saying a single word, with just the look in Erasmus’ eyes. He was smart and quick where Erasmus was deliberate and thoughtful, very open and fond of hugging and snuggling where Erasmus was more standoffish. When Erasmus broke a costly pitcher and sobbed in fear, Kallias dried his tears and silently took the blame and the punishment. When Kallias fell ill from swimming in the sea when it was too cold, Erasmus begged to skip training to nurse his friend to
health, bearing his teacher’s annoyance with calm. Kallias stole Erasmus the finest fruits, convinced visiting traders to give Erasmus trinkets and fine cloth for free, and taught Erasmus how to swim in the ocean. In return, Erasmus brushed oil into Kallias’ fine, dark hair, bandaged his wounds, and tried to soothe their teachers’ anger in response to Kallias’ lateness or absence.

“Was it a good meeting with your doctor?” Erasmus whispered as the lesson began again. Out of habit, his hands stroked the silken waves of Kallias’ hair.

Kallias twisted his lips.

His teeth had grown in but the lisp had persisted, much to Kolnas’ horror. So a special speech doctor from the border of Vere—Vere having the finest doctors, they had heard—had been commissioned to come to the gardens to fix Kallias’ speech problem.

Kallias could now speak without ruining his ‘s’ sounds but he had taken on a Veretian accent from his doctor, so the ‘h’ sound at the beginning of words had been lost. Kolnas insisted it made him sound more exotic and interesting, so Kallias was also learning the Veretian language.

He had taken to calling Erasmus ‘Sussie’, his pronunciation of the Veretian word for ‘care’.

“Should I learn Veretian as well?” Erasmus had asked, but the worry must have shown on his face. He feared he was too stupid to learn another language. Kallias had kissed the furrow between Erasmus’ brows with soft lips.

“There is no need, Sussie.” Kallias assured him. “I am learning and I won’t leave you. I’ll go with you wherever fate takes you and I will be your translator.”

Class was dismissed not long after Kallias’ arrival and the young boys scattered across the gardens like dandelions in the wind. Erasmus was slower to rise, wanting to keep practicing his form even after class was finished. Kallias watched him with those startling blue eyes of his; even though he was quick to rise, he was effortlessly graceful.

“You smell different today, Sussie.” He said, wrinkling his nose and Erasmus blushed, “Very sour.”

Erasmus bit his lip and wished he had a veil to cover his hair.

“Have you been putting lemon juice in your hair again?”

“So what if I have?” Erasmus whispered, embarrassed beyond words.

Kallias made a hissing noise between his teeth. “You’re doing this because of what teacher Kolnas said, aren’t you? Trying to lighten your hair because Prince Damianos likes yellow hair. And that last Veretian trader said his most recent lover had skin like snow so you’ve started staying inside and rubbing that white cream on your shoulders and face.”

“I have too many freckles…” Erasmus said lamely.

“I like your freckles.” Kallias responded, touching one on Erasmus’ shoulder with his smooth fingernail. “And your bronze hair.”

“Thank you.”

As they walked closer to the cluster of buildings, Kallias wrinkled his nose again, but this time it was not in jest but as if he smelled something too strong. Almost on cue, Erasmus heard a
commotion from inside the house and his nostrils tingled the next time he inhaled. It was the heat.

Erasmus had smelled the heat a few times before when some of the older boys succumbed to it at dinner or in the baths. It smelled animalistic and musky to him, and there was always a rush, a feeling of anticipation like a baby snake wriggling in his gut. Kallias was even more sensitive to it, but as a beta he said the smell was too strong for him. He said if an omega smelled of lilac, their heat smelled like having lilac oil poured directly into his nostrils. He said it gave him a headache.

They both knew the smell would be diluted and perfect for an alpha’s nose.

Forgetting about escaping from the sun, Erasmus simply snatched Kallias’ hand and yanked him toward the beach. One night, when they hadn’t been able to sleep, Kallias told Erasmus that he had been born by the sea and the sound and smell calmed him down. Whenever he was stressed, Erasmus could find his friend with his feet buried in the sand, eyes closed as he breathed in the briny smell.

When they reached the sandy shores, Erasmus tossed himself in the shade of an orange tree and Kallias sprawled next to him. His head rested on Erasmus’ lap and it looked as though someone had spilled ink on his legs.

Erasmus looked around in a panic as Kallias got ever closer.

“Kallias, stop! What if someone—what if the teachers see us?” Erasmus tried to wiggle away but Kallias latched onto him.

“It’s ok. This isn’t one of the bad things.”

Despite still being in the doldrums of childhood, Kolnas warned them constantly of the ‘bad things’: the things slaves could do to lose their place in the gardens. They could not touch themselves between their legs, they could not kiss each other or do lewd things to each other. If they made love or the omegas were bitten or impregnated, they would be sent away. It was drilled into them with such utter seriousness; it was the only fear, aside from failure, that remained in Erasmus. Kallias, on the other hand, played hard and fast with the rules, kissing Erasmus’ forehead and cheeks, and always gluing himself close. Erasmus was not sure if this touching counted as a bad thing, but he trusted Kallias and besides, Kallias was smarter than he was.

Erasmus ran his hands through Kallias’ hair. “Is your nose better?”

Kallias nodded into Erasmus’ lap. “Just smells like the sea and oranges now.”

Erasmus knew of what chaos would be occurring at the manor now as their teachers bustled the boy into the heat house and made sure that no others were falling to their own heat. Erasmus was secretly glad his heat would not come for a while yet.

“You are scared.” Kallias said, squeezing Erasmus’ waist. “Why?”

Erasmus smiled down at his friend. “I never want my heat to come. I envy you betas. You don’t have to have one.”

Erasmus had heard the horror stories from the older omega boys as they recounted their heat. They said it felt like they were melting from their hips and they had to take bitter medicine to keep from rutting on each other. At night they had to have their hands tied to the bed to keep from touching themselves and they lost sleep for lust. It sounded terrible…

“Sussie…”
“And I will disgust you.” Erasmus admitted. “My smell will make you sick and I will have to spend a week away from you.”

“You won’t make me sick!” Kallias sat up and his thin eyes flashed with indignant anger, “And I won’t let you go alone. When you go to the heat house, I’ll go with you and plug my nose with cotton!”

“You cannot go into the heat house! You’re a beta.”

“I’ll sneak in.” Kallias was stubborn and he was now set on this path. “I’ll come in at night and stroke your hair until you can fall asleep. I won’t be able to sleep either if I know you are in torment.”

Erasmus was touched by his friend’s kindness. “It is too great a risk.” He whispered. “If the teachers find out that you sneak into the heat house, you’ll be beaten. They might even send you away.” Erasmus felt himself tearing up at the thought of either thing. “I…I don’t think I could bear it, Kallias.”

“Then we will speak no more of it.” Kallias said, brushing away the burgeoning tears from Erasmus’ cheeks. “But when the day of your heat comes, I won’t have you face it alone.”

“I believe you.”

Kallias smiled at having assuaged Erasmus’ concerns and fell back on Erasmus’ lap. “Good. I will never leave your side, I swear it.”

Erasmus laughed. “We have no choice on where we will be sent when we are of age.”

Kallias shrugged. “I will convince them. Whoever wants you, I will convince them to take me as well. Even if it is Prince Damianos himself. I can talk him into buying us both.” Erasmus knew he could and besides Kallias was lovely and intelligent; his only ‘flaw’ was the inability to bear children.

“If you are so confident in your tongue, perhaps you can convince Prince Damianos to favor bronze curls and wild freckles.”

Kallias’ eyes sparkled. “If he does not find you anything but perfect, then he is a fool.”

Erasmus laughed nervously, glad no one was around to hear such treasonous words. “You, a slave, would dare call the Crown Prince of Akielos a fool?”

Kallias hissed again. “A slave can be wise and a prince can be a fool.”

“And what am I, if you are so wise?”

“You are perfect, Sussie. Perfect and sweet.”

It did not occur to Erasmus the lengths Kallias would go for him until the event with the bad teacher.

Kallias had again skipped the afternoon classes on how to properly attend to masters and guests, and the teacher was furious. His name was Adrastus and he was an irascible, strict beta whom Kallias had always disliked, mostly because of his heavy hand during punishments. Even Erasmus’
excuses and pleas had fallen on deaf ears as the entire class was taken out of the buildings to find their truant classmate.

Erasmus had not seen him since they had dressed for day and Kallias had helped rub oil onto Erasmus’ back. His hands had been light and gentle but his expression was of rare concern. He had stopped his application at the small of Erasmus’ back and stepped away quickly.

“Cold.” Was his only reply when Erasmus had asked where he was going.

He was found on the beach, of course, up to his waist in the seawater, his hair billowing around his face like waterweeds.

“Kallias!” Adrastus screamed.

Kallias turned his head slowly. He looked like a sea nymph, save his gold cuffs and collar. “Ah…”

“If I am forced to wade into the water to get to you,” Adrastus yelled, his face red with rage, “then I will ask to beat you until you cannot stand! Come to the shore immediately.” All of the other boys whispered in concern over the threat and Erasmus felt his stomach turn to ice.

Kallias leveled them all with a gaze, as if he was deciding whether the walk to shore was worth the effort.

Erasmus stepped forward. He did not want to see Kallias beaten badly and knew he could stand to have his feet slapped with wooden boards. He had endured such many times before. “Kallias, please! Come back!”

Kallias returned at Erasmus’ plea, though his expression showed no hint of contrition. He only stared at the front of his soaking chiton, as if admiring the way it draped on his body. Adrastus looked as though he would have liked to slap Kallias in the face, but he withheld his rage for when they would arrive back in the courtyard for a larger audience. Erasmus withered under the merciless glare and squeezed Kallias’ hand when Adrastus turned his back.

“All of you will follow me to the main house.” Adrastus ordered. “The punishment will be administered there.”

While all of the other boys were silent, Erasmus whispered to his dearest friend.

“Why did you not attend classes again, Kallias?” Erasmus asked him, tears already threatening to spill down his cheeks. “I tried to come up with an excuse b-but…Adrastus knows that you—.”

“Shh Sussie.” Kallias said. “I know you tried. Thank you. But I just wanted to be alone. I needed to think about…well, someday I will tell you what I think about. I needed to be calm.” It was a dangerous mindset for a slave. Kallias was too independent and the stricter teachers would try to break him of it while the others would be forced to watch.

“I cannot watch you take punishment.” Erasmus insisted.

Even though Kallias was the type to bear pain with only grimaces but no noise, Erasmus hated to see Kallias bite his pillows when Erasmus disinfected and wrapped his wounds later in the night. Erasmus’ tears inevitably soaked the bandages.

Kallias wiped Erasmus’ hot tears away in one quick motion and his blue eyes were set with determination. “Don’t cry, Sussie. I hate to make you cry. I will take the punishment; it is none so bad and worth my time alone. Don’t worry.” He squeezed Erasmus’ hand and stared ahead, calm as
Quite a crowd had gathered in the main courtyard by the time their group returned to the main villa; their guards and servants watched lazily behind doorways and the older boys looked down from the second-floor terraces. They recalled the time in the not-so-distant past when they had been too stubborn or too foolish to follow orders and had been shamed in front of the entire villa. Kolnas was noticeably absent.

“Teacher,” One of the older boys came forth at the sight of Adrastus. This far along in his training, he was the picture of poise and grace, a true testament to the gardens, “Teacher Kolnas is feeling indisposed and has requested reprieve. He will not be present to witness the punishment but asks that you do not go overboard.”

“The boy offers no proper excuse for his absence,” Adrastus insisted, a vein bulging in his neck and forehead, “and this is the fifth time he has missed my lesson. I fear he is to be useless.”

“I already know the protocol.” Kallias said and a stifled gasp rose from all of their spectators. No one ever dared to talk back to a teacher.

“Enough!” Adrastus bellowed and Erasmus gripped Kallias’ hand so hard he feared the slender bones might break. “For your truancy and your obstinacy, your feet will not be the only part of you beaten on this day. Perhaps this will teach you to watch your smart mouth and remember why you are here.” He retrieved the paddle of heavy, smooth oak that was used instead of whips so any wayward slaves would bear no marks on their skin. It still hurt like the devil, Erasmus had heard.

Kallias was silent as he was yanked from Erasmus’ death grip and he took off his chiton without a word of complaint, so that he was in his loincloth in front of everyone. Erasmus immediately began chewing his thumbnail.

The first blow of the heavy wooden paddle landed hard on the back of Kallias’ white thigh and the skin instantly turned red with a welt. Erasmus began to cry immediately but Kallias remained silent.

By his fifth slap and not a peep from Kallias, everyone could tell Adrastus’ fury was not abating, but only growing in intent to hear a whisper of pain or an apologetic cry. Erasmus knew that he would not show pain until tonight when Erasmus would put cold compresses on those angry red blemishes and Kallias would moan from the pain.

“Teacher, please.” Erasmus bowed his head and would have prostrated himself on the ground if it would make the punishment stop. “Mercy.”

He felt Teacher Adrastus whirl to face him and he begged every god to let the man see reason. He did not expect the man’s reaction to him interjecting.

“You are just as culpable, Erasmus! Always attempting to lessen the punishments for Kallias. You will take half the punishment for your inability to keep him in line!” Erasmus looked up in a panic and saw Kallias mirror his horror. “Maybe then you all will learn not to allowed your friends to flout the rules!”

Kallias screamed like some sort wild animal, snarling and kicking his legs as one of the guards yanked him back and held him in place a respectful distance away. Erasmus was pushed into Kallias’ place and he was shaking so badly he could not undo his chiton. One of the other boys had to help him and looked up apologetically as he took the garment away. He could not find the voice to beg for mercy for himself.
Erasmus had never been punished before and the thought of pain had him feeling like he was going to faint from fear. His skinny knees knocked together as he heard Kallias shout.

“Don’t you touch him!” Kallias hissed, spitting mad. “Leave Erasmus out of this! Let me go! Let me go!”

Erasmus screamed when he heard the whistle of the paddle through the air, but the pain was nothing like he had ever experienced before. The blow against his left buttock seemed to rattle through his bones and blossomed red hot pain not a moment after. His first scream died to a bubble in his throat as the second blow landed.

Snot and spit bubbled out of him as he sobbed; Teacher Adrastus gave him the time to catch his breath after the second strike.

Surely it could not get any worse.

The final three hits were on his legs and—due to the fact that they were so slim and bony—the pain was unspeakable. Erasmus shrieked in a way that sounded inhuman to his ears and nearly pissed in his loincloth before the final blow was dealt. When Teacher Adrastus passed the paddle back to the guards, Erasmus sank to the ground, his legs quivering from pain and fear. He would not be able to sit tomorrow for the bruises.

He could not see through his tears, but even so he would not want to look around to see the looks of pity on the other boy’s faces. It was so shameful.

Cool arms smelling of the sea wrapped around his torso and head, and Erasmus cried into Kallias’ bare shoulder. Comforting hands stroked his curls as Adrastus addressed them both.

“You will be in class tomorrow Kallias, or the same punishment will await you both.”

Erasmus whimpered at the thought and Kallias clutched him tighter. Kallias was shaking too and Erasmus looked up to see if he needed to comfort his friend as well. He did not.

Kallias was trembling with rage.

His beautiful face was twisted into a snarl of fury, not vestige of contrition, and his blue eyes glinted with something Erasmus had never seen before. In the safe confines of the gardens, Erasmus had never seen the look before but he knew of it and now he could see what hatred looked like.

Kallias looked as though he wanted to tear out Adrastus’ throat with his teeth, like he could kill the man in front of him and not feel an ounce of shame or guilt. Erasmus was afraid of his friend for the first time.

When Kallias refused to answer, Adrastus sighed, obviously thinking Kallias a lost cause, before walking away.

No one dared to help Erasmus and Kallias for fear of incurring Adrastus’ wrath, so it fell solely on Kallias’ shoulders to fetch their chitons, help Erasmus to his feet and walk the two of them back to their bed. A small kindness at least, some of the boys from their class had anticipated their absence at dinner and left a variety of fruits, bread, and cheese underneath their sheets. Kallias simply placed them off to the side so Erasmus could lie on his stomach and cry through his pain.

Gentle hands stroked his curls. “I’m sorry, Sussie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…I won’t skip class anymore, I promise. I’m so sorry. I’ll make sure he won’t hit you any more.”
Erasmus could not understand how Kallias could promise such a thing.

He refused to eat or speak, but when the tears dried up he did hold Kallias’ hand until he was able to fall asleep.

The next morning found Adrastus gone from the gardens and Kolnas refused to provide explanation, though he did give Kallias and Erasmus a day off from their lessons to rest and recover. Kallias spent most of the time worrying over Erasmus, though they did receive a healthy stream of visitors throughout the day.

Kallias simply glared at any who approached their bed and some of the boys were cowed that Kallias, who was normally so vivacious, was so cold.

Some of his friends from the older groups brought them medicine and snacks and idle gossip after some pleasantry were exchanged.

“Have you heard, Kallias?” One of them inquired lightly as he peeled the skin off of an apple with a small knife. His eyes sparkled with untold secrets, as if he were going to regale them regardless of whether or not they were interested in listening. “The guards were talking about it this morning and we overheard. Apparently Teacher Kolnas was not ill as he said but was searching Teacher Adrastus’ rooms during your…” He could not bear to say it with Erasmus and Kallias still in pain and another boy took over the storytelling.

“Apparently proof was found that…Teacher Adrastus was going to try and steal some of the omega boys away to sell to the markets of Patras. If you had not taken such a beating he would not have gone under inspection. Teacher Kolnas found the lists of the ones he was planning to take. Can you imagine?”

The older boys laughed nervously at the thought but Kallias remained unmoved. “Do you know of any of the names on that list?”

“This is a secret, ok?” The first boy hissed with every intent of telling them. “But, I heard…” He began to list off the names and Erasmus’ breath hitched every time he recognized a boy from his class. But the real terror came in moment. “And…I heard Erasmus was on the list too. It’s so lucky. So lucky he was found out.”

“The fates favor us.” Said Kallias, without emotion. “And the kyros will deal with him now.”

“I envy him not.” The older boys agreed thinking of the punishment he would receive in turn.

When they left the room, Kallias cuddled up against Erasmus’ back, hugging him gently to keep from touching any of his wounds. Erasmus was overcome with a feeling he couldn’t shake, mostly because he knew Kallias was clever and brave.

“Did you try to get punished on purpose, Kallias?” He sniffled, still aching.

“Rest, Sussie.” Kallias said.

It was easier for him to trust Kallias and rest than to lose sleep asking questions Kallias might not answer. He could trust Kallias. Kallias would take care of him. And so Erasmus did not press him for details.
III. Le prince et la promesse

Chapter Notes

A little late updating this afternoon but I'm late in general when it comes to these things. I have been updating faster than I write so...hopefully I can type faster before Monday! If so, I may have to stagger the chapters a little longer until I get more written.

In any case, this chapter is the last sort of childhood-groundbuilding chapters; next chapter I will spur the plot into motion I swear.

Poor Erasmus, he just wants to be safe and secure but...it's a little hard in this world. At least he has Kallias to reassure him. And Kallias is definitely into Erasmus haha! Also I made a semi-plausible explanation for the A/B/O universe in this world (mostly thanks to my never-ending love of mythology). What with demi-gods and monsters and gods with questionable morals, it makes sense to pin these 'alignments' on the heavy hands of the heavens.

As always thank you to all the beautiful readers who have come along for the ride! I have a hell of a plot coming up for you all ;) Enjoy!

III. Le prince et la promesse

Erasmus’ first broken heart came at fifteen, when King Theomedes died, Crown Prince Damianos ascended to the throne of Akielos and he made an alliance marriage.

Those events in and of themselves were of no issue, save for two reasons.

The first was that there was nearly a civil war in the face of Damianos’ ascension. His half-brother, an alpha named Kastor, decided to place his claim for the throne and commanded a handful of kyroi who supported his cause. An uprising was imminent and more guards had been posted around the gardens as word of skirmishes in the north spread to the inside of their walls. For the first few months of the year everyone was distinctly on edge. That was…until Damianos got married to the second alpha prince of Vere.

Laurent of Vere. Prince Laurent of Vere.

Only Kallias could say his name properly with his practiced Veretian accent, but even with the Akielon pronunciation of his name, it sounded beautiful and exotic, like fine music.

Prince Laurent of Vere had married Prince Damianos and killed Kastor in a duel, ending the rebellion. All of this within the first month of his marriage, the peace in Akielos like a honeymoon gift, a dowry for King Damianos. And herein lay the second problem.

Because everyone who came from Vere and Ios and anywhere Laurent had gone could do nothing but sing his praises. Was he a handsome man? A beauty unparalleled. A face that would fetch a fortune on the auction block. Hair like liquid white-gold, eyes cornflower blue, his skin the satiny smooth white of polished ivory. Was he an intelligent man? A king in his own right, they said. Wise beyond his eighteen years and quick as a whip; he could keep pace with the greatest thinkers and flay a man with his razor-sharp tongue. Was he strong? He could go blow for blow with Damianos in a sword fight so his skill was nothing to scoff at. He was the finest horseman in four
kingdoms and word was he was learning wrestling just to please his husband.

He had poise and polish, he had grace and class. He was all people could speak of and all of Akielos had gone absolutely mad for him.

Damianos was no exception.

Over the years since his growth into manhood, there had been stories of his virility and the careless ease with which he wooed the greatest beauties and strongest warriors on offer. One of the cruder merchants had said it was common gossip that ‘Damianos had the strength of a bull and a cock to match’, causing most of the boys listening to blush furiously.

He regularly sampled omega beauties from the gardens and it was no secret who Kolnas had pinned his hopes on to draw the prince’s eye.

Erasmus had shot up at fourteen, his legs becoming long and unwieldy, his chest and shoulders broadening and a lump growing in the center of his throat. But he did not look gangly or awkward. Rather, he was clean and fresh and innocent, the kind of boy who was sure to grow into a beauty of a man.

His hair was wildly curly but it was the loveliest shade of golden brown under sun and people couldn’t help but want to reach over and attempt to smooth the silky mass. His skin, kept smooth and pale from his regiment of cold baths, skin creams, and avoiding the sun, was luminous as a pearl. His eyes were wide and hazel, though they looked gold in the firelight, like big golden coins; and, though he didn’t realize it, that sweet innocent gaze with the golden irises could root people to the spot and turn their minds and mouths to marble as surely as a mythical snake-woman could.

He was one of Kolnas’ uncut diamonds, still young and unpolished, but sure to be a crowning jewel. He and the other teachers and—most importantly—the owner of the gardens had pinned their hopes on Erasmus to become a royal slave to King Damianos. Kolnas in particular groomed Erasmus to suit Damianos’ especial tastes and whispered words of a hopeful future and a handsome master into Erasmus’ innocent, obedient ear.

Erasmus felt their hope and faith in him, but all he wanted was safety for himself and Kallias. Damianos’ handsome face and even more handsome fortune were secondary to a kind nature.

But he dared to hope, even if civil war raged through the country, even if Damianos took a husband. Many people with a husband or wife still took slaves, so it was not unheard of. And besides King Damianos and Prince Laurent were both alphas and would need an omega to bear them royal children.

But no one had expected the sheer beauty and charm of Prince Laurent.

The second problem was King Damianos, who had once been a man of enormous sexual appetites, now limited himself to only one man. He was obsessed with his husband—an unwise man might say, in secret, that he had been bewitched.

In any case, Damianos was so enamored he made a royal announcement not long after, saying that he intended to bed no other, save his husband, for the rest of his days.

It was quite the scandal.

Above all other arguments, there was the underlying question of an heir. Prince Laurent, as valuable as he was as an ally, could not bear children. What were the people of Akielos to do with a king who had renounced slaves meant to bear his royal children?
Inside the slave gardens, there was some concern other kyroi and wealthy people would also abandon their plans to buy slaves but so far no one of much importance had followed the king’s initiative.

The ripples this decision caused to Erasmus’ fate were small but just as acutely felt.

Some of the other boys in the gardens were jealous of Erasmus’ good fortune and better looks, though due to his sweet nature and their awe of his constant companion, they could not hate him completely. But they did cause him pain.

Word came to the gardens that Damianos would not be purchasing any more slaves and the bitter boys heard this with the greatest vindication. Not one of them would be favored by the king.

He would not want Erasmus any longer.

Because Laurent of Vere was more beautiful and intelligent. He had no shameful heat and no collar around his neck. Damianos would not want Erasmus when he already had someone so perfect by his side.

They did not say it directly to his face, unable to say such poisonous things to those wide golden eyes, but they made sure he heard. They made sure Erasmus was cast down from his pedestal and that he knew his future was now uncertain.

All these thoughts and more had darted through Kallias’ mind as he looked for Erasmus that evening during dinner.

As a habit borrowed from their five years of close friendship, Erasmus also sought solace by the ocean and Kallias found him sitting on the cool sand, crying softly under the shade of an orange tree. Kallias sat next to him and Erasmus immediately set his feverish head on Kallias’ bare shoulder.

“You didn’t come to dinner.”

“I-I’m sorry,” Erasmus sniffed, rubbing his nose. “I…wasn’t hungry tonight.” He felt Kallias’ hand stroke the softest, puffiest curls at the base of his neck and almost balked, but then he remembered that this touching wasn’t one of the bad things.

“I thought you might have started your heat.” Kallias said, and his tone was both accusatory and filled with relief. Erasmus was fifteen, a bit of a late bloomer amongst boys who started their heats at thirteen, and everyone seemed to be on edge, waiting for him to succumb.

Erasmus gave a watery laugh and rubbed his eyes this time. “I would have run to you Kallias. You would have smelled the oranges.”

Kallias shifted closer, warm against Erasmus’ wind-chilled skin, “Why did you not come to dinner?”

A fresh wave of pain, choking like salt water, overcame Erasmus at the gentle inquiry and he forgot all sense of decorum. Kallias rubbed his back to soothe him and Erasmus pressed his face into Kallias’ chest to muffle his sobs. It took him some time to calm down but Kallias was patient.

“Erasmus…”

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Erasmus sniffed. “I-I didn’t mean to scare you but…I-I…” his words came out in a shameful whisper, “I had such…foolish hopes. A scruffy little thing like m-me doesn’t need to
be in the p-palace, but…” he felt a new rush of tears and tried to fight them, “D-Damianos sounded like a…a good man and…you would be safe there.”

“Silly thing!” Kallias did not laugh but he gasped much like he wanted to. “You are too good to me. And you are not scruffy. You’re beautiful and everyone here knows it.”

Erasmus did not know how to explain his fears properly but he tried his best.

What if the person who bought him was cruel, like the people in the cities? What if he gave birth to a baby—an omega baby, like he had been—and they forced him to give up the baby to the slave gardens? What if they abandoned him for not giving them an alpha child?

Because that was what had happened to his mother, the woman he’d never met before.

He realized during one of their lessons on children that his father, that terrifying man who shook his head when he heard the doctor say Erasmus’ alignment, had given him up in disgust.

Children born to slaves were hidden away until they were old enough to show their alignment. Alpha children were brought into the family with fanfare and raised as a legitimate child, with every attention lavished on them. Betas were a slight disappointment but could always be married off for an advantage. Omega children were sold almost immediately to hide the shame and bring income for the family—perhaps to buy a new slave capable of bearing an alpha.

He was the bastard child, hidden in the slums until he could be tested. A pity he was not born an alpha. He was afraid to be useless and unwanted, afraid that he could not do the one duty expected of him.

And what if the one who bought him would not allow Kallias to come?

His heart, Erasmus thought, would surely wither and die if he were lashed to someone who would not allow him to be with the only one who truly ever cared for him. Kallias glowed so brightly at this, that Erasmus’ tears actually stopped and he felt fine for the first time since he had heard the devastating news.

“I honestly don’t know why Kolnas thought I had the best chance. You are twice as beautiful. Three times as clever.”

Kallias scoffed. “Docteur says they say in Vere that Damianos is not satisfied with the riches in his coffers and wants ever more gold on his lovers’ heads.” Erasmus gasped, a small giggle escaping, at Kallias’ treacherous talk. Warm hands tilted Erasmus’ head up and Kallias wiped Erasmus’ cheeks dry. “You must stop saying that too.”

“What?”

“You are perfect, Sussie.” Kallias insisted.

Erasmus flushed.

In hopes of fighting the residual chill, the two of them walked hand-in-hand down the length of the beach to the rocky outcropping on the southern side. Erasmus was smiling by the time they reached the pockmarked black stones.

“It would have been something like a story, wouldn’t it? A boy who lived most of his life in the dirt of the city, becoming the king’s favored one. Perhaps…having a baby who would grow to be strong and healthy and safe.” He sighed and felt Kallias squeeze his hand. “A beautiful dream.”
“Damianos is not the only kind man in Akielos. I would see you with none who frighten you.”

Erasmus looked at his friend’s lovely profile.

Kallias’ voice had dropped into the depths of manhood and his learned Veretian accent could comfort Erasmus like nothing else, save the sea.

“Everyone frightens me, except for you.” Erasmus admitted. “I would even be afraid of Damianos. A king with so much power? And they say he is eight feet tall!” Kallias laughed.

“No man is eight feet tall. Those are all stories to scare his enemies.”

“He should take care not to scare his allies as well.” Erasmus replied. “I would be too afraid to look up at him. Perhaps it is a blessing. Such a man…his children might kill me.”

A flash of deepest blue and Kallias was looking at him with something very much like fear. “Don’t say that! Don’t even think it! I cannot…” It took him a moment to collect his thoughts. “I think a lot about you being—having babies and it makes me nervous. Your hips are so…thin.”

They had talked in class about how male omegas had to be especially careful when pregnant because their bodies were even more susceptible to complications. Even in Vere, where the doctors were the best in the Four Kingdoms, there was still a very good chance that one baby could destroy the reproductive system entirely or end in death.

“Forgive me. I did not mean to cause pain.”

“Then I must take care to dry your tears,” Kallias broke a smile, “your sorrow brings me pain.”

“Only you can make me smile.” Erasmus insisted and squeezed his friend’s hand.

Together they climbed onto one of the flat-topped rocks, smoothed by sand and salt to look at the emerging stars. Erasmus went up first, Kallias lightly supporting his legs and bottom, and Erasmus returned the favor by pulling Kallias up. They were both giggling at the illicit nature of their expedition; Teacher Kolnas would have kittens if he saw them doing something so dangerous.

“What do you think of it?” Kallias asked, stretching out so his legs dangled off the edge of the rock. “Having a baby, I mean.”

Erasmus and Kallias both looked down at his flat, lean belly.

Once the first boy in their class had gone into heat, they began to have their first lessons on sexuality and pregnancy.

The lessons had devolved into what would be expected of them by their masters, another long list of ‘bad things’, and of course the stern warnings to the omegas to avoid alphas during their heat and never remove their golden collars. Betas were of a lesser concern; usually they could resist the scent and could not impregnate an omega unless there was a very strong bond in place.

Erasmus found these topics uncomfortable to speak of and blushed furiously whenever the topic of First Nights and biting and babies arose.

The only part he liked about these classes was the story about how alphas, betas, and omegas came to be. Often, in the darkness of their quarters, Erasmus and Kallias ducked under their sheets so that Kallias could tell the story again in his deep, gentle voice.
“I think…I might like it. Especially if my master is good.”

Erasmus put both hands on the pit of his stomach and tried to imagine it round and hard as the shell of a melon. Though he had not seen a baby in many years, he did like to care for the younger boys and they liked him for his patient, gentle nature. He felt it might come naturally to cradle a tiny bundle and sing to it and rock it to sleep.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Kallias placed his hands over top of Erasmus’. Kallias smiled at him.

“I think you will be a good father. And your master will be good to you. If he frightens you, I will make him regret it.”

He always spoke so boldly, with such confidence, even though he was as slender and gangly as Erasmus was. Still, Kallias said these things with steel on his tongue, the truth of the gods.

“How would you do that? We are just slaves, we have honor by being submissive to our masters.”

“I don’t care about that.” Kallias murmured, looking out toward the sea. “I have decided and the gods will not move me. Wherever you go, I intend to go with you and if anyone attempts to stop me or if your master mistreats you, I will take you far, far away from there.”

Erasmus giggled nervously.

He did not like the idea of swearing such an oath by the gods above, but he could sooner stop the tide from coming to shore than to stop Kallias’ mouth. Instead, he rested his head on the smooth bump of Kallias’ shoulder.

“You are too good to me Kallias.”

“Only as good as you deserve, Sussie.”

Erasmus was overcome with his drastic change in emotions. Going from fearful and disappointed and sobbing to a feeling like a bubble of love and elation in his chest, he was in no control of himself. His mouth had gone as renegade as Kallias’.

“If the man who wants to buy me is a s-scoundrel…I will just marry you instead.”

He meant it to soothe Kallias but he did not expect Kallias’ reaction to his offer. He turned his head like the snap of a whip and his normally slim eyes were unnaturally wide. When he next spoke, Erasmus was almost sure the Veretian accent would be lost and his darling childhood lisp would have returned.

“Really Sussie? Do you mean it?”

It only took Erasmus a moment to decide.

“Yes, of course I mean it. Even if my heat will give you a headache…”

“It won’t! You smell very pleasant Sussie.” Kallias insisted, shaking his head so hard his black hair whipped his cheeks. “D-do you swear?”

Kallias was his best friend. He was beautiful and brave as a young god and he was the smartest boy in the gardens. Erasmus would trust Kallias with his very life, even though he was a beta. In fact he could not imagine a future without his dear companion.
Living with the king was not a beautiful dream, he realized, it was the knowledge that Damianos could afford to bring Kallias with him.

Suddenly Erasmus felt as though he was standing on a precipice or like he was about to fall off the rock he was sitting on. His skin prickled; the world was about to tilt based on his answer to Kallias. Something tugged at him; he couldn’t think of the feeling that nagged at him.

Erasmus swallowed and responded. “Yes, I swear. I think…I would like to be married to you Kallias, my dearest friend.”

He was happy he had chosen this answer because Kallias practically glowed with joy. He had both of Erasmus’ hands in his own now and got to his knees next to Erasmus.

“Sussie…we promised. Now we have to seal it like they do in the stories.”

Warriors sealed solemn promises by bonding in blood: taking a long silver knife and drawing their own blood. They then mingled it together with their friends, but Erasmus had no knife and no intention to do something so extreme. People swearing an oath to the gods sacrificed an animal and burned it on an altar, but Erasmus would not be able to stomach that either.

A promise of marriage was sealed by…bad things.

He trusted Kallias with his life. Erasmus trusted him not to do anything painful or scary but…he still closed his eyes.

There was a soft press on the skin of his forehead and Erasmus opened one eye.

Kallias was close, very close. With his eyes now open, Erasmus could see that the small jut of Kallias’ Adam’s apple was directly at eye level. One hand was on Erasmus’ shoulder, the other tangled in the golden-brown curls at the base of his neck. The silky touch on his forehead, he realized, were Kallias’ lips.

A kiss.

Erasmus felt his breath freeze; kisses were bad things.

“Kallias!” He gasped, thinking of the horrible punishment that would await them if they were caught. Kallias pulled back. His cheeks were flushed and Erasmus thought he had never looked more beautiful. “We cannot. I-It’s bad.”

Kallias shook his head. “Only on the lips is bad.”

Erasmus thought and…yes, the only places Teacher Kolnas had shown them kissing was on the lips and the…the…Well, Erasmus balked at the idea of kissing there, but he supposed he would get used to the idea in time. In any case, a forehead kiss was none so bad then. And he trusted Kallias with his life.

Kallias did not close his eyes but looked at Erasmus with serious expectation.

Erasmus was suddenly nervous. His lips tingled and his mouth was dry. He had never kissed anyone before but a bad part of him wanted to kiss Kallias. This was bad of him, very bad.

But he did not stop and leaned forward so that his entire face was pressed to Kallias’ forehead. And he wanted to cry as he kissed Kallias’ forehead, cry because he never wanted to be away from his friend and he didn’t know if he could keep this promise. Kallias’ silky black hair tickled his nose.
and it smelled like sea salt.

When Erasmus pulled back—a little too quickly—Kallias delicately touched the spot where Erasmus’ lips had been, as if the touch had been branded onto him. Erasmus panicked at the thought.

*What if Kolnas and the other teachers could tell that Kallias had kissed him on the forehead? What if there was a brand, like two pink flower petals, or an indentation in the perfect shape of Kallias’ bow-shaped lips on the white skin of his forehead?*

He touched the spot on his own forehead and felt nothing alarming. It was as warm and smooth as usual.

Kallias was smiling. He looked perfect like this.

He was made of night colors: inky black, midnight blue, moon white. Only his lips were pink. Kallias calmed him down; he smiled as his fear dissipated.

“We swore. And we sealed our oath. So if you do not like the man who buys us, I will take you away and we can get married. We can go live by the sea and you won’t have to wear your gold collar or put white cream on your skin.” *A child’s promise. A beautiful dream.*

Erasmus laughed. “How would we eat? Where would we get money?” He knew of life on the streets, even after so long. He knew the world would not turn for them unless they had gold in their pockets.

Kallias shrugged. “We can go to Vere and I can be a docteur. They are the best in Vere. And you can grow the herbs.”

“It’s *cold* in Vere.”

Thin arms wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him close. “I will make sure you are warm. Warm and happy.” Erasmus gave up. Kallias had an answer for everything, he was clever like that, so Erasmus could only nod. “Are you still sad about Damianos, Sussie?”

“It wasn’t sadness I felt. I was scared.” He admitted. “I want to be safe. I want to be certain of my future.” Damianos had ripped that certainty away in the face of Veretian beauty. If Erasmus had been inclined to bitterness, he might have thought it was unfair.

Kallias squeezed him. “Be certain: no matter your future, I will be there.” He sounded so assured. He was beautiful, three times as clever, and they had sworn an oath.

“I believe you.”

*Once, when the earth was empty and only winds ran through the grasses, the gods made people from water and clay. They put fire in their hearts and air in their souls and the people were beautiful. So, so, beautiful.*

*The king and queen of the gods took some of the beautiful people as lovers and the children from this union blazed bright.*

*They were strong and brave, intelligent and charismatic; so much so that the normal people were helpless in the face of them. Those Alphas, those children of heavenly royalty, would elevate*
themselves above all others.

The other gods revolted.

There was no balance, it was said, no hope for the seas of Beta people, who now looked plain and weak in comparison. They would be ruled, slaves to the whims of these powerful Alphas. There needed to be something else. A weakness.

It was the love goddess who solved the problem.

She made new creations, even more rare and special than the Alphas. Beauty and love and lust, each anointed with a goddess’ perfume on the nape of their necks. They could drive Alphas wild but the scent was too much for Betas.

The balance was struck.

Alphas, blood of kings and queens, had their natural power and charisma over the Betas and their seed could impregnate any; Betas were drawn to Alpha magnetism, but they could resist the pull of the last ones. The Omegas, the ones with the beautiful scent, could bring Alphas to their knees, could drive them wild with the sexual heat that came from their cores. All of them could be impregnated, male and female, and it could be done by anyone. It was easiest with Alphas, harder with Betas, almost impossible with other Omegas.

The balance was regained with a set of three.

Erasmus smelled a mix of orange peel and orange blossom. Light, tangy, and sweet, he smelled eternally of summer; something that floated on air, caught in glimpses, but then everyone wanted to breathe in deeper.

There was no question that he was an omega and that there were rules to his kind.

Of course he smelled sweet, of course he wore a collar to protect his tender, scented neck from sharp teeth. Of course he would someday bear children who had a coin-flip of a chance: burning bright with the blood of kings and queens or be born to scented sweet slavery. The thought made him ill.

Of course he would have his heat.

Erasmus had seen the heat. The moment he and the other boys had turned thirteen their legs had become long and hair had begun to grow in new places. Voices dropped to low cadences, spots broke out on some unfortunate souls, and Kallias said their scents had gotten stronger.

He wrinkled his nose as they lay in bed together.

It smelled too strongly of cinnamon and vanilla, of lilac and roses. The other few betas claimed similar headaches and slept closer to the open windows to get some fresh air, but Kallias simply buried his face closer to Erasmus’ nape. Oranges did not give him headaches, he said.

Erasmus saw the boys flush and collapse to the floor, the smell of sex thick in the air. That feeling came back to him—that snake that twisted in his stomach—when he smelled and saw and ran away. He was afraid of losing himself like that.

But fourteen and fifteen passed. Sixteen came and went. At seventeen a doctor was called and insisted after an inspection that Erasmus was indeed an omega. He was just a late bloomer. Kallias insisted he was perfect and at least he did not have to figure out how to sneak into the heat house.
Erasmus turned eighteen and the future loomed in front of him like a giant orange-scented wave. The snake that wriggled inside him was going to swallow him whole.

He was an adult and he had never once had his heat.
IV. Un beau parleur

Chapter Summary

Ok so, this may be my last update until the 25th or the 26th because of all the holiday craziness! So enjoy this update as it will be the only one for 7-8 days ;)

Dinner party! The exposition is over, Erasmus and Kallias have grown into young men and now it's time for them to impress people who might want them in the future. I also know when exactly Laurent will arrive on scene but...if you want spoilers you'll have to ask on tumblr haha! It's subtle at times but some of you might notice Kallias slipping a bit in keeping his emotions even. And I love that they are both called 'kits'; Sussie is def a baby bunny while Kallias is a fox haha!

Once again thank you to everyone who has read/commented ;)

VI. Un beau parleur

Teacher Kolnas was a whirlwind of energy as he directed the steady stream of merchants, servants, and his curious students around the gardens in preparation. At first it was unclear what exactly merited such a frenzy of activity but eventually Kallias was able to overhear what exactly was happening. He always had a way of discovering such things; he loitered at the edges of conversations with a dazed, dreamy look in his eyes as he listened intently. He was the cuckoo in the shrike’s nest, which not many of guards and servants realized.

That evening the eldest boys all sat cross-legged on their beds, staring at Kallias with wide eyes, waiting for his hallowed pronouncement.

Kallias’ expression was grave but there was a telltale sparkle in his blue eyes.

“There is word that a wealthy contingent of nobles is coming to visit the gardens within the week.” He said, smiling at the astonished gasps that followed after this pronouncement. “They wish to be entertained by the eldest and most accomplished of us and may seek to buy some slaves for their own households.”

The excitement of the boys could not be contained at this and several squealed as they turned to their friends and began plotting for the event, their very first event after graduating from their training silks.

“We must get you some plumeria; it will compliment your scent so nicely!” “I hope that there is at least one young man amongst them. I would so hope for someone close in age…” “There is a fine silk in a violet wash I would borrow.” “Do you think all of us will be shown or only the most accomplished?” “If my heat comes on that evening, I swear I will sob for an eternity!”

Erasmus tempered his joy. He did not offer opinion or his particular course of action to flaunt himself, but just allowed his excitement to radiate from within. He could feel the blush on his cheeks as Kallias looked at him.

“What do you think, Sussie?” He asked with practiced innocence.

Erasmus knew better. There was an element of calculation and cunning to everything Kallias did.
He would not indulge Kallias’ curiosity so easily and smiled to himself.

“If I am to go, I only hope the gentlest among them looks on me with favor.”

It was a response he knew his teachers would praise him for, even if Kallias did roll his eyes. Only under the cover of night would he tell Kallias his true thoughts on the matter.

As Erasmus looked over the sea of excited young boys he felt a twinge of apprehension. They had not been allowed to parties in the past but he had a general idea of what would be expected of them. However…he wondered if any of the other boys realized that they might never see one another again after the showing.

They would all go to different households across Akielos—or perhaps a rare purchase from Patras or Vere—and maybe an encounter between two or three would be had at a banquet but never again would they all be together.

That gave him a little pain.

Though he was still hopeless when it came to talking at length, he was fond of nearly everyone in the gardens. He would miss the familiar comfort they gave him.

And then there was always the constant fear of being separated from Kallias.

He did not voice any of his concerns. It was improper for a slave to burden his master with their complaints and Erasmus was too reluctant to tell his teachers so he practiced keeping his fears locked deep in his heart, far from his smile. A firm massage that night helped assuage him.

Kallias watched him from the cold-water baths with unwavering intensity, sensing that something was slightly wrong but was unable to see any outward sign. It was the only way Erasmus teased him.

Erasmus moaned as the skillful beta masseuse unlocked one of his muscles and he immediately felt lighter. Kallias twitched in the water but his gaze never turned away.

“You’re more sensitive today, Sussie. Are you nervous?”

“I could ask you the same.” Erasmus responded, lightly rolling his shoulders. “Your lips will turn blue if you stay in that bath much longer.” Erasmus easily slid off the table and walked to the warm bath across from Kallias. His tenderized muscles seemed to liquefy in the heat.

“I prefer the cold water. It…calms me down.”

That was true.

Ever since they had grown the bodies of young men, Kallias regularly bathed in the cold water. He would dip in the warm water once before Erasmus undressed and then again after Erasmus was dressed again. Sometimes he even would run from their shared bed to the beaches in the dead of night to submerge himself in the cold seawater. Erasmus supposed it was part of the unique beauty regimen every boy had to enhance his best features.

“You should have her rub the base of your neck.”

Kallias scoffed. “It is not my neck that troubles me. And I would have no hands on me but those of my dearest friend. And my future master.” Erasmus shrugged at his stubbornness.
Instead, Erasmus stretched out his hand so Kallias could take it. Anyone wishing to pass would have to jump over them. “If the gods seek to vex me, my heat will come at the most inopportune moment.”

“As you are serving wine.” Kallias giggled though he did not usually see humor in the issue of heat cycles. “How very charming to spill wine on a guest.”

Erasmus grinned wide. “You must talk him out of anger with your clever tongue.”

“I will bear the brunt of their anger.” He promised.

“No!” Erasmus squeezed his hand recalling the sting of their dual punishment. He would not have that horror repeated on Kallias due to his carelessness. “You must make them smile. As you make me smile.”

“In any case, if tension runs hot I will be sure to see you through the night unscathed.”

They smiled, were filled with good humor in the baths but it wasn’t until the cover of night that the anxiety crept in. And though the older boys were give beds of their own to accommodate their larger bodies and avoid any temptation of ‘bad things’, Kallias slipped under Erasmus sheets to whisper their secret conversations.

And, like many times before, Kallias promised to the moon and stars that the same master would purchase them, that it was not in their fate to be separated.

“The gods could not have made you so good,” Kallias murmured, “to have you suffer such a thing. You must believe that.”

“I believe you.” Erasmus replied without hesitation. “I am just...nervous.”

They held hands, sleeping side by side until before the break of dawn. Kallias seemed sensitive to the change of light and slipped away to his own bed before anyone could discover them in that position. As usual, Erasmus rolled into the warm spot he had left, feeling only a twinge of guilt as Kallias would be forced to burrow into a cold bed.

The evening of their guest’s visitation arrived after what many in his class complained was the longest week in existence. Some boys deemed too unskilled as of yet were caught crying into their pillows when told that they would have to wait until the next showing to showcase themselves and to practice in the meantime. The frenzy of excitement and preparation leading up until that evening could hardly be described and that evening some of the younger boys were called into the baths to help prepare the fourteen elder ones to dress for their party.

Erasmus was sitting completely motionless on the stool closest to Kallias as his curls were combed to a burnished sheen and a spicy cedar wood scent was rubbed on to his throat and wrists to enhance his natural orange scent. Kallias was holding still for once as the pots of body paint were brought out and placed before him. He looked at the colors offered with a cunning eye.

“Outline my eyes in black and silver and bring me the red. I’ll handle my own lips. Do the same for Erasmus.” He ordered to the boy combing Erasmus’ hair. “But put gold on his eyelids and pink on his lips. That will suit his coloring better.”

“Anything else?” The young boy attending him seemed astonished at the simplicity of his orders.
Recently the new popular thing for slaves in Ios—teacher Kolnas had told them—was body paint in fanciful colors that snaked from the wrist cuffs across the collarbones beneath their golden collars. Many of the boys in their class already had golden curls and red snakes and violet flowers climbing up their lean forearms but Kallias ignored that entirely.

“No. Make it simple and sweet.”

Erasmus did not argue with Kallias’ suggestion and dutifully closed his eyes so that he could be made up with the paints. After their short painting, Erasmus took a moment to let his body dry before donning the plain white silk slip every one of the boys would be wearing that evening.

Hung from a delicate golden chain around his neck, it fell to the knee to maintain modesty, but cut low in the back so that his lean shoulders and the graceful curve of his lower back were on display. The younger boy looked at him in awe and Erasmus felt…light.

He walked to one of the long mirrors near the steam room and gasped when he saw his appearance.

Gone was the dirty, skinny street urchin he always conjured when he thought of himself; same for the lanky, windswept youth unsure of his own skin that so often appeared in reflections. The young man in the mirror was a vision in gold and white, eyes large and lovely from the kohl outlining them. He looked perfect, the way Kallias always said, and for a brief moment he could not tear his eyes away from the beautiful stranger in the mirror.

Quite suddenly, someone collided with him, arms wrapping around his waist.

He almost did not recognize who was holding him either.

Kallias looked like a young moon god with the silver above his eyes and the way his long black hair shimmered. But his cheeky grin was the same.

“Look at you Sussie! You would make women weep! Many men would die for you! Even more would kill for you! And every single one would pay their weight in gold to have your love.” He laughed at his own dramatics as he draped himself as if fainting.

Erasmus laughed and blushed. “And you?”

“I am too happy to weep, too young to die. And I don’t think I could ever kill someone.” He winked at Erasmus, standing up straight. “I hardly need to give up my cuffs to have you love me best. So I smile.”

“You are lovely as a godling.” Erasmus insisted, gripping Kallias hands.

“Lovely as we go to meet our fate.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds so morbid.”

“Never.” Kallias promised, grinning and tugging on the end of one of Erasmus’ cuffs so it bounced. “Any man would be a fool not to buy you tonight. It is the beginning of the rest of our lives! Be happy; for I shall always remember you as you are on this night.”

“A beautiful dream.” Erasmus replied and Kallias nodded vigorously.

He must have been nervous though, his dry hands as cold as the bath he had lounged in earlier, his lovely slim eyes close to watering because he seemed unwilling to blink. The boys clustered in the slave’s corridor between their dressing rooms and the baths as they waited for their summons.
Every small noise had the boys on-edge and giggling with hysteria as they listened for unfamiliar voices and checked their appearance a thousand times in one of the simple looking glasses affixed to the wall.

Erasmus and Kallias remained silent and tense, only soothing one another by rubbing their fingers over each other’s hands.

When Teacher Kolnas came in to fetch them, Erasmus and Kallias were the only ones who did not jump.

Kolnas had taken great care with his appearance that evening, his dark brown curls tumbling around his shoulders, and even though he was nearly twenty years older than his students, Erasmus could not help but be impressed by his charm and distinguished vestiges of beauty. He looked across the audience of wide eyes and painted faces and laughed for joy at the efficiency of his pupils.

“Little kits!” He called upon his old nickname for them—Erasmus had been told it was the name for a shivering group of baby bunnies as well as the more mischievous baby foxes; of course Kolnas referred to them as sweet and pliant bunnies. Only Kallias was wild and wicked enough to be called a fox. “For some of you tonight will be the beginning of the rest of your lives. All of you are lovely and skilled as any prince could want. Any one of our guests would be honored to have you as a member of their household. So quiet your nerves, kits, remember our lessons and above all, smile. Smile!”

His tone was so familiar and infectious that Erasmus felt a soft smile snap to his lips immediately. Kallias’ came slower, reluctantly, the bow of his lips almost a grimace in that unfamiliar shade of red he had painted on top. Erasmus squeezed Kallias’ hand and Kallias replied.

“I am so very proud.” Kolnas sniffed looking out over his prized rabbits as he was set to corral them into greener pastures. “Now follow me.”

Out they went into dark, sea-scented summer air and Erasmus felt his anticipation soak into the familiar surroundings. The darkness was heavy and laden with unfamiliar perfume and the torchlight cast them all in an exotic orange-red glow. There was the foreign sound of men speaking with confidence and laughing loudly, two sounds every slave had taken care to erase from his repertoire, and the smell of rich foods and richer wines somehow turning the stomach to crippling hunger and overwhelming nausea. Erasmus did not want to let go of his one familiar comfort but he knew that he and Kallias could not hold hands the entire evening. It was with no small amount of sadness that he let go and allowed his empty palm to fall against his thigh.

Kallias looked down at his own hand and squeezed his fingers into a fist, once, twice.

When they reached the entrance to entertainment hall, Kallias moved quickly to the front of their pack so that he could talk to Teacher Kolnas. His expression was relaxed but there was an element of flint to his eyes that made Erasmus think he would not be taking ‘no’ for an answer.

And surely enough, as Erasmus reached the two of them Kallias had affected a pleasing yet steely tone. “Remember your promise, teacher.”

Kolnas groaned, as Kallias was the only student who could cause him headaches. “I remember Kallias. And I will do my best to see it done. Now get back into place with Erasmus.” Kallias obeyed.

Erasmus wanted to ask him about the unusual exchange but did not get the chance as Kolnas led
the way into the entertainment hall and the boys followed him wordlessly.

The moment they stepped out of the heavy darkness and into the golden, well-lit interior, Erasmus sensed the change that washed over them as surely as the light did. They stood up straight the moment the light touched their painted skin, their eyes dipped to the floor as if transfixed, and Erasmus knew each and every boy in his class popped up onto the balls of their feet so that they could glide noiselessly over the mosaic floors.

There was a murmur of approval as they formed a practiced line. Kallias’ hand brushed across his hip for the briefest moment. Relax.

The feeling of being around alphas was overwhelming. They were introduced as kyroi (or future ones) and ambassadors, the wealthiest merchants and most successful generals, but their confidence and scent more than gave them away as people born to lead. If he had less control over himself, Erasmus’ knees would have knocked together as he was washed over by his favorite scents: the smell of clean sheets, honey-sweet baklava sticking to his fingers, the scent of sunshine and sea salt on bare skin…and under it all a current of something hot and red and primal. There was the scent of bad things under what he loved and he knew he was helpless to it.

He wondered if Kallias could smell it…

Kolnas made the introductions to their esteemed guests, extolling Erasmus’ class as his ‘most promising’, their training ‘befitting royalty’ and looks ‘unparalleled throughout Akielos’. Erasmus blushed at the praise.

Years of training drilled into him day in and day out had Erasmus moving instinctively as Kolnas proclaimed the start of dinner. It seemed perfectly natural to move slowly—hips must rock in a way that was both innocent and sensual—to the heavy-laden table and keep his head and shoulders down submissively as he seated himself gracefully on his own heels. Kallias, he knew, was seated right behind him as their feet touched.

There was a hum of approval and Erasmus felt large fingers cupping his chin, tilting his head up to meet warm brown eyes.

“By the gods,” Came the astonished voice in front of him, “this beauty has golden eyes!” Erasmus dropped his head, overcome by the obvious amazement in the man’s voice, but he had already been singled out as ‘special’. “What is your name, lovely one?”

Timidity overwhelming, Erasmus felt the simple sound of his name freeze to a lump in his throat.

Kallias saved him. His voice, his greatest weapon save his eyes, had the sweet, light sound of bells and could take an entire room captive. “His name is Erasmus, my lord. He was trained for kings.”

“And he cannot speak for himself?” Another voice inquired laughingly.

Erasmus found words, and the right ones, as he bowed a little lower. “I-I…I am shy.”

That gave him another appreciative murmur and Erasmus had officially cemented his persona among these wealthy and powerful people as the shy golden-eyed beauty. Everything was rushing around him, it was almost too much for him to remember his training, much less even commit to memory the man next to him or listen to the rapid-fire conversation over dinner.

Dinner was served with much fanfare from Kolnas and their guests, but Erasmus could not even discern what was on the menu that evening. At least the man next to him was unerringly gentle, quietly praising Erasmus to the stars for his every move and tilting up his face on occasion to offer
him a tender morsel of food or a sip of water. No alcohol was served at these parties, lest the alphas lose their control.

After dinner, the rest of the time was taken up by the wealthy guests ‘acquainting’ themselves with the boys who had not been seated beside them. Despite the absence of the shameful auction block, Erasmus still felt painfully on display as a steady stream of powerful men and two or three alpha women claimed his company during the evening. They were all alphas; he could feel their energy and power pulling him in and causing his heart to thunder every time they touched him. He defended himself the only way he knew how: he smiled and made himself pliant when unfamiliar eyes drank him in, he bowed his head and blushed when anyone asked him a question.

He knew he was green, unsure of how to seduce, but he hoped their esteemed guests found him sweet in nature and pleasing in form.

His attention—and the attention of many others—was only drawn away by the radiant form of Kallias.

Kallias was bold, something almost unheard of for slaves, but it set him apart from the others and he did so with such an unassuming, sweet demeanor that he endeared himself to most of their guests. Without lifting his head, keeping his eyes closed demurely, he turned a phrase that caused the group around him to burst into laughter.

Quite naturally, Kallias moved himself ever closer to Erasmus until the two were hip-to-hip and surrounded by a rapt group.

“Ah the golden one, Erasmus, you said your name was?” One man asked.

“Yes, my lord.”

“You are fetching for one so plainly decorated.” One of the younger guests said and Erasmus could not decide if the statement was a compliment or a jab. Kallias smiled beatifically.

“We are to be the sun and moon my lord.” Kallias murmured. “A matching pair, so to speak.” Compliments abound at that response and Erasmus blushed at all the attention.

“Ah yes, if Erasmus were to get more sunlight, he would have the most attractive dark shade to his skin. A pretty, little sunbeam.” There was a brush of fingers across his cheek and through his curls and Erasmus shivered at the unfamiliar touch. Kallias’ smiled at the comparison but Erasmus saw his white hands clenched with nervousness. It was a delicate line to say sweet things but to appear innocent at the same time.

“One to caress your skin in the day and one for the night.”

“Both at sunrise and set.”

There was another round of laughter at this statement and there was an edge to it that made Erasmus drop his head in embarrassment. He felt one comforting finger brush against his knuckles.

“How could such beauties not already be claimed?”

This was beyond even Kallias’ boldness to divulge as no official contract had been made. But Teacher Kolnas had overheard and was more than willing to praise his students. “Our slaves are trained in the classical style, befitting royalty—from back in Ios when there were still slave gardens in the palace. King Damianos and his family regularly bought some of our finest boys.”
There was a murmur of allure over the possibility of owning something meant for royalty. It did not take their companions long to realize whom Erasmus had been meant for.

“The both of you are reminiscent of the lovelies from Vere…”

“A thousand times sweeter though.” The young man added conspiratorially and there was a flurry of illicit laughter.

Erasmus secretly burned with curiosity now that he knew many of these men had met his king and—in all probability—Prince Laurent, the man of unique beauty whom Erasmus had developed an interest in; was Laurent of Vere not sweet? But he was too well trained to pose his questions and they died in his throat.

Kallias responded back in his flawless-sounding Veretian and the men around burst into amazed laughter. The younger man must have not understood Veretian because his tone was that of a man who was uneven ground with someone he considered beneath him. If he had been so bold as to speak, Erasmus would have begged Kallias to hold his tongue.

“I suppose a even a royal beta slave must have some superfluous skills to set himself apart.”

Erasmus saw the flash of steel in Kallias’ eyes but his smile was sweet in supplication as he bore the backhanded compliment. “I live to serve and bring honor to my master.”

“Surely you are a testament to these gardens. A beauty any would be pleased to have in their home.” Another man said to Kallias, curling a lock of his glossy black hair behind his ear. Kallias blushed prettily and Erasmus brushed his finger across Kallias’ knuckles without looking down.

The subject was changed and the ‘party’ continued.

As the evening wore on, Erasmus began to relax a little and even enjoy some of the attention that was lavished on him. Some men were a little unpleasant, very cool and businesslike about the whole ordeal, as they raked their eyes over his blushing face and exposed body; he half-expected some of them to turn his head or lift his skirt like the buyers did in the city markets. He tried to understand them and imagined that they saw him as the future bearer of their children. His left hand was stroked with greater and greater frequency.

The alpha women were delightful.

They lavished praise on him until his cheeks were the color of the rich crimson hangings. They were the only ones who spoke to the boys with any candor.

They spoke of their homes near the borders of Vask and how the women there preferred surrounding themselves with more women and gentle-natured men, avoiding ‘swaggering alpha males’ who could not appreciate fine things without violence. Kallias looked at them with a sort of awe as they put a long braid in his hair and applauded lightly as Erasmus and Kallias showcased their twin supplication with arms spread out wide.

Those boys with musical inclination were called to the front to give performances and Erasmus made sure the skirt of his gauzy chiton was modestly covering his knees before placing his lyre on his legs. Kallias was not musically inclined, save to hum under his breath while Erasmus sang.

Though Erasmus was no great singer, Kallias insisted his tone was honeyed and smooth. And as he sang the song he had chosen—an old song of a beautiful boy beloved of the gods—he saw Kallias smiling, head bowed, as he mouthed the words along with Erasmus.
He felt the eyes on him, the applause tickled his spine as he removed himself from the center of attention and moved back to Kallias’ side. A cool finger brushed the pulse line on his wrist and there was the wink of a smile from his painted mouth.

Erasmus wiped that paint off later in the night after all their guests had left to decide if they would make any offers.

Alone in the baths, he filled a ceramic bowl with warm water and a few drops of tea tree oil, and dipped a cotton towel into it. Gently, he patted the towel across Kallias’ lips, leaving a bright red scar across the cloth; when he dabbed Kallias’ eyes, black and silver ran down his cheeks like sparkling tears.

He smiled at Erasmus when he opened his eyes and Erasmus laughed.

“Oh, Kallias, you look like weeping nymph.”

“I weep for joy now that we do not have to keep our heads down.” Kallias responded as Erasmus wiped any residual paint under his eyes or on his cheeks. “Give me the towel, Sussie, and I will clean you off as well.”

Erasmus sat still as Kallias dabbed his paint away and then wiped his face dry.

“There. Much better.”

Erasmus felt as though he was glowing from the inside out. He wondered if it was the after-effects of being surrounded by the powerful aura of those alphas that continued to make him so weak-kneed. In any case, he leaned forward, resting his forehead on Kallias’ shoulder.

He was trying to decide what they should talk about first.

“Do you think we will be chosen?”

“They are all fools if they do not choose us.” Kallias said with his smooth confidence. But his brow was furrowed slightly and his mouth was downturned. Erasmus felt a jolt of fear.

“Kallias.” Erasmus put his hands on either of Kallias’ cheeks and his friend leaned into them. “Don’t worry. That is for me to do.” Kallias moved his head so his mouth was pressed against Erasmus’ wrist and Erasmus thought back to what might have affected his dearest friend. “Did that man’s remark about your Veretian offend you?”

Kallias looked up and his dark eyes were a little watery. He did look lovelier without all the paint on his eyelids. He shook his head but still looked pained.

“He does not deserve you Kallias,” Erasmus insisted, unable to think of another reason for Kallias’ melancholy. “You are brilliant and you will not make them lose their minds. If they did not see it then…they are…f-fools!” He gasped out the word and clapped his hand over his mouth in shock. Never once had he taken Kallias’ initiative and insulted someone openly. It wasn’t seemly.

But it had another effect on Kallias.

His eyes opened wide as if Erasmus had slapped his face and then he burst into helpless laughter. Erasmus laughed with him and the two clutched each other as they dissolved into hysterics over Erasmus’ lapse of control. Kallias was in tears when he finally controlled himself.

“Oh, Sussie! Teacher Kolnas will say you are incorrigible! Being with me has tarnished your sweet
mind."

“Never,” Erasmus insisted.

Kallias hugged him tight, the sun and moon pressed tight so that nothing could tear them apart. His voice was quiet but the acoustics of the bathroom made it easier for Erasmus to hear his whisper. “It is you they do not deserve…”

Their clothes and the paint-stained cloth were tossed in the laundry pile, the bowl and oil put away on their shelves as Kallias and Erasmus left to sleep for the night. Erasmus was not sure he would be able to sleep for his residual excitement and nervousness. Tomorrow his destiny could be decided.

But he did fall asleep, with the help of Kallias humming the song Erasmus had played that night. It only occurred to him after he woke to find Kallias still awake on the left side of his bed that his dear friend did not find the comfort of sleep that night. His unspoken sorrow had not been assuaged, even as the sun rose and welcomed them into the rest of their lives.
Chapter Notes

Hello all! It's been a while hasn't it? And I apologize. I just needed a break from writing and the fandom in general since I've been heavily involved for over a year now! Hopefully now that I have a new job and some time to myself I'll be able to step back in and write this in a timely manner. And Pet will come out soon too! Anyways, where were we? So the exposition part of the story has officially ended and the plot is beginning to move forward. To all of you who have stuck around with me for this story, thank you so much! I know it isn't a super popular pairing but I'm very excited to share the rest of the story with you all!

Enjoy!

V. Le prix de la beauté

Breakfast was a raucous affair the next morning as the younger boys and those who had been deemed too unpolished mobbed the fourteen boys who had gone to dinner the night before. There were sighs of jealousy and hope as the little ones imagined a night of mystery and magic. The attendees were able to use this welcome distraction to take their minds off of whether or not Teacher Kolnas would call them from breakfast to give them the delightful news.

Erasmus smiled until he thought his cheeks would crack and he could only stammer out responses when the other boys asked him about his experiences.

His appetite was almost nonexistent and it wasn’t long before he and Kallias excused themselves from breakfast to spend some time in the small orange groves in the Gardens.

They dared not go to the beaches.

With so many alphas lodging nearby, Kolnas and the other teachers had extracted solemn promises from every boy to stay within the garden walls. Otherwise, bad things would happen to them and they could possibly be sent away.

Instead of swimming or walking on the shore, Erasmus watched as Kallias scaled the still-fruiting blood orange tree. He jumped as four oranges landed in his lap and he laughed genuinely as Kallias hung upside down in front of him.

“Feed me, Sussie.” He begged, uncaring that the skirt of his chiton flapped up around his chest.

Erasmus knew better than to argue with him and peeled one of the oranges so they could split it. Despite the casual playfulness they tried to exert, Erasmus knew that they were simply waiting until word came out. Grateful for the walls around them, Erasmus knew he and Kallias would only be watching the road for messengers. Instead, they ate blood oranges until they were close to sickness.

Kolnas did not call the two of them into his quarters until near sundown.

“Both of us?” Kallias asked, clutching Erasmus’ wrist when the servant came to fetch them. His
grip was a little tighter than usual as if he were daring the poor servant to try and separate them.

“Yes, yes both of you.” The servant amended quickly. “Please follow me.”

Kallias smiled at Erasmus, jubilant over the idea that they may have been purchased as a pair. And they were only cemented when Kolnas greeted them with a little scream of delight when they entered his quarters.

Too in control of himself to embrace the two of them, Kolnas grabbed their hands and squeezed with all of the bone-crushing excitement he could muster. “Oh happy days! Praise the gods above I knew the two of you would be our brightest stars! I knew you would make the fortunes of this place! Oh I could simply scream it from the rooftops!”

“Have we been chosen, teacher?” Erasmus asked, quite overwhelmed by Kolnas’ excitement. His own heart was pounding in his chest at the thought.

Kolnas’ eyes were misty with delight. “Chosen? Chosen? My dear Erasmus, no one has ever sparked a bidding war like you have! You are the most valuable slave we have ever fostered. Even our Exalted King might not have paid so much for a single slave!”

Erasmus almost began to tear up at the thought.

He had value. He was beautiful. Someone wanted him and would keep him safe.

Kallias squeezed his hand and Erasmus looked over at him; he was smiling as if he had known all along that this would be the case. And there was a chip of pain in his slim blue eyes.

“A-and Kallias?” Erasmus gasped; he was horrified that such a thing could not have immediately jumped to his mind. If Kallias’ future was uncertain, what good was his own happiness?

Kallias’ eyes swiveled back to Kolnas. “Teacher. You promised me.”

Kolnas glared right back, his smile still in place but the irritation unmistakable. “Never let it be said that I do not keep my promises. Though the price was exorbitant, your future master agreed to purchase the both of you as a pair. I offer my sincerest congratulations to the both of you.”

A rush of joy slammed like a wave into Erasmus’ chest and for a moment he felt that the only thing keeping him from fainting was Kallias’ iron grip on his hand.

“We…are to go together?” Kallias gasped.

“Yes, yes,” Kolnas waved his hand as though he wished to change the subject. “The both of you will go off together to serve the same master and I will put a clause in your purchase that the two of you are not to be separated. Your purchaser seemed only too pleased to comply with some eccentricities as the both of you remain unspoiled and Erasmus unbiten.”

Kallias dropped his head in supplication, Erasmus following suit, but he saw a flash of victorious smile.

Seeing that Kallias was momentarily resigned to listen, Kolnas began to give them further details. “I hope to have a contract drawn and payment delivered by tomorrow morning, so the both of you need to prepare to leave sometime within the next two days. You need not bring much aside from any personal effects, as your master will provide you with all the clothes, toiletries, and cosmetics you could need. I am sure your master’s slave handler will deal with any other questions or concerns you may have over the duration of your move.” He looked up and his expression had
moved from excitement to a sort of melancholy, “I am sure the two of you will want to go and tell your classmates and the younger boys the good news.”

“Of course.” Kallias replied, “Thank you for the wonderful news, teacher.”

Erasmus and Kallias moved with quiet dignity until they were out of Kolnas’ hearing and then they both began to scream in delight. Kallias began to spin them both in a circle and Erasmus was bouncing up and down; they must have looked absolutely foolish to anyone passing by. When Erasmus became dizzy and paused, Kallias pressed his nose against Erasmus’.

“How did you manage it?” Erasmus gasped, not for a moment believing that their dual purchase was a coincidence.

Kallias’ grin was positively wicked. “It has been years in the making, Sussie.” They found their way to an unoccupied bench hidden away in an ivy-covered corner so that Kallias could discuss his carefully laid plans. “The teachers owe me a large favor for showing them what Teacher Adrastus was up to. They stood to lose some of their most valuable boys in that one instance and the owner was so pleased he even offered to let me go free with all the gold on my wrists and neck.”

“You would give up such a future for me?” Erasmus was truly touched.

Kallias shrugged but his ears were flushed. “I…could not imagine any kind of life without you, Sussie. Instead I only asked that we be sold as a pair. Of course, I had to talk the both of us up to all those basta——.”

He could not finish his sentence because Erasmus embraced him around the neck. “I was so worried, Kallias. I was worried if I was bought that I’d never see you again.” He tried to contain his emotions but his relief was overwhelming and he started to cry into the crook of Kallias’ neck.

Lean arms wrapped around his back and Kallias patted him. “I won’t leave you, I swear.”

“I’m so happy.” Erasmus sniffed, pulling back. Kallias began to laugh at the sight of Erasmus dripping with tears and snot.

“I can tell.” Kallias used his chiton to wipe Erasmus’ face clean. “You are radiant with happiness.”

They lounged together on the bench for a while, considering their extraordinary good fortune, what their master would be like, and speculation over their new home. It did not strike them until this discussion of their future home that they would probably never return to the gardens or see many of their other classmates again and then melancholy set in.

“I hope our master’s home is by the ocean,” Kallias said, twisting his lips in dismay. “I’ve never lived away from the ocean before.”

“We must go to the beach then before we leave.” Erasmus insisted.

Kallias laughed in disbelief. “Kolnas made us promise not to go down to the beaches because of all the alphas nearby. Did you forget, Sussie?”

He had forgotten. And immediately he balked at the idea of breaking rules and promises. But at the same time he could not imagine leaving their home of nine years without visiting the beach. Kallias smiled as Erasmus warred in his mind over what to do.
“We have to go, Kallias.” Erasmus finally made up his mind. “We cannot leave without going one more time. I would regret not doing it...even if it is against the rules.”

They waited until nightfall at the very least.

When they were sure everyone was deeply asleep, Kallias took his hand and the two of them slipped through the quiet halls, dodging the only guards that were on duty that evening.

It was one of those nights that Erasmus felt deep in his chest. It was summer-warm, but not heavy with heat thanks to a warm breeze, and the last surviving oranges lent the air their tang. The moon was near full, the sky clear, and there was no noise save for the rustling of leaves, the rush of the tide, and their footsteps. It felt like he and Kallias were the only two people alive in Akielos. Erasmus could feel his friend’s heartbeat through his palm.

The sand was perfectly cool under their bare feet as they unraveled their simple chitons and hid them under a piece of driftwood. Kallias kept his eyes on the moon and the dark sea; Erasmus could not help but notice in this cool light that Kallias had a beautiful form and very fine skin.

“Ready?” Kallias asked when Erasmus straightened up. Erasmus took his hand by way of reply and the two of them sprinted for the surf.

The ocean was still pleasantly warm from the sunny day and the two of them laughed as the waves hit their bare chests. Kallias, the better swimmer, slipped out of Erasmus’ arms whenever Erasmus attempted to grab hold of him or lean against his back and the two of them giggled as the waves lifted them off their feet.

“I hope our new home is by the sea.” Kallias stated again, floating on the surface as his hands covered his hips. “My heart would split further if I never saw or smelled the ocean again.”

Erasmus caught him unawares this time and looped his arms around Kallias’ slim chest, hugging him tight. Kallias laughed and thrashed in an attempt to escape, but Erasmus held fast. Kallias’ heartbeat thundered from the exercise and Erasmus rested his cheek against the cold metal of Kallias’ collar.

“If I ever miss the sea, I shall hold you like this. For you always smell of sea salt.”

Kallias grinned at him and slipped through his arms as easily as seawater. When he emerged again, it was carefully, with his back facing Erasmus. “Of course it does. By the ocean are all of my greatest dreams.”

Erasmus’ personal belongings could be carried in both of his hands.

There was a small rabbit carved of smooth brownish stone that an older boy had given to him after his first year in the gardens. He had a small satchel filled with dried orange petals and orange peel that smelled of summer time in the gardens. There was a single white pearl Kallias had found inside of an oyster and bound in twine. Those were his sole possessions and they could be ordered out of his hands in a moment if it was his master’s pleasure.

He could form no attachments, not even to his future children, lest they be born omega. Only Kallias would stay with him, as per their buying contract.

They had been bought and their contract signed only hours before their illicit swim and they were told the next morning that they would be leaving the gardens with their master’s caravan by dawn.
the next day. Three other boys had also been bought and were set to leave within the next day; the mood in the gardens was both excited and somber, as with the departure of any one of them.

Kallias and Erasmus said their goodbyes to the garden cooks and servants, the guards and teachers, and of course the other slave boys who would be staying behind.

Those were the hardest goodbyes for the two of them.

The younger boys were starry-eyed and gave them delighted hugs, all while gushing about the lavish parties and beautiful gifts they would be receiving from their master. The older boys in their class were more reserved, if not from jealousy, then from the realization that they might never see one another again. The world was suddenly very large.

They had been informed that they were to leave at nightfall and so Erasmus and Kallias skipped dinner due to nerves and spent the entire evening in their room in a desperate attempt to memorize every last aspect of their childhood home. The moment the sun set, they picked up their meager belongings and went down to wait for their future master and his entourage to arrive.

Hand-in-hand they waited in the courtyard with Teacher Kolnas and Erasmus was reminded of the first night he arrived.

Not a word was shared between them, with Kallias and Erasmus only stroking each other’s knuckles by way of communication. Speaking would not allow them to hear any riders coming down the road.

It seemed like hours had passed before they heard anything other than the rustle of leaves.

The moment they heard hoof beats on the road, Kolnas straightened up and plastered his most professional smile on his face. Erasmus gripped Kallias’ hand so hard he felt Kallias stiffen next to him.

A small group of horses surrounding a gray traveling wagon galloped into view. Erasmus was a little surprised that such a wealthy man had so few men joining him. Teacher Kolnas too looked concerned; Kallias kept his expression smooth and apathetic.

“Forgive me,” the man said dismounting from the front of the wagon and jogging up to the three of them though he only addressed Kolnas, “My name is Aleksis and I am the slave handler. Their master encountered some of his alpha friends on the road and instructed me to fetch his purchases so that nothing untoward would occur.”

“It puts my mind at ease.” Kolnas agreed. “I hear such unsavory stories about bandits and mercenaries near the border.”

“These guards and I are all betas so worry not about their necks.” Aleksis continued.

Kolnas allowed Aleksis to assuage his unspoken fears before he squeezed Erasmus and Kallias in his arms. “Oh, my kits you will be glorious! I will miss you so dearly but you will have such a magnificent life; perhaps you’ll even rub elbows with royalty.”

“So long as Prince Laurent doesn’t outlaw such things.” One of the guards added as they stepped forward to help Erasmus and Kallias into the wagon.

Kolnas and Aleksis both glared at the man before resuming their cordial smiles. “The _kyroi_ would never allow such things,” Kolnas assured, “now, if you men will help Erasmus and Kallias into the wagon, I have something to discuss with Aleksis.”
A small, firm hand pushed him on the small of his back and Erasmus trotted obediently to the wagon. Kallias lagged behind, his expression that of intense focus. The beta guards helped them into the back of the wagon, which had been piled with fine blankets and pillow for their comfort.

Kallias must have had questions or was already seeing how far he could push their new handler, because it took him much longer to reach the wagon and he looked like he was thinking very hard about something.

“Kallias, look at how beautiful it is!” Erasmus gushed throwing a soft pillow at Kallias’ stomach. “I’ve never traveled by wagon before. Are they all like this?”

“No, silly.” Kallias laughed collapsing next to him. “Usually traveling wagons are very uncomfortable. Only wealthy men can have a wagon so comfortable.” The wagon creaked as Aleksis resumed his spot on the driver’s seat of the wagon, tucking what looked like a small bottle of water into his pack. “Aleksis, our master is obviously a man of means.”

“Obviously.”

“Is he a good man?” Kallias pressed, perhaps more talkative that a virgin slave should be. “What is his trade? Does he have any other slaves?”

“I am sure you will discover all these things and more in the coming days.” Aleksis replied enigmatically. “All you need to do is listen and obey, as was your training. I permitted to tell you at this point is that our journey will take two day’s ride and that all of your safety and comfort will be taken care of.” He said this in such a way that it became painfully obvious Aleksis was not looking to foster conversation with the two of them.

Erasmus nodded in assent but Kallias was only content to rest in silence for a few moments before posing a final question of their new handler. “Aleksis, is our master’s home by the ocean?”

“Ahh, I’m sorry but it is not.” Aleksis responded and the wagon lurched into motion. Erasmus had never seen Kallias look so disappointed, as he wilted into the pillows on the floor of the wagon.

Erasmus clambered over the pillows and blankets to provide his friend with some comfort and happened to glance out of the open back of the wagon at the entrance of their gardens. Teacher Kolnas had gone back inside almost immediately, not even bothering to watch them go, and the gardens began to disappear into the distance. Their childhood, their old life gone as swiftly as if it had never existed in the first place.

It was well into the night by the time their small caravan arrived at the inn where their master and the rest of his entourage were staying.

Erasmus was hesitant at the sight of such a place thanks to his very distant memories of inns in the cities. Generally they were wild, bright, and raucous establishments that people went to in order to do bad things and he was quite surprised to learn from both Kallias and Aleksis that this far from the city, merchants and travelers were the main patrons, seeking only food, rest, and local gossip.

Even so, the main tavern was packed with guests and Erasmus wished he could melt into the ground when seemingly ten thousand eyes swiveled to meet him. Even with the guards and Aleksis around him, Erasmus still shrank behind Kallias’ body for an extra barrier.

Even so there were murmurs of appreciation and even a few whistles that put Erasmus on edge. Kallias narrowed his eyes, though his smile remained in place, and gentle fingers stroked Erasmus’
“Don’t worry,” Aleksis assured them both as he led the way. “The two of you will have guards outside of your rooms at all times so these men will not bother you in any way. Slaves are an expensive luxury that most here can only dream of having and no one, save your master will be allowed to touch you.”

Like prized horses they walked through the room on display, and Erasmus was simultaneously too terrified and too well trained to look about the room. His gold—which he had not noticed for years—suddenly felt heavy and constricting around his neck and wrists. It singled him out as being different and unusual; he wondered if these men could smell the scent of omega wafting off of his neck.

If their master was in the crowd, he did not call for either one of them to join him because they reached their rooms without incident.

It was no royal suite by any stretch of the imagination, but it was clean, the bed was soft and there was a small room off to the side where they could bathe in privacy. Aleksis surveyed the room with a professional eye, only looking a little displeased that the room did not contain two beds.

“Well I suppose you both are perfectly capable of sharing accommodation, but do not get used to it.” Aleksis said. “If you are in need of food, please let the guards outside your room know. We will leave not long after sunrise so please rest accordingly.”

With that small set of instructions he was gone, leaving Erasmus and Kallias alone in their room.

The moment he was gone, Kallias lost all of his affected poise and launched himself onto their bed. “Gods above, I despise that wagon. I would much rather ride on horseback.”

“Kallias, they would never let you expose yourself like that.” Erasmus laughed. “Besides, we were never taught how to ride a horse. I fear I would fall off immediately.” He was sure Kallias would take to it as easily as breathing, clever as he was.

“Only one way to find out.” Kallias said, sitting up, his dark hair wild. “We must climb out the window and borrow one of our guard’s horses.” Erasmus panicked and shushed his friend, wondering if their guards could hear his wicked plan. “Sussie, Sussie! I’m joking, honestly. It’s too dangerous to go out looking as we do.”

“I am sorry I am not as adventurous as you.” Erasmus sighed.

Kallias ruffled his hair. “Never. You are perfect Sussie. Now rest. I am going to have a bath. In our own private bathroom.” He looked tickled by the very thought of having privacy. Erasmus took his suggestion and relaxed on the bed until he was teetering on the edge of sleep.

Kallias exiting the bathroom, sending out warm plumes of steam, brought him back from the brink of exhaustion and he smiled at his lovely friend.

“Do you think our master is a good man?” Erasmus asked as Kallias dried off his skin with a soft towel. Aleksis’ smooth dismissal of their questions about their master had him on edge and he wanted Kallias’ reassurances. “Do you think he is young and kind?”

He dared not voice the other possibility and tried not to remember those cold men who had simply tilted his head to and fro and looked at his body like it was a fine vase or a prized broodmare.

Kallias paused, tying the towel around his slim waist so he could rub oil onto his skin. “I…don’t
know Sussie. I’m sure we’ll find out soon but…I’m sure he will not mistreat us. If he does…”

Erasmus felt a tiny jolt of panic then.

He felt as though Kallias was going to make a threat or a promise he may not have been able to keep and if anyone overheard…

The both of them jumped as a knock came at the door and Kallias’ dark blue eyes narrowed slightly. He must have been more nervous than he let on.

“Little ones,” came Aleksis’ honey-smooth voice before he entered the room, “I have… commands.” He saw Erasmus leap from the bed to assume his submissive bow, Kallias newly washed and smiled wide in approval. “Excellent! Both of you look lovely; you are a testament to your gardens. Now…your master has had food and drink and is in a festive mood. He requested that one of you join him in his chambers to attend to him and pour his wine at his behest.”

Erasmus felt his breath catch in his throat.

There was a very good chance that serving wine and staying silently by his master’s side would be all that was required of him. But the memories of their lessons on ‘First Nights’ and intimate things done during that time jumped to his mind and he panicked deep in his heart. A small part of his mind whispered something that would not be tolerated: *I am not ready.*

He did not even know his master’s name or what he looked like. He was uncomfortable in the inn. He was still scared of the bad things he would be expected to do. But his training would compel him to obey with a smile.

He longed to hold Kallias’ hand, knowing that Kallias would be able to understand all his fears with such simple contact. But he didn’t know if Aleksis would consider it improper.

“He asked me to say that he finds you both exquisite when simply attired and favors neither of you above the other.” Aleksis added, perhaps mistaking their reluctance for coyness. “And of course you will be escorted to and from his quarters, so you need not fear that any harm will come to you.”

“I will go.” Kallias spoke, voice clear and unbothered.

“Oh, yes. You are Kallias, yes?” Aleksis asked, pleased with a volunteer.

Kallias smiled. “Yes. I have the steadier hand in any case. Sussie, you can rest for our long journey tomorrow.” Aleksis seemed amused as Kallias reached over to squeeze Erasmus’ hand. “Rest Sussie and I’ll return to you later tonight.” Erasmus was too terrified to offer to go instead and hoped that Kallias could see the gratitude in his eyes.

“Follow me, Kallias.” Aleksis ordered, looking pleased as Kallias fell in step behind him. “Good night Erasmus.”

“Good night.” His voice was barely a whisper. He could not even find the courage to raise his head until after the door was shut and Kallias was gone. He shuffled back to his bed and collapsed upon it, trying not to focus on any of the unfamiliar noises or surroundings. If a tear or two slipped out, Erasmus could always claim it was due to exhaustion and not fear over a rapidly approaching future that did not feel at all safe.

He must have fallen asleep because the sound of a door opening woke him out of a hazy dream and the room was nearly pitch-black. The hall outside was still semi-lit and a figure slipped into their room before the door shut.
“Kallias?” Erasmus’ voice sounded reedy and fearful to his own ears. There was the sound of a shuffling gait, quite unlike Kallias’ smooth walk; the guards would not let just anyone in, would they? “Kallias is it you?”

“It’s me, Sussie.”

Kallias sounded exhausted, something like a whimper coming from him as he collapsed in bed next to Erasmus. Erasmus felt trembling arms around his waist and he reached for Kallias’ hair, stroking it in an attempt to comfort. Kallias smelled of unfamiliar wine, perfume, and wood fire; there was no smell of sea salt on his skin this evening.

When Kallias seemed to relax against him, Erasmus felt safe to hazard a few questions. “Kallias are you all right? You met our master, yes? Is he a good man? Was he kind to you?” Kallias shrugged and Erasmus wished one of the candles were lit so he could see Kallias’ expression. “You were…shaking.”

“I’m tired, Sussie.”

Stroking Kallias’ hair to hide his nervousness, Erasmus broached a subject that required a great courage. “Kallias, d-did you…have your First Night?”

Erasmus was extremely curious about what would occur on his First Night. He was instructed to go into the experience knowing as little as possible, hoping that Aleksis would prepare him somewhat for what his master preferred. But Kallias might be able to provide him with precious insight over what might be expected of him.

At first, Kallias did not speak but nestled deeper into the linen sheets. When he did respond, his voice was so quiet, Erasmus almost did not catch his words. “They just—No. I did not.”

Erasmus relaxed a little then, embracing his friend in relief. Kallias stiffened as if the embrace was painful and the moment Erasmus relaxed his hold, Kallias turned over so that his back was facing Erasmus. It felt so wrong to only see his shoulders and back…

“Sleep, Sussie.” Kallias insisted. “We have to travel again tomorrow.”

Despite the awkward air and Kallias’ unusual mood, Erasmus could not help but recall that his dearest friend had gone to serve their master in his stead and bought him more time to prepare himself. “Thank you Kallias.”

Erasmus was almost asleep when Kallias turned over and took Erasmus’ hand in his own. He was trembling again. “Anything for you, Sussie.”
It feels like forever since I've updated this but it's actually only been like 10 days aha! So much has happened since then, and Pet came out! I half-wondered if I should add Ancel/Berenger into the plot, but I haven't decided yet...who knows, y'all might see them added to the tags!

And speaking of tags, please everyone keep in mind the tags for this chapter (possible TRIGGER WARNINGS tbh) though I swear nothing as horrible that happens to Erasmus in the books will happen to him here. I think 1-2 more chapters and we will be out of the first arc of the story and some new, familiar characters will appear! Thank you to everyone who's reading and enjoy ;)

VI. Les fleurs d'oranger

When Erasmus woke up, Kallias had burrowed down under the sheets and his face was pressed in Erasmus’ flank, his arm draped across Erasmus hips. He looked younger than his eighteen years in sleep and Erasmus tucked errant black silk strands behind Kallias’ ears.

It seemed a shame to wake him when dawn was still so young, but he doubted Aleksis would approve of them sleeping so close together.

The two of them were bathed and presentable, their bed made as Aleksis came to fetch them. There were less people to gawk at them over their breakfast as they were escorted to the wagon with their silent guards. A modest breakfast was waiting for them within and Kallias must have had an unholy thirst after his night of entertainment. He drained the entire pitcher of water they had been provided before Aleksis had even taken his spot on the seat of the wagon and the innkeeper had to be sent to fetch another.

Ever mindful of their slender forms, breakfast was simple and healthy fare of olives, yogurt, and freshly baked flatbreads. They ate lightly and Erasmus spent most of the morning trying to illicit some facts about their master from a reluctant Kallias. Doubtless he was riding further ahead of their wagon at the head of the procession and would not deign to greet them until their arrived at his home.

Aleksis and the guards were not forthcoming with information in any case.

After a lunch of sandwiches and grape salad, Erasmus napped on the pillows, the rocking of the wagon soothing him as much as the motion of the sea. When he woke the wagon had taken on the dark orange color of late afternoon sunlight and Kallias was curled up next to him, his head resting on Erasmus’ outstretched arm.

They must be getting close.

He sat up without waking Kallias and his golden-brown curls floated like clouds around his face. Gently he pulled the cloth of the wagon covering aside and saw flat fields cutting through the veritable sea of dark green trees.
It had been so long since he had seen any other scenery than the seaside and he briefly wondered how large Akielos was.

Aleksis looked back at him and smiled. “We should reach your master’s home a little after sundown. Then you will both have a proper dinner and I will instruct you on the rules of your new home.” Erasmus nodded and fell back on the pillows, busying himself by sleepily counting Kallias’ long eyelashes until he could sleep again.

The two of them did not wake again until the sun was set and the wagon had settled to a halt.

“We’re here boys.” Aleksis said as he dismounted from his seat. “No need to put on airs. This is your new home.”

Erasmus and Kallias were helped out of the wagon and found themselves in the courtyard of a very fine villa. Set up like their gardens, but on a larger scale, there were several buildings in the compound and a lavish garden visible behind the main building. But while their slave garden had been on a hill overlooking the sea, the closest large village a good two hours ride away, their new home was surrounded by a thick, lush forest and a village was visible on the hill to the west of the villa. A veritable phalanx of servants had come out to greet their group.

Erasmus, due to his good training, did not lift his head to look around for their master. Instead he shuffled behind Aleksis into the throng of servants.

“Please take these boys to the slaves quarters,” he instructed to a handful of beta servants, “and make sure they are cleaned and properly attired. I will see if appetites run to the newly purchased this evening but…he may be too tired to indulge.”

With the speedy efficiency of a well-oiled machine, Erasmus and Kallias were whisked through the mansion and shown to their new quarters, the Slave Quarters.

They were very fine; from what Erasmus had seen from under his lashes, the entire villa exuded an aura of wealth and a style a little more ornate than what Erasmus was used to. The Slave Quarters were three large rooms on the western side of the villa, the first room being round and opulent, no doubt used for entertaining guests or their master.

The bedroom and bathroom were simpler, more like the gardens had been.

The servants were not particularly talkative either, simply explaining the purpose of each place and telling the two of them who should be alerted and sent for if they needed clean sheets or certain toiletries and which servant could procure them food. Left mostly to their own devices, Kallias and Erasmus decided to take a long soak in the tub and prepare in case their master decided to call for them.

Kallias drank an entire pitcher of water that had been left for them before getting into the warm bath with Erasmus.

“It is certainly a beautiful home.” Erasmus tried to start conversation as he combed fragrant coconut oil through Kallias’ wavy hair. “Though…I wish the people here were more…” He didn’t want to admit his disappointment of their new household within the first hour of his arrival as he tried to search for a diplomatic way to say ‘unfriendly’.

Kallias must have sensed his thoughts through the hesitancy in his hands. “They are unfriendly to us because we are slaves, Sussie. They cannot appear to favor us in any way.”

Erasmus rested his cheek on Kallias’ head as their situation truly overwhelmed him. “If you were
not here with me, I think I would have died of loneliness."

The two of them jumped as someone cleared their throat from the doorway and Erasmus assumed his most gentle smile in preparation for whoever had overheard their conversation. He saw glints of gold.

Three more slaves stood in the threshold, watching Erasmus and Kallas bathe.

Erasmus took quick stock of them and realized their master was a very wealthy man if he could afford to buy and house three omega slaves. Two were female and one was male, one of the female slaves in the early stages of pregnancy, and all were lovely with the classical, dark Akielon beauty Teacher Kolnas had mentioned was popular in most of Akielos. However, they all looked timid from where they huddled together in the doorway.

“Would you like to join us?” Kallas spoke when no one else could find the courage to.

The other slaves joined them silently, Erasmus making a conscious effort not to stare unduly at the female slaves. He had never seen the naked body of a young woman. Kallas was unperturbed and looked at them near-unblinkingly.

“I am Erasmus, and this is Kallas.” Erasmus attempted to breach the silence. “What are your names?” An idea occurred to him as well; though he was not especially good at making friends, he was open to trying and these fellows could provide useful information about their master. “Can you tell us about life here? Tell us about our master? I feel that—I don’t even know his name.”

“He doesn’t—,” One of the girls interrupted as if the words had been yanked out of her, “he doesn’t…like for us to call him by name…” She blushed as if unused to speaking aloud. “You need not…learn it…”

Kallas narrowed his eyes though his smile was painted in place. “And what are we to call him then?”

“Master.” The young man responded, his head lowering instinctively upon even saying the word.

Kallas gripped Erasmus’ hand and began to murmur under his breath, his Veretian accent making the words all but unrecognizable to anyone who had not spent years with him. “He likes timid. He likes shy.” His free hand touched the curve of his gold collar. “Not to speak.”

“Kallas?” Erasmus was concerned as Kallas looked pale, even in the warm water.

“What did you say?” The young man asked.

Kallas’ fingernails scratched the gold of his collar. “I said, I am not shy.”

No one called for Erasmus or Kallas their first night in their new home.

A servant slept in the slave quarters with them to make sure nothing untoward occurred between them in the middle of the night, and, for the first time in years, Kallas did not sneak from his bed to join Erasmus in his. It was simply too risky until they discovered which servants were the heavy sleepers.

When he woke, Erasmus found the bed next to his empty and Kallas gone from the room.
It was late morning or early afternoon, judging from the light in their quarters but the other three slaves were still fast asleep, burrowed deep into their blankets. Erasmus crept out into the main room and found a very fine breakfast waiting for him on one of the low tables.

Fresh figs and pomegranates, honeyed sweetbread and wedges of goat cheese...Erasmus rarely ate so many sweet foods in a single sitting. There looked to have been a pitcher of iced milk and a jug of water but...Kallias’ thirst had been legendary as of late and both were empty.

Kallias skidded back into the rooms as Erasmus was finishing his meal, and his slim eyes were fiery with excitement yet again.

“Sussie!”

“Kallias.” Erasmus smiled at him. “Where did you go?”

“Exploring. I wanted to get the layout of the place. You should see the stables! They are enormous. Our master might deal in fine horses. Here.” In a graceful arc, Kallias tossed a skein of water and Erasmus drank deep, thankful for his friend’s care. “They sleep still?”

“Perhaps they are used to long nights.”

“Are you finished?” Kallias asked impatiently, bouncing about. “Are you done? I have something I want to show you.” He helped Erasmus clear the plates and stack them off to the side so that the servants might take them away later. Then he showed Erasmus to the building he had discovered earlier in the day.

The enormous stables smelled of hay and horse, and Erasmus shrank back behind Kallias as several large, intelligent heads peeked out from their stalls to inspect them. With the feline grace of someone who had grown up climbing trees, Kallias scaled a rickety, wooden ladder into the hayloft.

When Erasmus joined him—albeit at a much slower pace—it was as if he had been tossed into a room of gold.

The dry hay had a yellowish glow in the afternoon sun and Kallias waved him over to the small window looking out over the villa. His smile was wicked as he showed Erasmus.

“Look! You can see everything from here! I could spy on everyone and no one would know any better...”

“If you are caught, you will get in so much trouble!” Erasmus gasped.

“Which is why I do not intend to be caught.” Kallias replied, pulling away from his secret hiding spot. “And there’s another reason I brought you up here. Look.” Even rolling wildly, his dark hair filled with errant bits of hay, Kallias was still the most graceful person Erasmus had ever seen. He waved Erasmus over to the corner of the small room where some old wooden crates had been stacked.

Following Kallias’ gesturing finger, Erasmus peered through the slats of one of the crates and saw three round puffs of orange and white fur curled up on old rags and a small pile of straw.

“Barn kittens?” Erasmus realized with growing delight.

He had seen feral, matted cats in the city, occasionally a skinny kitten, but he had never held one before. These sleeping puffs looked like they would be the softest things he had ever held.
“Can I touch them?” Erasmus asked, his fingers tingling with want.

“I am unsure.” Kallias said, smiling as he gauged Erasmus’ reaction. “They are still a little small. But we can watch them grow over the coming days. It will be our secret.” Instead of touching the soft fur, as he wished, Erasmus squeezed Kallias hand.

“A secret I will hold dear. I am happy to see you smile again, Kallias.”

“Have I seemed churlish?” Kallias asked, his blue eyes sharp with something that looked akin to alarm.

“You have been on edge since our night at the inn.” Erasmus admitted remembering Kallias shaking. “Did you…fear you displeased our master?”

Kallias shook his head, but his mouth was hard and tight. “I…do not think he cares for me. I am not so sweet and gentle as you are.” The thought was incomprehensible to Erasmus.

“But you are so clever. And beautiful.” Erasmus cupped Kallias’ cheek in his hand. “You are beautiful. I am sure he will come to adore you in time.” It was bold to make such promises about a man he had never met, but Erasmus knew Kallias.

“I…can only hope.”

The two of them only spent an hour and a half in the loft, feeling that they might be missed if they were missing for too long. But they returned to empty slave quarters and no one was looking for them. It was not until after a few exercises, supper, and a bath—a few hours past nightfall—that they had another visitor.

Aleksis and a few servants breezed into their bedroom without even knocking, looking on appreciatively as Kallias and Erasmus took turns brushing each other’s hair until the black waves shone like dark water and Erasmus’ curls were polished golden-brown.

“Kallias, a moment.” Aleksis called him over, holding a deep bronze bowl. “I was told you spent the day familiarizing yourself with the villa. Take this bowl to the arbor and fill it with grapes. Your master will want them later in the night.”

Kallias practically skipped to Aleksis, his smile just burgeoning on wickedness as he accepted his task. “Of course, Aleksis.”

Erasmus looked hopefully to Aleksis as soon as Kallias had gone. He too was eager to prove himself as capable as Kallias.

Instead of issuing an order immediately, Aleksis found a pitcher of water Kallias had not finished and returned with a glass for himself and one he pushed towards Erasmus. Erasmus felt the sting. It was he who should fetch water and serve, not Aleksis.

But Aleksis seemed unperturbed. “Drink Erasmus.”

Obedient as always, Erasmus drained the cup. When he moved to place it on the table closest to him, he must have misjudged the distance because the cup slipped through his fingers and clattered to the floor.

It hit him like how he imagined a punch to the stomach would feel like and he would have fallen to his knees had a strong hand not wrapped his arm and kept him upright. Aleksis. He smiled down at Erasmus with a bit of regret in his eyes.
“What is…happening?” Erasmus’ panic was dulled by the feeling of his tongue seemingly going numb in his mouth. His limbs were too heavy, his head too light; there was an uncomfortable hot, wet feeling in his hips and suddenly the place smelled overwhelmingly of oranges. He felt wrong.

Aleksis dragged him along the room, giving orders to the servants as he did. “Fetch the oils though…I doubt we’ll need them. And alert the blacksmith. He might want to bite the boy at some point in the evening. There you are, Erasmus.” He said as he laid Erasmus back on the bed. “Legs apart, if you please.”

Erasmus realized he was crying, hot bubbling tears streaming down his cheeks into his hair, at his feeling; despite this, his training kicked in and he spread his legs instinctively.

His body was throbbing. That was it.

Like he was going to burst out of his skin. Like he could smell the scent of everyone around him. Like there was a shameful itch he couldn’t bring himself to scratch. And he was hot. So hot.

He sobbed, unable to help himself as Aleksis thrust a hand between his legs.

“Kallias!” He cried into the sheets. “Someone! Save me…”

Aleksis ignored him and removed his hand thoughtfully before calling back to the servants. “Perhaps no oil. He is slick enough on his own. Just a new chiton then. No loincloth. And wipe his face.”

Hands gripped him, turning him to and fro as he was wrapped into some gauzy thing that only served to tickle his skin. He was vaguely aware of someone attempting to dry his face and apply kohl to his weeping eyes. Aleksis watched impassively as if he saw such shameful displays on a daily basis.

“I’m sorry it had to be done like this, Erasmus. But I was told you had never had your heat and your master wants an omega that is warm; there are drugs that speed these things along that your teacher helpfully provided.” Erasmus heaved as he saw the empty water glass he had downed. “If he finds you appealing he may mark you this evening. But you must stop your unsightly crying and remember your training.”

“I’m having my heat?” Erasmus choked, as he tried to sit up.

Aleksis rolled his eyes. “Well, it is a good thing you have your looks, as your common sense is lacking. Yes you are in heat. Now rejoice and smile; tonight will be your First Night.”

Erasmus whimpered as he attempted to stand and smile. All he wanted was to curl into a ball and cry until this shameful feeling abated.

Now he understood why boys had been sent to the heat house and why Kallias had offered to go with him. He was so hot and so terrified that he wanted his friend. Instead of letting tears fall, he began to whisper Kallias’ name under his breath in hopes he would be saved.

Unbothered by the scent Erasmus was obviously giving off, Aleksis clipped a chain leash of gold to the collar around his neck and gave him a quick tug. “Follow me, Erasmus.”

He nearly stumbled and fell at his first attempt to walk and the spot he wasn’t allowed to touch between his legs felt like it would bubble up and spill over. He feared he would soil himself in front of everyone present and the tears came again.
“Follow me.” Aleksis groaned in annoyance, giving another quick tug.

Erasmus yelped and he caught sight of Kallias walking into their quarters with a bowl of grapes. He lost his grip on reason then and cried out for his friend. “Kallias! Kallias! It burns.” Kallias’ eyes were huge in his white face and the bowl slipped from his fingers. Red grapes rolled across the marble floors. “Kallias, save me!” Erasmus begged. “Save me!”

“Hush!” Aleksis hissed, “Remember your training.”

“Erasmus!” Kallias called but the door to the slave’s quarters was shut unceremoniously in his face before he could reach the two of them.

The moment they were out in the halls, Erasmus bowed his head and straightened his spine but his legs still trembled. He was alert to everything but his mind was going hazy. He could feel the heat pouring off of him in tendrils, he could feel people staring at him and part of his drug and heat-addled brain wanted someone—anyone really—to push him to the floor and ravish him.

Stone-faced beta guards fell in line behind them to deter any other wandering alphas. Their presence was necessary as Erasmus was having difficulties putting one foot in front of the other. He would never be able to escape someone who was determined to have him.

Weaving through the labyrinthine halls, hearing no hushed whispers over the pounding of his heartbeat, Erasmus was finally shown into a very fine set of rooms that he would not have recognized even if he were not in the violent throes of his first heat.

“That will be enough, thank you.” Aleksis’ voice sounded very far away, like he was speaking from beneath the surface of the ocean. “You may return to the guard room and instruct any alphas to keep clear of this wing of the villa.”

Then his hand pressed flat into the small of Erasmus’ bare back and pushed him firmly forward.

His knees hit the bed before he even realized a bed was in front of him, and he collapsed onto it gratefully. To keep from touching himself, his fists gripped the fine silk sheets and he curled into a tiny ball. Although he knew the heat lasted several days, he hoped that if he stayed very still then the warmth in his hips would abate. He heard Aleksis click his tongue.

“I am sure your master will be lenient this time because it is your first heat and he enjoys this… sort of thing but, next time he will expect better form from you Erasmus.”

With hands lacking any sort of gentleness or understanding—as if peeling open the petals of an unready bud—Aleksis began to arrange Erasmus’ limbs to look more attractive and inviting and shameful. Erasmus was patient and let Aleksis move him like a doll; when he was pleasingly arrayed he gripped the sheets again and bit his bottom lip. He was left alone in the room for an indefinite period of time.

To his panicked and heat-soaked mind, he could have been lying on the bed for mere seconds or hours but soon his body began to heat the rest of the room. The cool silk of the sheets became hot coals under his bare back and the gauze of his wispy chiton was a sheet of fire against his chest. He longed to rip the cloth from him but his hands were glued to the sheets.

There was the sound of the door opening again and Erasmus did not know whether to be hopeful or fearful. Nausea won out in the end. “Aleksis?”

Aleksis seemed to be on the tail end of a conversation, easily ignoring Erasmus’ cry. “…I should
warn you, my lord, that this is his first heat and he is a little frightened, so he may not be of the perfect form you saw in the gardens.”

“My gods, the smell of him,” came an unfamiliar voice, “is it not a pity to you, Aleksis, that you cannot enjoy this scent?”

“I cannot miss what I have never had.”

“Aleksis!” Erasmus tried again and was ignored again.

“Yes, yes. I can see he is a little nervous…and also about to burst. I am sure he will become more…docile once I have soothed his heat. I will let slide some transgressions not normally permitted. Aleksis, You may leave us. Send no one to disturb us until tomorrow afternoon at least. We will be busy.”

“Of course.”

Erasmus did not bother to call for Aleksis again. He knew no help would come a third time and heard the click of the door as it was shut. His master walked across the marble floors toward him and Erasmus was not brave enough to open his eyes until he felt the bed dip under the weight of another.

His breath was ragged as he looked over at the man beside him and a large hand swiped the errant curls from his face. Even that simple touch had him crying out and his master smiled.

Erasmus tried to commit the face to memory, tried to recall the man from their dinner at the gardens but he could not focus on much of anything, save his feelings. All he could see was dark hair and eyes that burned with want.

“Oh, you’re lovely. Just like I remember. And you smell divine, little thing.”

Erasmus’ breath hitched; the man never called him by name. He may not have even remembered what it was. “I am scared…”

“Mmm, don’t worry. I’m going to soothe you. You will never have felt so good in your life.” Two fingers pushed into Erasmus’ mouth keeping him from shrieking. “You’re so fine…Now be still.”

Erasmus could not keep his breath smooth as the gauzy little handkerchief serving as his chiton was tugged away and discarded; hands raked down his overly sensitive body and he could not find the strength to push them away. This heat was torture and Erasmus cursed the weakness of his body.

Growling, like something that would come from a wild dog, shook his spine and his master seemed incapable of holding back any longer. In one smooth move, Erasmus was engulfed. A man’s heavy, unmoving body straddling him with no apparent intention of ever letting him up again. Some primeval, base part of Erasmus’ mind realized he was about to be devoured and the heat paused only to let in a moment of frozen fear.

To the tip of his tongue came the name of the only person who had ever saved him, who had ever protected from the terrors of the world. He sobbed it in a mantra, “Kallah, Kallah, Kallah!”

His master whispered in his ear, seeming not at all upset by his untrained outburst. “Don’t cry, pretty golden thing. I’ll have your friend join us in the future but now…now is no time for interruption from untouched beta appetites. I would savor you alone first.”
Erasmus cried a little and the kohl stung his eyes.

“Open your legs, my golden boy.”

He obeyed, his knees shaking. The smell of an alpha responding to his heat and starting a rut was choking. Erasmus could barely breathe. How anyone could find this pleasurable he didn’t know. It was terrifying.

Large hands lifted his hips up, positioning him and fear traced a cold finger down his spine. I am not ready.

But he could not fight; he could barely breathe. All he could do was cry and pray that his heat would end soon and that the experience would not break him. Something pressed into his hips and he gave one last gasp.

“Kallias help me!”

A crash answered his watery plea, the sound like a pitcher of wine shattering against a marble floor, and the entire weight of the man above him slumped limp and unmoving against him on the bed. Erasmus felt a drip on his shoulder and struggled to catch his breath. He dared not move in case this was something his master enjoyed, but a decision was made on his behalf when someone pushed the dead weight off of his chest.

Air and relief flooded his lungs and lean arms wrapped around his naked body, pulling him to the edge of the bed. Without meaning to, Erasmus dug his nails into the skin of his savior, desperate to hold onto anything.

When he looked up at the person tugging on him, his vision was filled with the most calming color: that deep, dark blue of the ocean, and tears of relief streamed down his cheeks.

“Kallias, Kallias.” He chanted it in a prayer, in a song, the sweetest name that had ever passed his lips.

Kallias embraced him tight and Erasmus could feel his teeth grinding together through his cheek. Kallias’ skin was cool as stones and Erasmus melded against him in hoping to alleviate his heat.

“Sussie, are you all right?”

There was something strange about his voice. He was obviously attempting to affect a comforting tone but there was an edge of steel underneath. Through his haze, Erasmus realized that he had not heard such venom in Kallias’ voice since their punishment with Teacher Adrastus.

“I am not ready.” Erasmus admitted pulling back from Kallias’ chest. “I am not ready for this Kallias b-but…it burns. Oh god, Kallias I am burning. I cannot be pliant and I will sh-shame myself.”

With surprising strength—perhaps borne of his anger—Kallias yanked Erasmus to his feet and procured a length of rich cream cloak, which he draped over Erasmus’ naked body. With the simple gray chiton he had donned, Kallias wiped Erasmus face clean before taking his hand.

He smiled but there was something sharp about it that Erasmus could not discern in his current state. “Don’t cry, my Sussie, don’t worry. That…man won’t touch you again, I swear.” He looped Erasmus’ arm over his shoulder and grimaced as he began to help Erasmus toward the veranda.

“How can you promise such a thing?”
Kallias gripped him tight, his lovely mouth set in a determined line. “Because…I think I killed him.”

Erasmus looked back before Kallias helped him out into the warm darkness of the gardens. Despite his rattled and heated state, the image of what was within the fine room was immediately burned into Erasmus’ brain.

There was a bed in the center of the room, a bed large enough for eight men and Erasmus realized he had been laying there not but a moment before. The silk sheets were rumpled and spilling off the sides like water and their master was left collapsed on the mattress.

At first glance he looked like a fine painting, his bare, bulky body lounging across the white surface. But a closer glance saw the rivulets of blood running down his face, matting his dark hair, and staining the sheets in tears of red. Another anomaly, around his head were cracked pieces of amphora, some of the sharp edges wet with blood after Kallias had smashed it over his head to save Erasmus.

The room smelled thickly of oranges.

As Kallias nearly dragged Erasmus through the gardens in search of the stables, it duly occurred to Erasmus that they had done a very bad thing. Slaves were not supposed to murder their masters, no matter what treatment they received.

But he was not about to go back. He was not ready for what his master and Aleksis had wanted. And Kallias had made the decision for him.

He would trust Kallias with his life.
Oh my god the first arc of this story is almost over! Then we will have some new/familiar characters thrown into the mix! Haha I cannot wait!

So last we left them, Erasmus and Kallias have 'escaped' and now...and NOW?? Now we have to deal with this heat. I won't give away any spoilers up here but...there's gonna be some gentle M rated stuff in this chapter. Also Erasmus is not very descriptive of his own body because I think he is terrified of it for one. And also in the gardens they probably try to deter the boys from getting to know themselves.

As always thank you to everyone who reads, gives me kudos and comments! I love you all ;)

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How Kallias managed to drag Erasmus to the stables and help him up onto a horse, Erasmus did not know. In the relative safety of Kallias’ company, he slipped into a sort of black haze that had him thrashing with heat, interspersed with brief moments of clarity.

In the moments of clarity, he was aware of Kallias seated in front of him on their stolen horse. Absent bits and bridles and a proper saddle, Kallias was guiding the horse by it’s mane and was squeezing the horse gently with his thighs to get it to move forward. Erasmus’ hands were around Kallias’ waist and when he managed to look around all he saw was the dark, silent, green of the forest. He had no idea how long they had been riding at any point in time, but in the moments before he blacked out, he could feel himself rut his hips slightly against Kallias’ backside.

He did not truly regain himself until Kallias had slowed the horse to a complete stop and slid out from Erasmus’ arms. Erasmus felt himself tip sideways, unable to catch himself.

Kallias steadied him, whispering smooth, lilting Veretian as a way to comfort and encourage him. Erasmus’ feet hit hard packed earth and he leaned on his friend.

The sound of a slap and the horse galloping away from them came before Kallias began to drag him through the underbrush. Erasmus, usually able to keep pace, felt clumsy as his feet plodded heavy and he whimpered as something slick ran down his legs. Kallias hissed and hoisted Erasmus a little higher so only the tips of his toes dragged the dirt.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He slurred, his head rolling to the curve beneath Kallias’ collar.

“There is nothing to forgive.” Kallias insisted, his voice firm and eerily calm for what he had just done. Murdered a man, stolen a horse, and escaped the place that owned them… “I should have been the one to drink whatever Aleksis gave you. It is I who should be sorry.”

“I was not ready.” Erasmus admitted. “I…failed…”

“Never.” Kallias snarled. “You are perfect.”
They walked for some time and Erasmus was beginning to wonder through his agony how Kallias was managing to practically pull him through the dark undergrowth. He wondered if Kallias even knew where they were going. But soon his friend slowed and Erasmus’ feet touched boards of sanded wood.

He could not get his mouth to form the proper words so his questions remained unsaid.

Within a few minutes, they were inside some sort of dwelling and Erasmus had been gently placed on a pallet. Kallias did not move to light any lamps and instead moved to barricade the door before coming to lie beside Erasmus. Without anything else to focus on, Erasmus’ condition came to the forefront of his mind and he trembled with need and fear.

Kallias gently tucked some curls behind his burning ears. “Does it hurt, my Sussie? Are you in any pain?”

“My body is fighting me.” Erasmus gasped. “I feel…as though I might burst from my skin. I want it to stop. Please make it stop.”

He could not make out Kallias’ expression in the dark, but his voice was pained when he responded. “I cannot. Sussie, I wish I could take this from you but…I am helpless in this.” There was only one way to quiet this heat…

“I must stink.”

Kallias buried his face in Erasmus’ nape and a shiver wracked Erasmus’ hips. “No. You must rest. This will pass in a few days time. And I will keep you safe.”

“…Thank you.”

Kallias took his hand in a way that was meant to be comforting. Erasmus tried to rest, tried to close his eyes and sleep, but the darkness only heightened his discomfort. He could feel his heartbeat behind his eyes, feel liquid heat pooling in his hips and his mind was seared with what he needed.

It was not long before he was squeezing Kallias’ hand with all his strength.

“Erasmus…”

“I’m sorry.” He choked, his throat dry. “I will…I feel like I will die if I do not…do something about this.”

Kallias touched his cheek with a gentle hand. “If you…wish to touch yourself…t-to relieve the heat, I can…turn away.”

“Please no!” Erasmus gasped. “I don’t…I can’t…it’s bad, Kallias. We are not allowed to.” Kallias did not respond and Erasmus stopped thinking of repercussions, of his training. He just wanted relief. “I...do not know how. Help me Kallias. Help me, please.”

“Erasmus. I…I…” Kallias sounded unsure. It was a tone Erasmus did not hear often on his friend. Erasmus, heedless of all decorum, latched onto this dearest friend, not realizing that he was grinding his hips against Kallias’ leg. “I am not afraid of you Kallias. Please…please help me.”

Kallias stiffened next to him, his free hand on Erasmus’ chest clenching into a fist. “I…am a beta.”

“You are the only one I care for.” Erasmus begged, allowing his feelings to spill out uninhibited. “I
trust you Kallias. I love you so please, please…” He fully intended to cry until Kallias gave in, knowing that Kallias was weak to his tears.

“You love me?”

“Of course I do.” Erasmus was crying so hard now he could not tell if the scent of seawater came from Kallias’ skin or his own tears. It was true, he realized. Of all the people he had ever met—including his now-dead master—he loved this boy beside him a thousand times more than anyone else.

Kallias tilted Erasmus’ head up and leaned his own head down, his breath cool against Erasmus’ burning skin. Twin kisses pressed against his cheeks and it did not feel bad at all. On the contrary, Erasmus wanted more before the cool kisses evaporated.

It was clear to see now why medicine was needed for omegas in heat. The lust combined with his feeling of safety and relaxation sent every lesson and protocol out of his mind. Carnal instinct was all that remained and the basest of them all was to get as close to Kallias as possible.

They exchanged kisses of inexperience: innocent and desperate, soon both Erasmus and Kallias were barely pausing to breathe. It became almost a challenge to see who could get closer.

Kallias’ lean arms wrapped tight around his back and waist; Erasmus responded by straddling Kallias’ leg and rocking his hips against the tight muscles there. Their teeth collided clumsily in their haste to kiss. Erasmus felt the cloth on Kallias’ legs beginning to soak through with something that smelled strongly of orange blossoms. Normally he would have been ashamed to see something like…whatever it was spilling from his body to stain a garment but Kallias’ leg moving against him was sending the most delicious feelings shuddering through him.

Kallias’ skin was so smooth, so cool and soothing that Erasmus raced towards something he could not name. His legs jolted, his hips bounced and Kallias held him tight, kisses plastering his feverish forehead.

His entire body twitched for minutes afterwards, heat spilling from his thighs.

“K-Kallias.” He moaned his sanity returning for only a moment. “Did I…?”

“Yes.”

“I-I didn’t mean to…”

“You needed it.” Kallias said in between peppering kisses along Erasmus’ jaw and throat. “It is nothing worthy of bringing you shame. Did it…did it feel nice?”

No one could hear them in this dark, quiet place. Not even the gods, in all their glory, would care to look down upon this mismatched pair discovering beauty in heat like they were. So Erasmus could be honest with his dearest friend.

His forehead touched Kallias’, the tips of their noses as well. He could feel Kallias’ breath against his lips. “Yes. It felt good.” He could feel Kallias smile in front of him and the warmth came rushing back with vengeance. “Again. I-I need it again.”

“Wait a moment.” Kallias pulled back before Erasmus could seek relief again.
In the darkness, even the pearly expanse of Kallias’ body was hard to make out as he stripped the gray chiton from his body. Gently, he peeled the white cloth from Erasmus’ body so the two of them were bare but for the gold on their necks and wrists.

Kallias looked down at Erasmus’ body, drinking it in before lowering himself back down onto the pallet.

With slow hands he touched Erasmus’ collarbones, his shoulders, the small curving muscles of his arm, the lines of his ribcage and Erasmus wanted to melt into the blanket beneath him.

He tried to return the kindness, the love he felt, but his hands shook and he could only grip Kallias’ cheeks, hold gentle fistfuls of his silky hair. Kallias kissed him lightly on the lips.

“My dreams, I…Sussie may I…soothe you?”

Erasmus was hotly, painfully aroused again. He would trust Kallias with his life; there was no fear of trusting him with his body. “Yes Kallias, please.”

With slender fingers, Kallias traced a swift path down to Erasmus’ hips and took hold of him. Erasmus wailed at the feeling. Save for washing, not even Erasmus had touched himself there and the feeling had him thrusting into Kallias’ hand without pause. Kallias kissed him on the mouth, better for practice, as Erasmus spent again with vision gone white.

Kallias wasted no time stroking him gently back to arousal. When he let go, Erasmus’ hips wiggled in a crude dance until hands were placed back on him. Erasmus jerked, his legs spreading instinctively as Kallias’ hands touched lower, seeking the source of orange-scented oil pouring from him.

“Kallias! Kallias!” He squealed as those elegant finger circled him and thrust deep. With his free arm, Kallias pulled Erasmus into his chest to muffle his noise to any passersby. Erasmus dug his nails into Kallias’ fine shoulders and his mouth latched onto whatever bit of body was in front of him, causing Kallias to wail slightly and cup Erasmus’ head.

It was indecent, two slaves dancing against one another and giving into these…urges. Kallias’ fingers were clever as his mind, quick as his mouth; Erasmus sucked his chest and their cries faded to whimpers in skin and hair. Erasmus spilled near constantly over Kallias’ wrist and he was becoming near catatonic with the feelings, the heights of pleasure Kallias was lifting him to.

Kallias explored him thoroughly, touching him over and over in places Erasmus had never touched himself. Kallias’ breath was hot against his neck when he pulled away entirely.

He began to move Erasmus’ limbs, hands trembling and almost worshipful as he slid them along Erasmus’ bare skin. Occasionally he had to pause to press his lips to ankles and thighs and wrists, obviously overcome.

When he had finished, Erasmus was splayed beneath him, Kallias’ hips pressed between his orange-scented legs but not…inside yet.

Erasmus took shaky breaths in attempt to clear his head for this moment.

“You will…dominate me?” He rasped. His roaring heat ached for it.

Kallias leaned down, lips slick and searching. Erasmus gave his up with no fight. “Never.” Kallias whispered breathy, kissing any part of Erasmus he could reach. Cheek, eyelid, temple, ear. “The very beat of your heart, the color of your eyes holds me in submission more than the gold at my
throat. I…want to soothe your heat. But never dominate you.”

A moment of clarity, like the cool press of Kallias’ body, cut through the heat. “D-do you…care for me, dearest Kallias?”

“The only god I worship,” Kallias’ words sounded heavy on his lips, “is the one that keeps you by my side, Sussie.”

Erasmus smiled, warmth blooming in his chest. And he welcomed Kallias to his First Night with open mouth and legs. A small noise escaped from one of them as Kallias slid inside of him.

Unthinkingly, Erasmus grabbed two fistfuls: one of sheets and one of Kallias’ long hair, as his friend set a sweet, torturous pace. Everything about what Kallias was doing had Erasmus digging his heels into the pallet, muffling his cries into Kallias’ mouth. The moment hands touched his hips, Erasmus could hold on no longer and spilled again.

When Kallias did not stop his pace, Erasmus fainted.

His memories thereafter came in glimpses, spots of crystalline clarity that cut through the heat.

At one point Kallias’ face was clear in the pale violet light of dawn and he was crying silently as he kissed Erasmus’ cheeks. “My dreams…all my dreams are pale to this.” And Erasmus twined heavy arms around his neck letting the tears soak his hair as Kallias jolted inside of him.

He woke as the light was fiery and hot, matching the glow in his crotch.

Kallias had fallen asleep beside him and Erasmus was almost regretful that he had to wake his friend out of his exhausted slumber. But his body was not sated and he shook Kallias shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said on his first glimpse of dark blue, “I’m sorry but…I need more.”

Kallias had simply nodded, too exhausted to speak and rolled over onto his back. His body was a work of art but Erasmus couldn’t take the time to admire it, as he only needed one part of Kallias active. As he was not an alpha, he did not have the stamina to last during an entire heat and his pale…cock had begun to drip less and less.

Too desperate to feel shame, Erasmus straddled his friend, riding him as he liked until they both slipped into dreamless exhaustion.

The next time Erasmus’ mind was clear was obviously midday, as his surroundings were yellow and bright. Kallias, who was lying next to him—still sheathed between Erasmus’ legs—had a halo that fought in turns between black and yellow-white.

Erasmus could see past his friend into the humble abode they had taken, finding only a simple kitchen and fireplace behind Kallias’ milky shoulder. It was the first time since his heat began that he had really taken in his surroundings.

With his sense returned he could think about what had been done and dread settled in first.

“Our master,” Kallias’ expression, which had been smooth and watchful, immediately darkened to something deep and furious, “you…you killed him.”

It had only just hit him and Erasmus was breathless at the realization.

He knew Kallias had his own rules for living, that he often flaunted the rules others tried to press
on him, but he never hurt people. Never did Erasmus think his dearest friend, the one he loved most in the world capable of killing another man. It frightened him more to think that he did not know the depth of Kallias’ darkness, than the fact that the man who he had been trained for was dead.

When Kallias found the strength to speak, his voice was thick with rage. “He did not deserve you.”

He flinched as Erasmus stroked his cheek. “Kallias…”

The dark blue eyes Erasmus loved were brimming with unspeakable pain, warring now with the anger. “You were crying for me. I could not get the sound from my ears. When you…when I heard you calling me for help, I…madness gripped me. I only thought to get you out of that wretched place.”

Erasmus embraced Kallias, who now looked to be on the verge of tears. “You are always protecting me, dearest Kallias. How on earth am I to return this burden you carry?”

“Love me,” Kallias whispered, embracing in return, “as you always do.”

When their subsequent kisses brought back the flames that had been at bay, Erasmus was careful to hold onto his mind.

It was this that made him realize why it had been called ‘lovemaking’. How anyone could call this a ‘bad thing’ was beyond his imaginings because Kallias was too sweet for words. Their previous times paled in comparison to this, and when Erasmus found his pleasure he practically sang Kallias’ name through kiss-swollen lips.

Kallias whispered in breathless, beautiful Veretian, his fingers purposefully tangling in Erasmus’ burnished curls. Erasmus had never felt so beloved.

This feeling he never wanted to end.

But the heat subsided, slowly and surely.

His head was clear and belly calm for longer intervals and he could take water and the dried food that Kallias offered him. Less frequent were the times when he had to rouse Kallias from sleep to fill him. The scent of oranges no longer raged out of control and he allowed himself to relax.

He had survived his first heat.

When Erasmus woke it was daylight, though he did not know how many days had passed. In any case the heat had dulled to a faint throb in his hips and backside, his voice, he could tell, was scratchy and dry.

There was pressure across his hip from Kallias’ left arm, a crest behind his neck from Kallias’ other arm acting as a pillow, and that feeling of Kallias—beta though he was—full inside of him. His dearest Kallias was still asleep, breath steady and soft against the spot below his collar.

Erasmus wanted to move.

He knew he smelled of sex and sweat and slick oranges and Kallias; he hoped there was a pitcher of water or a stream somewhere close so that he could cleanse all but one of those scents from him. Water would also soothe his throat, weak from crying. Standing and walking would relieve his
aching muscles.

In the cooling of his heat, he could now feel the aftereffects of such a prolonged period of lovemaking.

Though Kallias’ anatomy had been inadequate to sate all of his urges, what he could provide had been enough. Erasmus knew when he got to his feet his legs would feel jellied. His lower back and buttocks would ache and…that part of him would be swollen and tender from attention.

He tried to slip free but Kallias felt him move and gripped tight in sleep, latching onto Erasmus as though he never intended to let go. Erasmus whimpered as Kallias’ flesh pushed into him anew.

“Sussie…” Came the sleepy voice behind him and Erasmus smiled. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’ll never leave you.” Erasmus rasped. “Save to quench my thirst. I will bring you a cup, dearest Kallias.”

“You need rest still.” Kallias mumbled, shifting slightly. “I don’t want…I don’t want to risk you being seen. Stay.”

“No, no…” Erasmus stroked Kallias’ arm that lay across his waist. “Rest, dearest Kallias. I am rested enough to fetch water.”

The hold around him relaxed then and Erasmus maneuvered away, his legs giving a funny little jolt as Kallias’ pale cock slid from out of him. Even though his heat was over, the spot Kallias had just vacated was slippery and Erasmus contracted his muscles to keep anything from spilling out. It did not occur to him to feel shame for his feelings.

Kallias was smiling up at him from the mussed blankets, ivory body more flushed than normal, and something deep and passionate in his blue eyes. Erasmus leaned towards him instinctively, helpless to that adoration he had always wanted. In that moment he wanted to serve his dearest Kallias, body and soul. It took considerable effort to tear himself away to fetch the water.

As from his hazy observations during his heat, Erasmus could clearly see now that it was some kind of crofter’s or woodcutter’s cottage, to be utilized more in the fall and winter months, but well stocked with dried foods. He located plain earthenware cups and pitcher, which he took out behind the cottage to a small well.

The first cool bucketful was poured down his body. It felt good to be somewhat clean, the chill of the water a balm against his tender body.

The pitcher and cups he filled immediately afterwards and it did not strike him to be embarrassed by his nakedness until he re-entered the cottage.

Kallias was stretched out on the pallet, white and pink save for the black hair between his legs, and he smiled sleepily at Erasmus’ return. “Don’t turn away, Sussie. You’re perfect.” He accepted the cup of water with one hand, the other wrapping around Erasmus’ waist. “You are perfect like this.”

“Is it strange,” Erasmus stroked the dark hair he loved in between sips of his own water, “that I have bathed next to you a thousand times…but only now I am…shy?”

Kallias looked up at him in all seriousness. “Only you were never reluctant to bathe. After fourteen, any time I saw your naked body,” his ears flushed pink, “or touched your skin and hair…my body reacted. As any boy’s would at seeing the one he cares for…unclothed.”
Eramus flushed at the thought. “I-I had not…I did not…realize.”

“I hid it very well, no?”

“How?” Although he knew betas like Kallias suffered not even half of an omega’s heat on their arousal, Erasmus could not imagine having to hold such desire in, of remaining untouched.

Kallias laughed into Erasmus’ thigh. “Why do you think I was so fond of bathing in cold water? Cold water stops the normal arousal. Some days I had to run to the ocean to hide it.”

Erasmus did recall then, of all the times Kallias lounged up to his waist or chest in cool water, his eyes never wavering from Erasmus. “Oh. Oh.”

Kallias kissed Erasmus’ stomach, his eyes flicking briefly down to stare at Erasmus’ exposed cock. “Would you like me to tell you what I did when the ocean could not calm me? Who I thought of in those moments?”

“Prince Laurent of Vere.” Erasmus guessed as he blushed furiously.

“You are more beautiful.” Kallias promised, laying another kiss.

“You lie.” Erasmus laughed, kissing Kallias’ forehead.

“We have never laid eyes on the man.” Kallias insisted. “Maybe he is lovely but…they have not seen you by comparison.” Cool fingers poked at Erasmus’ freckles. “My beautiful Erasmus.” Erasmus kissed him again.

Erasmus gave Kallias a little more time to wake up before posing his most pressing concern. “The heat is abating. What are we to do? Where will we go?”

They could not return to their master’s villa, that much was certain. Doubtless by now their master’s body had been discovered, their absence noted. Erasmus had no idea how far Kallias had taken them from the villa but it had been far enough to avoid detection thus far. However, he knew they could not stay in this cottage. They would be discovered at some point and there was no way of knowing what those people were like.

Kallias nodded as though he had thought these exact things before. At least he was clever and could come up with an acceptable course of action.

“Vere. We will head north to Vere. First we must find a way to take off the gold on me; we’ll leave your collar to prevent anyone from biting you. But that gold can buy us a horse and supplies. Maybe even a cottage like this near Delpha.”

“Our oath.” Erasmus murmured, blushing. Never once had he actually thought such a thing would happen but Kallias grinned bright.

“You remember…”

“Of course. You will have to speak for me.”

“I will teach you Veretian.” Kallias promised, so overcome with delight that he kissed each one of Erasmus’ fingertips. “We can learn together. Everything they would not let us have we will take with our own hands.”

“I trust you dearest Kallias. I trust you with my life.”
The next day held no promise of a better future, but the dream of such a thing was lovely. Hand-in-hand they left their safe haven before sunrise…and everything changed.
Chapter Notes

I'm so happy you all loved the last chapter! These two finally admitted their love for each other and this chapter signals the start of arc 2 of the story. In this arc there will be a lot of new (familiar) friends, one of which who will appear at the end of this chapter ;D Also, the horse mentioned towards the end of the chapter is a grullo; I love the shimmering gray-black of its' coat and I wanted something new aside from the normal black that most headcanons seem to favor. Finally....I hope you all haven't forgotten who is writing this story :))) Enjoy?

VIII. La route brisée

Erasmus’ lungs were on fire. He knew parts of his feet would be bleeding from slapping against rough stones and sharp branches but he refused to slow. His only focus was escape.

Kallias was in front of him, his ivory skin dappling under the leaves as he ran. Occasionally he would stop to listen for the inevitable hoofbeats before leading the way through the underbrush in attempt to escape. Hope had fled from him as swiftly as men on horseback.

They had only been an hour from their cottage, the sun barely cracking the horizon when the earth seemed to tremble beneath their feet. Kallias squeezed Erasmus’ hand so hard that they both stopped in their tracks to watch and listen. Kallias whispered something in Veretian that sounded very much like a curse before he looked to Erasmus. His eyes seemed black in the light and the fear.

“Horses.” He whispered.

Kallias gripped his hand before Erasmus could even begin to comprehend what that might mean for them and he yanked them into the brush before they could be seen. He dragged Erasmus deep into the brush, the two of them ducking low amongst the leaves.

Kallias practically covered Erasmus’ body with his and Erasmus could feel the rapid pulse of his heart as he watched the road.

“Keep your eyes open.” Someone authoritative called from the road. “It would be difficult to avoid notice on foot.”

“And there is no need for weaponry.” Erasmus clapped his hand over his mouth as the voice sounded very much like Aleksis. “They are not trained for any sort of battle.”

When the voices faded, Kallias moved and Erasmus could look up at him; he looked truly stricken.

“I could not see their faces but they are no bandits.” He whispered. “Their clothes and horses are too fine. I think…they are our dead masters’ men. Or men sent from the kyroi of this place.” This assessment chilled Erasmus to his core and he wished the gods would see them to safety.

It never occurred to him that people would be hunting them for his and Kallias’ crime but…
They had killed a man, their master who had paid a fortune for the both of them. Erasmus had given his First Night to his heart’s choice, a beta and a fellow slave at that. He clutched the gold around his throat, wondering how long his throat might stay intact if they were caught.

He gripped Kallias’ clothes, his lips so close to Kallias’ that they might have appeared to be locked in an intimate embrace by a passing bystander. “What are we to do, Kallias?”

Kallias was brave enough to close the distance and crushed his lips against Erasmus’ with near-desperation.

“I will not let them have you, Sussie. I will see you out of this forest unharmed.”

They had stayed like that for some time, pressed as frightened rabbits into the forest floor until Kallias felt safe to venture back to the path for a cursory glance. He poised at the edge of the forest, beautiful and still as one of those elusive white deer so prized by Akielon hunters. Erasmus watched him in terror, unable to move from his spot.

“Are they gone?” He whispered.

“Come to me,” Kallias motioned to him, “quickly, my Sussie.”

Erasmus ran to him. “We should stay off the road…in the shadows of the trees. In safety.” He was not as clever as Kallias but he knew that horses could not so easily run through the heavy forest.

“Yes…” Kallias whispered, taking hold of his hand. “We must try not to even breathe until we are far from this place.”

Erasmus nodded and they stepped gently by the edge of the path. Kallias stood closer to the packed dirt so that Erasmus was better shielded by the dark green. He was skittish, his thumb tracing quick circles on Erasmus’ hand.

And the gods cursed them…for their luck did not hold.

Erasmus’ heart and breath froze when he heard the horses and the shouts. “THERE IS A BOY ON THE PATH!” So they had begun to run, cutting deep into the forest as their feet were torn to shreds and their lungs became laced with fire.

Erasmus stumbled and had to brace his body against one of the trees so that breaths of sharpened glass could slice down his throat. Kallias’ dark eyes looked around in panic but he let Erasmus pause to catch his breath.

“I-I…am weak…forgive me…” Drawing breath was so painful Erasmus could not even cry.

“Forgive me…I cannot…run…much longer…”

“You have to!” He gasped, his tone pleading. “If they catch us—.”

He looked up then and Erasmus realized he was not used to seeing fear on Kallias’ face, as he was usually so sure of himself. In a way, it was more inspiring than any words of comfort Kallias might offer. He breathed deep a few times to steady himself and took Kallias’ hand again.

“L-Let us run…”

As lean as they were, it seemed odd how difficult it was to move quickly through the forest without leaving evidence of their presence. He wondered if Kallias even knew which way they were going as he wove without reason through the forest. At one point they even leapt onto the
hard packed earth of the road and Kallias’ face drained of what little color remained to it.

Any roads were dangerous.

The second time they were unlucky enough to encounter the road, only Erasmus made it to the opposite side unseen; Kallias practically threw himself past the trees as a horse cantered up to the side of the path.

Erasmus kept running, pausing only to snatch Kallias’ hand and yank him forward, but he heard the voice trail off, “He has taken to the woods! I will follow on foot! Headed towards—.”

The hope of getting a head start on the men chasing them gave Erasmus a burst of energy and he actually outstripped Kallias, pulling his friend along.

“They saw us!” He whispered over and over to himself, near to babbling with the fear and adrenaline.

“No…only me,” Kallias responded in a gasp when he could find the words.

Erasmus’ lungs ached when he skidded to a halt, all hope drowned.

They stood at the edge of a riverbank, the water itself swollen from the spring rains and moving at a fairly rapid pace. Not even the most experienced swimmer could swim to the opposite bank without being swept downstream. Erasmus and Kallias looked at it, Erasmus seeing the very river of the afterlife.

Whether they followed the river upstream or downstream or attempted to cross, they would most certainly be found and captured by the men chasing them. Doubling back would earn them the same fate, and so they stared as their plans rushed away with the water.

The sound of men running through the brush had them both looking at each other and Erasmus could see the defeat in Kallias’ eyes. Beautiful eyes…dark blue as the sea and Erasmus wondered if this would be the last time he would be allowed to look into them.

Kallias seemed to be doing the same thing, looking quickly at Erasmus’ face. His eyes flicked from curls to lips to eyes to the freckles on his cheeks as if memorizing him. The sound of men approaching yanked Erasmus’ focus from the one he loved and he looked with terror to the trees.

His attention was drawn back when Kallias made a sharp noise of pain and gripped both of Erasmus’ hands in his own.

“Sussie. Erasmus.” He whispered quickly, kissing Erasmus’ hands with cold lips. He looked as though he had so much to say and was trying to decide what was most important to him. “Please listen to me. I will meet you again, I swear. Meet me by the shores of the river but if you have difficulty finding me, remember the smell of sea salt. I’ll smell like sea salt. And bring four coins. My Erasmus, please promise me you’ll bring four coins.”

It seemed such an odd thing.

Erasmus wanted to argue and ask him but they had not the time. How would he possibly remember this specific strip of river? How could Kallias be sure they would meet there? Why only four coins? He was not clever, like Kallias; he had no idea what Kallias was planning.

“I swear it,” was the only thing he could bring himself to say. Kallias swiftly kissed him on the mouth the moment the words were out of his mouth.
Kallias smiled and it broke Erasmus’ heart. “Live, my Erasmus.”

His palms pressed flat against Erasmus’ chest and, before Erasmus could question his intentions, he pushed hard and Erasmus stumbled backwards. His arms reached out for Kallias but Kallias pulled back, smiling as he cried.

“Live.”

Erasmus plunked into the river, his blanket-chiton already billowing like sails and pulling him downstream. By the time he rose to the surface and cleared the curls from his eyes, Kallias was already thirty paces from him and shrinking into a spot of ivory on the far banks.

Despite their master’s men rapidly approaching, Kallias did not move. He watched Erasmus float away with the current and mouthed ‘live’ over and over again.

A bend in the river and Erasmus gave a watery cry as Kallias disappeared from view.

A moment later there was a response: a high-pitched scream that echoed through the trees and destroyed what little innocence remained in Erasmus. The broken bits floated with him downstream and the forest was quiet.

When Erasmus woke up it was late in the morning and he was lying naked on the side of the river. His wrap, left on the bushes, was dry and he hastened to tie it around him, the effect more like a bundled baby than a young man in a chiton.

He got to his feet despite the way his legs trembled and cleared his wild, snarled curls from his eyes. Leaves and twigs fell around him as he did so. His feet were throbbing and dirty, having been torn apart by running barefoot in the forest. Any skin that had been exposed to the sun was burnt angry red. He was well aware that he was a mess.

But there was a feeling like a thorn in his chest that he simply could not ignore.

Tears were beyond him now; he was so terrified, so upset, so broken-hearted he could only make soft noises of pain. Like a wounded animal, he whimpered through his clenched teeth as he gingerly wrapped the end of his garment over his aching shoulders, hiding his collar. He did not know what to do with himself or which way to go.

Never in his life had he laid eyes on a map. He could not get to Vere on his own; he could not turn himself in the direction of the closest village and the price of his freedom hit him with a force that made him want to sink to his knees.

A price he had been unwilling to pay.

“Kallias,” the word slipped through him against his will. Seawater through a shattered amphora, the pieces cut him deep. “Kallias!” He cried it louder, his voice breaking on that beloved name and the consequent cries that escaped from him were nearly inhuman.

He was not worth this. That beautiful, clever, dearest Kallias was gone from his arms forever… Erasmus did not know what could motivate him to walk into this new life.

He suddenly understood why Kallias had killed their master. Erasmus would rather throw himself at the man’s mercy, resume his duties as an obedient golden slave than have Kallias forever taken from him. Despite his vulnerable state, Erasmus allowed himself a moment by the riverbank to
grieve his unspeakable loss.

When he finally found the strength to carry on, Erasmus followed the river’s flow in slow, reluctant steps.

Lost in the forest and absent his life’s greatest source of comfort, he stayed by an easy source of water so he would not die of thirst. And the sound of water reminded him of a simpler time…a time of innocence that had come to an abrupt halt less than a fortnight ago.

He walked in this daze for hours and felt nothing.

His tender feet did not feel the pain of the uneven ground, he did not see the beauty of his surroundings and was not gripped by the pangs of hunger. The only part remaining sensitive to his surroundings were his ears; the slightest rustle had him pausing in his step and holding his breath.

Usually it was only an errant breeze or some small animal hidden in the thicket, but the moment he heard the sound of men and horses, he fully intended to throw himself into the river again. Let fate do with him what it would.

A small rabbit bounded past him at one point and he followed the graceful form of it as it leapt silently to his right. And then…his eye lingered on something else amidst the dense green that had swallowed the little hare: a wide strip of earth unnaturally packed flat for such a wild area. Though his heart was pounding, Erasmus slipped through the foliage with quiet, hesitant steps in order to investigate.

It was a road.

Erasmus touched his filthy toes against the very edge of the road and glanced down the length of it in both directions. Though it was well maintained, no one was within view and Erasmus took a moment or two to decide what he was going to do.

The road led to somewhere at the very least.

After some deliberation, Erasmus decided to trace the road in hopes of it leading to a village; and if anyone were to pass him on the road, he could be back to the river in only a few quick paces. He continued the way the river had been flowing.

He followed the road even as the sun was highest and warmest in the sky and still no village or town appeared in the distance. There was only endless forest and Erasmus wondered after some time if he had drowned in the river and he was wandering endlessly through the afterlife.

There was the sound of a branch snapping behind him and Erasmus whirled, his hand clutching the fabric tight around his neck so that his golden collar was obscured from view. He was in such a state it took him a moment to see the other person half-hidden in the undergrowth.

Three men stepped into view, slow and with hands upraised in a gesture of peace.

Erasmus looked at them carefully, seeing their travel-worn clothes and watchful eyes. They had the sun-browned skin of men who spent hours outdoors and they were lightly attired with only skeins of water and small knives at their hips. They were looking at him as carefully as he looked at them.

“Little golden one, what are doing so far from the border?” One of them asked in concern, taking a step towards Erasmus. “This close…are you Veretian? A traveler perhaps? Separated from your companions?”
“We have not seen any—.”

One of the others stepped forward to speak in hushed Akielon but the first man who had spoken, obviously the leader, stopped him. Erasmus was not downwind of them and he was not close enough to catch their scent. Even so...he took care to hide his throat and wrists.

“The boy does not speak.”

“He probably doesn’t speak our tongue,” the interrupted man grumbled.

“He’s terrified, the pretty thing.” The first man said with all confidence. Erasmus wanted to lean towards; but experience and crushing heartbreak had made him cautious. A callous hand beckoned him closer and a smile. “You are Akielon, I can see it in your eyes; you understand, don’t you golden boy? Come here.”

Erasmus shifted, one foot sliding forward at the direct order but his body remaining tight in place.

“Come over, boy. We will treat your wounds, give you water and take you into town. You need not be afraid.” He smiled and took another step forward. “We are travelers, like yourself. We only... want to help.”

His voice was deep and gentle. Erasmus trembled with the want to sprint to protection, the safety he had always desired. He was weak, he was ruined by the want of it.

His feet shifted in the dirt of the road and all three men brightened to see him move towards them. He only took one small step before stopping again, his instinct preventing him from moving any further. Expressions darkened immediately and Erasmus, for all his training in reading the sensitive nature of human expression, was on edge again. He could not shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong.

“Why do you stop, little one?” His voice was light but there was desperation there as well. Erasmus slid his feet back as far as would be allowed.

It struck him then: why would travelers stray so far from the path? Why would they hide like thieves in the bushes?

Breath came cold, despite the heat of the afternoon and Erasmus made his decision on that on uncertainty.

He turned heel and ran.

Curses rang out in the snarl of wolves and Erasmus heard them as they hastened to chase him. He had to run, he had to live; it was the last thing Kallias had begged of him.

“Come back to us, pretty boy!”

Erasmus glanced to the brush, wondering if he could make it through the forest to hide or leap into the river. But these men were probably bandits or highwaymen and would be able to maneuver through the forest with chilling ease.

“You cannot run forever!” They called out sensibly and Erasmus screamed to the leaves.

He could hear them close behind him and, aside from the red-hot breaths that sliced through his chest, pain came from knowing that no civilization would appear before him. Eventually he would be caught and then...and then...
There was a whistle that rustled his curls and he screamed at the same time one of his pursuers did. The man screamed in a gurgle as an arrow embedded itself in his meaty neck, his companions skidding to an astonished halt behind him. Erasmus again screamed and tripped as an enormous horse—the largest horse he had ever seen—burst from the trees to his left in a graceful leap.

Erasmus had fallen to the path and the horse landed solidly in front of him, its coat the shimmering gray-black of smoke and charcoal and polished dark stones from the sea.

“What have we here? Out for some fresh air?”

Erasmus’ head snapped up at the sound of that smooth voice.

It was the delicate, lilting accent he had come to love over the years. The inaudible h’s, the soft caress of the Akielon vowels, Erasmus could hear the cultured, wickedness of a Veretian voice in a crowd of thousands. It was Kallias’ accent coming from the man astride the horse. Erasmus could not see the speaker’s face, but he did see a fine, lean form, an elaborate, heavy-looking weapon resting easily on one pale arm, and a short shock of silken, pale gold hair.

When no one was quick to respond, there was a pretty bell-like laugh. “Forgive me, it seemed your friend was exerting himself. I thought he might need more air in his throat.”

“Veretian bitch!” One of the men could no longer hold back his venom and Erasmus flinched at the shouting and the crude language.

Lean shoulders tensed and Erasmus thought it was due to bearing the insult. However, in the next breath there were two swift twangs, like an incorrect strum of the kithara, and Erasmus heard the sound of two bodies hitting the earth. When he glanced through the horses’ legs, he saw the bodies of the bandits who had been chasing him in the same position his master had been in.

Surely it was unlucky for a pleasure slave to see so much death in so short a period of time.

There was a little noise of satisfaction and then the man dismounted so that he was standing in front of Erasmus. The strong, self-assured scent of an alpha immediately overcame him and, combined with his training, Erasmus’ body fought to prostrate itself in front of his defender.

But he was still so terrified, so shocked from…everything, that he could not find the power to move. He cursed his own weakness.

“Are you alright?” The voice was the tide, water over river stones: gentle, cool and soothing. “Are you hurt, little one?” The man in front of him crouched onto the path, uncaring that his ivory pale knees and the hem of his teal chiton were pressing onto the dirt.

Erasmus flinched in spite of himself when the weight of a hand settled gently on the top of his head. The hand was removed immediately.

When he made no movement or response the next question was fraught with concern. “Have they hurt you? I should not have killed them so quickly; forgive me.” An alpha asking his forgiveness? It was unthinkable. “Look at me, little one. I’ll not harm you, I swear it.”

Promises aside, a direct order from an alpha was something Erasmus could cling to.

He looked up and his heart stopped.

The large, curious eyes that took up his vision were the bluest he had ever seen. Where Kallias’ had been so dark that they looked black in the low light, these seemed like they would glow blue
even in the dead of night. The color of the summer sky ringed with long lashes in the darkest gold, it took Erasmus a few moments to get a good look at the rest of the man’s face.

He was Veretian, if not from his accent then from his winter-white skin and, by the gods, he was beautiful.

His large eyes were cat-shaped and, combined with the constant upturn of his lips, it gave his face a mischievous look. He had an elegant throat and high cheeks and skin so fine and smooth, Erasmus almost envied him for it. The more he looked, the more beautiful the man appeared.

Those eyes took quick stock of Erasmus, flicking around his face as if cataloguing him. Those quick eyes duly noted every wayward curl and tiny cut, every speck of dirt and freckle and Erasmus felt very conscious of his appearance. He tried to duck his head again but slender fingers tilted his chin up. Blue eyes took in the ring of gold around his neck.

“You are a slave,” He murmured with an edge that was to be expected of a foreigner. “Are you hurt? Are you lost? What is your name?”

Erasmus had to make a choice.

He had no idea whether or not the man in front of him was truly gentle or was a monster under a beautiful shell. The scent of him did not seem predatory and he wondered what Kallias would do. Kallias…

The very thought of him, the familiar ring of the Veretian accent pierced directly through his open wounds. The man in front of him recoiled a bit as Erasmus curled in on himself, gripping his chest and howling with the pain of it all.

He wanted so badly to believe that this man was good and kind.

His hands and voice were gentle and he doubted any bandits were so finely attired. But then…he could be equally cruel and shoot Erasmus through the throat with that crossbow of his. Erasmus wondered if he would always be so fearful of strangers. He made up his mind in a haze of panic. It was the familiar, lovely Veretian accent that swayed his decision.

“Help me please.” He finally whispered when words would come. “My name is…Erasmus. Please, please don’t hurt me.”

There was a noise like a hiss and when he looked up the golden man’s expression changed swiftly from fury to understanding. A gentle hand patted his back. “I would not—I will never harm you, Erasmus.” The beautiful young man allowed Erasmus a few more moments to compose himself before helping him to his feet. “I will bring you back to Ma—my home and we can take care of you.” And then under his breath, “They will be looking for me in any case.”

With a soft, reassuring pat to Erasmus’ shoulder, the young man turned on his heel and faced the enormous horse that had been patiently waiting for the both of them to finish their conversation.

Its’ large gray-black head swiveled to watch his owner and the Veretian man smiled, scratching it behind one ear as he spoke to it in bubbly Veretian.

With grace and ease Erasmus could only pray for, his rescuer mounted his horse in one fluid motion and settled himself onto the saddle. He reached out one hand to help Erasmus, but Erasmus hesitated. If the man were a villain it would be his last chance to escape.

“Erasmus.” His tone was patient and understanding, “I will not harm you, I swear it.”
The memory spilled over his mind in a rush of cold water. “We can go to Vere and I can be a docteur.” It was a beautiful dream, one of an innocent, one of a child but it was all Erasmus had and the man in front of him was Veretian.

He took the hand that was offered.
IX. Un prince en or

Chapter Notes

It's been a while haha but I have not abandoned the story; I just have...gone off the beaten path a bit with my outline. I'm so glad you all were happy to see the arrival of our favorite golden prince and now we have some other familiar faces (also, heads up, I canon all the Akielon men to have luscious flowing locks)! Just an aside, I promise Erasmus will not be a traumatic mess through the rest of the story; he's just had a long ass week and Laurent will help him grow from it, I swear. Also Laurent and Damen's personalities will be slightly different from Erasmus' POV haha! They'll also have tweaks personality-wise in general because in this story Laurent was never abused by his uncle; there are other reasons he is prickly and untrusting though... Damen on the other hand was never sold into slavery in this story so it is a bit harder for him to empathize with slaves; he's trying though for love of his husband and realizing that all omega slaves might not be treated very well. Also, Laurent is still getting the hang of Akielon so when he speaks it he'll occasionally make little mistakes haha! Enjoy!

IX. Un prince en or

The young man in front of him liked to go fast.

Erasmus latched onto his back and gripped his chiton as he spurred the giant horse into motion. It was like soaring; it was the fastest Erasmus had ever gone and he was terrified by it. His stomach dropped to his feet and he could not even make a noise until he managed to unclench his teeth; even then it was a tiny moan into the fine blue fabric of the man's chiton.

The horse slowed instantly, still at a lively pace, but with all of its' feet still on the ground. Erasmus felt a gentle pat on his clenched hands.

"Erasmus, do I go too quickly?"

"It…is your horse, my lord. And you are the better rider." He bit back the truth, "You command it as you see fit…” He gripped tighter in preparation for the frightening speed to resume but there was only another gentle pat on his hand.

"I would not have you fall off and hurt yourself.” He smiled back at Erasmus and Erasmus was shocked by just how beautiful he was; were all Veretians so beautiful? “And besides…” his smile took on a devious quality that Erasmus was quite familiar with, “I like the idea of making my shadow wait for me.”

Erasmus wanted to question what he meant by such a vague statement, but it was not his place to ask. “You are too kind.” He responded.

Instead, he waited for a moment, allowing his heartbeat to gain the rhythm of the horse’s gait. His hellish morning and this gentle rocking actually began to lull him into a haze, his exhaustion
making him bold and foolish enough to pose a question.

“I-if it pleases you, how long until we reach our destination?”

He did not sound displeased in the least; in fact he sounded relieved. “Marlas should be within an
hour’s ride at this pace. You can rest until then if you like. I won’t let you fall.”

“You are too kind.”

“You keep saying this.” There was a laugh in his tone. “I cannot wait for you to meet Nikandros.
He will ride from Marlas by tomorrow morning if you continue stating such things aloud.”

Erasmus knew nothing of any ‘Nikandros’ but Marlas sounded familiar to him. He wondered
where he had heard of it before. He hoped it was by the border, as Marlas itself did have a twist of
Veretian to it. The thought slipped from his mind as he rested his filthy head on the young man’s
back and fell into a fitful sleep.

If he dreamt, he could not remember, but he did know what woke him from sleep.

There was the sound of more than one horse galloping towards him, and his heart seized in his
chest. Even in sleep he knew he had to run from the horses, that they were coming for him, and he
tried to wrench away.

There was the sound of Veretian, hissed as if in a curse, and Erasmus was yanked back into the
waking world as his beautiful companion gripped his arm to keep Erasmus from falling off the
back of the horse. His other hand was reining the horse to a halt in the middle of the path.

“Erasmus, you are all right?” His voice concerned and thick with accent having switched so
quickly between languages.

“Yes.” Instinctively, Erasmus gripped the man’s middle, but he shuddered upon realizing that the
sound of approaching horses had not lessened. They were coming for him.

“Ah, here he comes.”

There were three men on horseback slowing to halt in front of them on the path and Erasmus tried
to shrink behind his companion’s back before noticing that his lovely face was relaxed and even
gleeful.

He obviously knew the men in front of them and Erasmus felt safe hazarding a glance at them.

All three were clean and armed—two with swords and spear, and one with a bow and arrow—and
their clothes were simple, but very fine.

The man on the left was Akielon, with his dark skin, full lips, and curly black hair that hung long
past his ribcage. He had a handsome, sweet face dotted with dark freckles—perhaps he was only a
year or two older than Erasmus himself—and his body looked as though it had been carved from a
solid chunk of rock.

The one on the far right appeared more Veretian, if not from his paler skin than from the fact that
he was wearing knee-high leather boots with his chiton. His brown hair was cropped short and a
long frond of wheat was clutched between his teeth.

The Akielon man in the middle was probably only a little under thirty years, but the expression on
his face was rarely seen outside men of twice his years, dark circles of exhaustion under his
almond-shaped eyes. His wavy, dark hair was tied back and his mouth was in something like a grimace under his short beard. The man in the middle obviously had seniority, as Erasmus’ companion seemed focused on him and his obvious chagrin.

“Good afternoon Nikandros.” Erasmus’ savior addressed the man in the middle. “I must admit, I am disappointed to find you and not my husband come to greet me on my return.”

The man gave a deep sigh, so deep that Erasmus wondered if his soul had ascended to the heavens from out of his mouth, and he pinched the bridge of his fine nose. “You are aware then, that we have other horses in the stables? Damen would have gone after you had you not—yet again—taken his horse.”

“I like his horse.” Erasmus’ savior patted the horse’s elegant neck and Erasmus could tell it was only to vex Nikandros. “And besides, such provisions were in our vows, no? What is his is also mine.”

His smile was angelic as Nikandros looked to the sky, apparently begging the gods to strike him dead on the spot and spare him any more word games.

“There are not many others that can keep pace. Nor ones that can…accommodate his frame. Trikymia is in need of new shoes and Daphni and Krinos are close to foaling. Kapnos is the only one who could be ridden today.”

The young man laughed then, his face even lovelier in laughter. “And yet I love the idea of seeing him on a horse under eighteen hands.”

“It looks…undignified.”

The man laughed again, blooming with delight. “I always hope he will follow on a child’s pony.” The man with the wheat in his mouth coughed to hide his own amusement and Nikandros sent the man a withering glare.

“He waits for you impatiently.” Nikandros suddenly looked nervous as though ‘impatience’ did not even come close to the proper description. “You know that this road is plagued by bandits and thieves…”

“I came armed.” He gestured to the crossbow strapped to his saddle and the sword at his hip. “And glad for it. There were some men on the road who had ill-intent to this one.” He shifted in his saddle and suddenly Erasmus felt six eyes trained on him. He lowered his head immediately.

“An omega?” Nikandros asked levelly after breathing in deep.

“A slave.” Erasmus’ companion responded with a touch of fury in his tone. “Lost and terrified in the woods. He’s coming with us to Marlas and I will have words with certain men about this situation.”

Nikandros sighed again at the iron cadence in that spoken conviction.

The sound of a horse trotting closer and Erasmus felt a firm gentle hand tilt his chin up. It was the man who appeared Veretian to him, and he looked at Erasmus with quick eyes and a tilted smile.

Rapid Veretian from his mouth sounded lewd, and it took him a moment to switch to Akielon, the words crudely wielded on his tongue. “Boy has yellow eyes.”

“Gold,” Erasmus’ companion corrected in Akielon before switching back to his native tongue. The
hand was taken away and Erasmus was grateful for it. He found that he did not quite care for the touch of strange men.

“I see you are set in your mind.” Nikandros groaned. “Very well. I know he will deny you nothing. Bring the boy with you, but let us return before your husband tears apart all of Delpha in search for you.”

Erasmus’ savior smiled fondly at the thought and nudged his husband’s fine horse into motion.

“What is your name, little one?” The freckled man asked as they came abreast of him. Erasmus was thankful to the gods he seemed content to keep his hands to himself.

When Erasmus did not speak after a few moments, the beautiful Veretian man patted his hand as if to assure him.

“Erasmus. His name is Erasmus.”

Marlas was the largest Akielon city closest to the border of Vere and had once been part of Veretian territory, at least according to the soft, informative whispers of the man who had rescued him. But aside from these small tidbits of information, the ride into the city was very quiet between the five of them. After about half of an hour on the forest path, the trees began to thin and small cottages appeared amidst them. One little girl chasing a goose paused and gave a gap-toothed grin and a wave.

Every one of the men smiled and greeted her in return, even Erasmus feeling safe enough to give a small wave as he passed.

When the forest thinned to nothingness, Erasmus was confronted with a sight he had never seen before. Farmers walked through fields that seemingly stretched endless into the horizon, either checking the small green shoots that pushed from the earth or pruning their trees as fat little goats munched on the weeds. What land was not for crops were filled with wildflowers. Under a wide blue sky, it seemed so calming, that Erasmus did not want to leave.

His savior spoke in Veretian as he too looked around and waved to the farmers, and then translated. “Akielos is very beautiful.”

In the middle of all of these wide, sweeping vistas sat the city of Marlas.

Obviously operating as a fort in the past, it had high, white walls and a large gate to keep out any unwelcome visitors. But now Akielos was peaceful and the walls served as nothing more than to remind of Akielos of its’ military might and fine architecture. Erasmus was appropriately impressed.

It had been so long since he had been in the city; he had forgotten the noise of hundreds of people and the press of buildings around him. There were wisps of scent he had not smelled since childhood and it was a struggle not to whip his head back and forth to take it all in. It felt like a dream…

He saw the small details: flowers and vines hung from a small balcony, flaky leek phyllo wrapped in paper, the sound of unknown languages raised in conversation or bargaining.

Despite the wide road his group traveled on, the crowds gave a wide berth for their horses. Erasmus had the distinct feeling that people were staring at him but he bowed his head in
unwillingness to see if they could see the deep shame he bore.

To keep from losing his mind in the middle of the street, Erasmus took to wondering which villa belonged the young Veretian man in front of him.

More than likely, he was the son of a merchant, wealthy enough to hire Nikandros and these guards; perhaps related to a cloth merchant judging by the fine weave of his chiton. But they rode past the gates of many fine villas and did not halt.

The buildings grew larger and more lavish; the dark part of Erasmus’ mind wondered if there were slaves within these walls…Beautiful and safe and loved…

The horses slowed slightly and there came a shout from behind an enormous gate emblazoned with red and gold and black. “They have returned! Open the gates and let them through!”

Erasmus peered over his rescuer’s shoulder as they rode beneath the arch of the gate.

It must have been the largest house in the entire city.

It was three times as large as his master’s estate had been, and the main building was a style the likes of which Erasmus had never seen before. It was similar to Akielon building but it was also so very…ornate. The gardens were frothing with yellow-white lilies.

And in the center of it all, pacing next to a pool the same color as his rescuer’s eyes, was the biggest man Erasmus had ever seen.

He was a classical southerner: a straight nose, sun-darkened skin, darker eyes, and inky black hair that curled and waved unruly almost to his waist. He was built like a bull, like a sculptor’s dream; his muscular chest stretching his red and gold chiton with each breath. His arms and legs looked to be thicker around than Erasmus’ waist and he thought that if the man had it in his mind, he could get into the fortified city walls, simply by tearing the gate down with his bare hands.

He was at once beautiful and incredibly intimidating, even from a distance.

At the sound of horses, he ceased his pacing and looked over to them. On seeing Erasmus’ savior, the giant man smiled wide in delight and relief. The expression transformed him, making him look young and boyish.

The young Veretian man who had brought Erasmus here was beaming, his pale cheeks flushed in private delight. Their expressions gave hint that this was his savior’s aforementioned husband and it was clear why other horses were inadequate for him.

After helping Erasmus down from Kapnos, his blond companion was immediately caught up into what was sure to be a bone-crushing embrace. His Akielon partner nuzzled his face into that fine golden hair and murmured surprisingly fluent Veretian. Love and happiness radiated from the two of them with such strength, it was difficult to imagine they had ever been apart.

It seemed so very personal, too intrusive to watch; Erasmus averted his eyes and felt his cheeks burn.

It took Nikandros clearing his throat for the two of them to seemingly remember that there were other people present in the courtyard. And the giant man must have noticed Erasmus’ unfamiliar form.

His steps were light for one so big, but Erasmus was alerted to his presence by the shadow he cast:
so tall that he blotted out the very sun and plunged Erasmus into immediate anxiety. The scent of him seemed to be physically pushing on Erasmus’ shoulders, his voice deeper than rolls of thunder.

“Today you bring back a man?”

Large, gentle fingers touched his chin, as if to tilt it up for a better look, and Erasmus’ training finally kicked in. He sank to his knees on the marble, his entire body stretched out in utter supplication.

The sheet slipped off his shoulders without him clutching it and he knew they could see him as he was: dirty and burnt, bruised from Kallias’ lips and the branches and stones that had collided with him in his long journey, his collar glinting gold around his neck.

“A slave.” There was a swift intake of breath. “An omega slave. Laurent, please tell me you did not a kill a man to bring this boy back here.”

His accented voice was poisonously victorious. “You are wrong. I killed three men.”

“Gods above.” His husband groaned.

“Bandits, Damianos.” Nikandros amended quickly to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings. “They were supposedly chasing him along the road and possibly had him held captive for—.”

Erasmus drowned out the rest of their speculations when two words truly sank into his mind. He suddenly found himself short of breath and his perfect form wavered with shaking limbs. It could not be.

Surely there were other men named Damianos in Marlas…who were married to beautiful Veretian men named Laurent…and lived in a house the size of a palace…

He suddenly felt as if he could vomit on the fine marble.

There was a swift conversation raging around him that went from Akielon to Veretian in turns and he could not keep track of the witticisms that were traded. With no warning, gentle hands hoisted Erasmus to his feet and he was pressed close against the side of the young man he was beginning to suspect was Prince Laurent of Vere.

“He is your responsibility. You have an honored duty to shield and care for all of your—.” His brow furrowed a little and his lips twisted as he fell silent in thinking. His husband watched him with a soft smile as he made a soft tsk noise. “How do you say this,” and then he spoke a word in Veretian.

“You must take care of your vulnerable subjects.” His pronunciation was as if he had known the word all along. His husband looked to relent simply based on the quick adaptation.

“As in all things,” He spoke, his smile widening, “I am in awe of your logic. Of course Erasmus can stay with us, if he wishes.” That warm, dark gaze was suddenly turned on him and Erasmus knew. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this man was his king.

“You are Damianos,” He gasped, clutching the gold at his throat; only the firm hand around his shoulders kept him from sinking to the floor again, from melting into it. “My king…Exalted One…”
“I am.” Damianos replied, presumably surprised that someone did not recognize him.

Erasmus felt light-headed as he looked to his right and saw Prince Laurent of Vere.

He was handsome man, a beauty unparalleled with a face that would bring Akielos to its’ knees. His hair was finer than liquid white-gold, eyes cornflower blue, his skin the satiny smooth white of polished ivory. He was intelligent enough to argue with a king in at least two languages. He had the bearing of a prince, born and raised. He was strong and quick, he had poise and polish and grace. And his smile was so very sweet.

He tried to sink to his knees but Prince Laurent was strong and kept him on his feet.

Relief and regret soaked through him in such a confusing mix that Prince Laurent’s expression became tinged with alarm.

His tongue rebelled and he began to speak without thinking. Teacher Kolnas would have fainted at his failure. But Erasmus gripped the fine blue weave of Prince Laurent’s chiton and felt his voice come out in a soft rasp.

“If only you had come sooner.”

If Prince Laurent had not been a born a prince, Erasmus thought he would have made an excellent Captain of the Guard, Master of Horse, a Nurse, or a Royal Steward.

Erasmus could ill-hide the pain of the bottoms of his feet as he stood and Prince Laurent noticed immediately, walking back to him slowly as if Erasmus might bolt. “Erasmus? Are you in pain? Tell me the truth.” He murmured kindly.

Erasmus could not ignore a direct order from a prince. “Yes…my feet…”

With one simple move, Prince Laurent had swept Erasmus up into his lean arms as if he weighed nothing at all and carried him into the airy palace of Marlas. From there, he gave orders with such crisp, formal Akielon that no one could dispute his demands. The horses were attended to, the servants were called to air out a room and draw a bath, someone was sent to the kitchens to fetch the list of lunch and dinner courses for Prince Laurent to approve—a practice Erasmus was wholly unfamiliar with—and one quick little boy was sent ahead to the doctor to let her know that she would be receiving visitors soon.

It seemed impossible that the castle had run smoothly before the prince’s marriage into Akielos.

Prince Laurent carried him all the way to a private bathing room where all the necessary oils, combs, and soaps had been laid out in preparation for their arrival. Prince Laurent gripped him tight as he set Erasmus back on his feet, in case it was too painful.

Erasmus took a respectful step back and arranged himself as prettily as he was able, given the circumstances.

“Erasmus, I… I am unsure of how things were done in the gardens where you were raised but if you need someone to assist you in the baths, I can send in a servant girl.” He was endlessly gentle and Erasmus balked before he next spoke. “Or, if you wish, I can—.”
Erasmus shook his head, refusing to interrupt but horrified by the very idea of a prince serving him so.

Aside from that, he was terrified and ashamed at the very idea of the Prince of Vere seeing him unclothed. He would see every wound, every freckle, and every suckle mark…Erasmus gripped his filthy robe tight at the hem.

Prince Laurent watched carefully and continued, “I can sit with you for company while you wash yourself.”

“Whatever pleases you.” Erasmus amended, keeping his head bowed.

“No, whatever pleases you.” Prince Laurent put a careful hand on Erasmus’ hand; he seemed very deliberate with the way he touched others. “You’ll find there are no slaves in my house and no one here will treat you like one.”

“No slaves?” Erasmus recalled Teacher Kolnas and Aleksis’ displeasure when discussing Prince Laurent’s refusal to buy any for his household. They had thought it a rumor grown wild but perhaps there was more truth to it than they believed.

There was a quick burst of Veretian before the prince caught himself and switched back to his more stilted Akielon. “I want to annihilate the practice.” He said and shook his head slightly as if he was displeased by either the idea of slavery or his own words.

“Abolish slavery?” Erasmus’ mouth felt dry.

“Yes, abolish.” Prince Laurent sounded relieved. “So no one in Marlas will touch you. No one will order you to their will unless it pleases you. You need not do anything you find distasteful.”

Erasmus could not fathom the idea. “Forgive me. I am…not clever and…I cannot…”

Prince Laurent squeezed his hand lightly before letting go. “It is a matter for another time. For now, enjoy your bath. I will wait outside the door so none will bother you and when you are finished I will take you to the doctor.”

The beautiful prince left him alone and Erasmus did find a little comfort in the familiar motions of bathing, something he had not had in a week.

He was so pleased Prince Laurent had not tried to stay and see the extent of his injuries, as he now did not particularly like the idea of strangers seeing him without his clothes on.

The warm water stung at his cuts as he stepped in and watched the dirt swirl off of his skin and into the water. Leaves and twigs and rocks marred the once-pristine floor of the tub when he submerged his head and he could not even find it in himself to be embarrassed at how filthy he had been.

Instead he washed himself thoroughly. It was a mindless task and he was grateful for it.

If he stopped to think too long, everything that had happened to him would swallow him whole and he was sure he wouldn’t be able to bear it. He would crumble in disbelief over what harsh cruelty and unbelievable kindness the gods had visited on him. He cradled his stomach in his hands, his thumb pressing over a fuchsia bruise that could have come from stones or lips.

Only the knowledge that Prince Laurent waited outside those doors with a careful ear and quick steps kept Erasmus from curling in on himself and wailing.
At least the mosaics in the pool were pale blue and not dark. Small blessings…

His mind was blank when he patted himself dry with the fine towel by the side of the bath but he could not help but be impressed by Prince Laurent when it came time to redress.

The chiton was simple and comfortable but Erasmus did not want to bare his skin. Luckily it seemed the prince had anticipated such and had left a black gauzy robe the likes of which Erasmus had never seen before. It was long to his ankles and wrists and laced up the front with gold ribbon. The color and length made it so that no one would be able to see his body.

He walked to the door and heard Veretian in hushed tones; feeling a little ridiculous, he knocked on the door leading out. “Your Highness?”

Prince Laurent opened the door a few moments later, smoothing himself, his eyes shining with intensity. “I hope the bath was soothing. And Veretian clothing suits you.” He opened his arms as if to embrace Erasmus. “Are you ready to see the doctor?”

Erasmus bowed his head, refusing to step closer. “I-I can walk…Your Highness.”

“Of course.”

He followed Prince Laurent quietly, a few steps behind, as was the respectful position. He was amazed by the man’s silence, by the way curiosity had not yet taken hold of him in regards to the omega slave that now walked through his palace.

Upon reaching the doctor’s airy chambers, Prince Laurent gave a very simple explanation and turned his attentions to the medical books laid out on a desk as Erasmus slowly removed his jacket.

Thankfully the head doctor in Marlas was a kindly middle-aged beta woman who had Veretian coloring and gentle hands. She smiled at him and told him what she would do and where she would touch him long before ever putting her hands on him.

She applied ointment to all of his bruises, burns, and scratches, placed bandages over the cuts that were deeper, and her eyes skimmed over the love bites.

She spoke as much to Laurent as she did to Erasmus. “He must drink plenty of water to ease the burn and I will give a soothing gel to prevent itching and peeling of the burnt skin. Most cuts will heal within a few days but tearing at the scabs may scar. Other than these surface wounds…” She looked Erasmus in the eye and her voice became even softer, “forgive me. I know it is painful but I have to ask.”

Erasmus saw Laurent freeze in the middle of turning a page, the muscles of his back coiled tight and it put Erasmus on edge.

“I am to understand you are an omega, yes?” Erasmus immediately shuddered, but she had asked him a direct question and he nodded after gathering his resolve. “And those men that were chasing you through the forest. Did…did they give you these sucking marks?” Erasmus was so shocked he whipped his head up and looked at her in shock. Her expression was sad and sweet, carefully devoid of pity. “Did they take liberties with you?”

Erasmus had never heard the word ‘liberties’ used before but her tone was enough to indicate that she was asking if those forest bandits had done bad things to him.

The panic was immediate and he must have looked truly alarming judging by the look on her face.
Shaking his head violently, Erasmus clutched the gold at his neck and began to curl in on himself. “No, no, no!” He cried. “Nobody touched me! Not them, not my master, no one except the one I loved!” The kiss bites were throbbing as if he could feel Kallias’ lips on his skin; it was so cruel knowing that such a gentle touch would never again happen from those beloved lips. He felt himself begin to scream, unable to help himself. “He’s gone, he’s gone! They took him from me!”

“Your Highness,” the hiss was nearly inaudible over Erasmus’ keening but a moment later slim, strong hands touched the top of his head.

Veretian sounded like the tide, like soothing balm as the prince himself tried to calm Erasmus.

“Shhh, shhh,” Erasmus could have sworn he heard Prince Laurent say ‘Sussie’ in his next sentence and the pain was intense, “Be still little one. You are safe now.”

“How…how can I live without him?” The tears stung and Erasmus felt Prince Laurent inhale in surprise or horror.

The nurse returned with a brimming cup and pushed it to Erasmus’ slick lips. “Drink, Erasmus. It will…it will help.” He was about to sip when he remembered his first mistake and looked up at them, still in unspeakable pain but begging to be spared.

“Please.” His voice sounded very small and weak to his own ears. “Please don’t make me have the heat again.”

Prince Laurent exchanged a brief look of shock with the doctor before the both of them recovered. She pushed the cup forward again. “No darling. I have nothing here that would cause an omega to go into heat. You are panicked. This will help calm you and nothing more. I swear.”

Erasmus looked to Prince Laurent. His eyes were intense. “Erasmus, I swear to you, we will not force the heat on you. No one will hurt you while I am consort here. Drink without fear.”

His beauty was enough to inspire confidence.

Erasmus downed the drink without pausing to draw breath, the cinnamon taste of it warming his chest and throat. As the doctor took the empty cup away, the prince patted Erasmus face dry, though the tears kept coming and shudders did not go away.

“A small blessing at least.” He murmured as he tucked the gauzy robe back around Erasmus’ shoulders, “That you have only known loving hands.”

The prince took a moment to speak with the doctor in Veretian while Erasmus tried to compose himself. The medicine was very effective as his tension relaxed into nothingness before the conversation was over, though…the tears did not cease.

“Erasmus,” his voice was silk and honey and kithara music, “I will carry you to bed.” Erasmus nodded slowly and felt Prince Laurent’s strong arms slip behind his legs and back. “Beta guards will be outside your room to make certain that no one goes in. You are safe here.”

The prince had smooth, quick steps and the motion began to rock Erasmus as if he were a child. He closed his eyes and breathed. The man did not have an oppressive scent either; it was warm and protective…

“Laurent!” A voice deep with delight, then: “Oh.”

“Damen. Wait for me.”
Erasmus was placed on cool silk sheets and someone covered him with a light blanket.

Veretian words again and then a soft whisper of Akielon. “Rest, little one.”

Erasmus opened one eye and saw the hazy outline of Prince Laurent and, behind his shoulder, an enormous dark form that had arms around the prince’s waist. “Thank you,” Erasmus whispered. Only once before had he experienced such kindness while being asked for nothing in return.

The last thing he heard before falling asleep was Prince Laurent’s distraught tone. “We must do something about this.”
X. Le sanctuaire

Chapter Notes

It's been a while!
I finally finished up the latest chapter and I came to some realizations. Mostly, it's about Damen. Since he was never a slave in this story it might be a little harder for him to relate to the plight of Erasmus and other slaves. So here sometimes he slips up in the way he talks to Erasmus or orders him around but he really is trying for Laurent's sake. And Laurent will be a bit more relaxed since he was never hurt by his uncle; any OOC moments are just because of the shift in the AU, I swear haha!
And I promise Erasmus is going to find his voice!
He might be nervous and traumatized now, but he will find his strength, I swear. Pallas and Lazar are useless sluts.
Enjoy!

Erasmus slept through the night.

When he woke to the sunrise, it took him a moment to get his bearings and recognize the fine room he was in. And then the knowledge of it all hit him in the stomach so that he doubled over. He wondered if every morning for the rest of his life would be greeted with such pain.

Aside from the wound on his heart, his body was sore and aching and he was gripped by hunger and thirst.

He wondered as he wrapped himself in his Veretian robe if he could find his way to the kitchens in the massive palace without being seen. He had forgotten about Prince Laurent’s promise to have his room guarded as he heard hushed voices the moment he got close to the door.

“No, not now!” A breathy laugh. “We can’t. We are to be on guard.”

“I don’t speak well.”

“We did so much last night! Ah! Shhh! For the love of the gods, stop your fool mouth…”

“I don’t speak Akielon.”

“You are the worst liar! I know you—ohhh…I know you understand!”

“Sorry. I don’t speak well.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yes.”

Erasmus once again felt a bit foolish as he knocked for permission to exit the room and the voices fell to silence only a moment later. The heavily accented voice was the one that whispered first and there was a smile in his tone. “Ah, rabbit is waked.”
“The rabbit is awake.” The Akielon voice corrected smoothly. “And he is a boy, not a rabbit.”


There was the sound of someone being slapped hard and a quick howl of pain. “Come out Erasmus. You are safe here.” His tone was soft and Erasmus cracked the door open slowly.

It was the muscular, freckled man from the day before and his Veretian companion, this time his mouth sans wheat; he only looked briefly at Erasmus before his intense eyes went back to the Akielon man at his side. Erasmus ducked his head.

“Apologies…for interrupting.”

“You interrupt nothing. We are here to guard you. Do you need anything?” When he did not respond, the Veretian man said something quick and melodic, gesturing to Erasmus’ neck. “Ah! Speak your mind, Erasmus.”

Orders were something he knew. “I…forgive me, I have not eaten in…” He could not even remember when he had last eaten, or what it had been. Phantom fingers brushed across his lips and he took great care to hide his ghost of a wound from these guards.

“Ah! You poor thing!” His Akielon guard seemed to be of the southern sentiment that going more than five hours without food was an affront against nature. “Come with me and we will find you something to eat.” He clicked his tongue and the Veretian man watched the swift motion of it. “You’re so slender…” And then to the Veretian man with affected severity: “You stay.”

A volley of Veretian and a smile like the bite of wine. “Later…you come.”

“Ignore him.” His Akielon companion walked quickly down the ornate halls and Erasmus trotted to keep up; luckily though the style was garish the layout of the palace remained simple and familiar. “He only speaks Akielon to say filthy things. It may still be too early for the Veretians to eat but Exalted One is always awake at dawn, so food will have been made.” Erasmus nodded. “My name is Pallas and His Highness asked me to take care of you. You must come to me if you are in need of anything.”

“Yes, ma—sir.”

Pallas laughed kindly. “You must call me by the name the gods and my mother blessed me with. Otherwise His Highness will scold me and he is terrifying when Lazar steps out of line.”

Erasmus thought of Prince Laurent, so gentle and attentive with his soft, cultured Veretian and he could not imagine the man raising his voice in anger.

“There are truly no slaves here?”

Pallas beamed at him and Erasmus was able to see why the Veretian man—Lazar, possibly—was so transfixed by his sweet freckled face. “No. Not anymore. His Highness forbids it and it is pointless to argue with him when he has made his decisions. He could talk the gods from the sky.”

“His beauty alone could inspire men to his side.”

Pallas glanced back at him, with a bemused smile. “Prince Laurent is fair but…I think you’ll find him…stunning in other ways.”

There was silence for a small stretch until Erasmus realized that Pallas was not taking him to the
servant quarters of the palace but that the doors to various chambers were become less frequent and the doors more ornate until the doors in front of him were lined with curving laurel trees made of gold.

“You are taking me to the Royal Quarters?” Erasmus gasped, his heart missing a beat in his chest.

“His Highness wanted to speak to you when you woke.” Pallas explained as if nothing at all were amiss. He was not worthy to dine with princes and kings but he was in no state to argue against this man who could easily swing him up over one shoulder and cart him wherever he pleased.

Pallas rapped on the door before Erasmus could think to stop him and they were both bid to enter by the deep voice that had rattled him so badly the previous day.

The room was enormous and very clean, a bed large enough for eight full grown men taking up the space closest to the balcony.

There was a marble pool dug in the very center of the room and a very fine statue of two men entwined in each other’s arms. There were fresh flowers in every available surface but even those frothing bouquets could not mask the overwhelming smell of alphas that had soaked into the room. Erasmus had to take a few deep breaths before he felt comfortable walking inside.

His Exalted One, King Damianos, looked up from a heavy-laden breakfast table and smiled as he recognized Pallas and Erasmus. Erasmus ducked his head.

“Ah! Our guest is awake. Please, join us.”

“Exalted One, I am honored but Lazar will never forgive me if I stay away from his side.” Pallas explained. “I have simply come to see Erasmus safely to His Highness’ side.”

“Thank you Pallas. Go to him then.”

Pallas beamed, bowed quickly, and patted Erasmus gently on the shoulder before he excused himself from the royal bedchambers.

Erasmus froze, wondering when Prince Laurent would come to rescue him.

“Are you hungry Erasmus? Answer me.” His king was obviously used to talking with slaves, as his requests were followed rapidly by commands.

“Yes Exalted One.”

“Come eat.” King Damianos ordered again and Erasmus lurched forward, wondering if he should feel terror, if the rumors of his king forsaking all other lovers in favor of Prince Laurent were true. “My Lau—my husband rises late and Veretian customs dictate cleanliness before a meal. He will come from the baths to join us shortly. Sit please.”

Erasmus pulled the fine Veretian robe tighter around himself to mask his trembling and sat on the chair opposite his king.

He must have sat idle for too long. “Eat, Erasmus.” Came the next order.

Erasmus looked up and surveyed what was set before him. Never had he seen such a rich spread for breakfast, and some of the foods were as foreign to him as dining with kings. There was the common fare in the slave gardens: eggs, fresh bread, yogurt, olives, grapes and a pot of honey, but
on delicate, white ceramics there were breads curved into odd shapes, studded with dried fruits like jewels in a bracelet. Milk and cream and butter and all manner of sweet, heavy-looking food that looked ill suited to breakfast. He took a little of everything, saving the unfamiliar bits for last, and realized that King Damianos was watching him as he raised the heavy bread to his mouth.

Decorum did not allow him to spit the raisin bread, with its’ thick, sticky shell back onto the plate, but he did place the remaining crust back down. King Damianos made a noise like he was choking back a laugh.

“Is it not to your taste?” Erasmus looked up at him, unable to keep the panic from his gaze as he tried to think of a diplomatic response. His king was grinning wide. “Tell the truth.”

“It is…not to my taste.” Erasmus felt his cheeks burn as he placed the bread back on the plate. “Apologies…for the waste.”

“It is not my taste either, Veretian pastries.” Damianos explained, gesturing to his olives, bread and eggs. “But Prince Laurent likes a Veretian breakfast and I adore my husband. So the cook makes it daily.”

Erasmus was struck and the words spilled from his mouth before he could stop himself. “You love him.”

“Yes.” Damianos responded without hesitation.

Erasmus nodded.

Prince Laurent took his time in the baths and Erasmus was beginning to wonder how long he would have to sit opposite his king in silence when several small blurs leapt past him onto the table.

He gasped as the plates clattered.

There were four cats on the table. They were tiny, mewing as they stepped gingerly between the plates of food. One locked eyes with him and gave a tiny wail that stopped his breath.

“They are still a little small. But we can watch them grow over the coming days. It will be our secret.” He heard it as clearly as if a cruel god had whispered the words in his ears, as that phantom hand squeezed his.

The king’s voice ripped through the haze of memory before Erasmus could drown in it.

“Ah, get down.” Damianos said in unconvincing seriousness as he scooped up two kittens in each hand, setting them gently on the floor. “My Lau—my husband has a good heart. He cannot be allowed to go out into Akielos or he will bring back all manner of things: litters of kittens, elderly stray dogs, lame horses, even birds and snakes.” Damianos took a deep drink of water and smiled with soft indulgence. “I had wondered how long it would be until he brought home a child.”

“I will forever be in his debt.” Erasmus said, breath coming hard as he bowed his torso.

“And in Vere we say that a man’s dogs should outnumber his coins.”

Prince Laurent of Vere swept out of the bathroom in a swirl of heat and steam. He was flushed rose under his ivory skin, accentuated by the pale pink of his chiton, but even water and heat and the light of day could not completely chase the sleep from his eyes.
King Damianos stood in delight of his husband, the kittens scattering from him. “Swee—Laurent, we have a guest.”

“Good morning Erasmus.”

“G-Good morning Your Highness.” Erasmus also stood and bowed quickly. “I thank you for… bringing me here.”

Laurent scooped up one kitten and it sat peaceably on his shoulder, rubbing its’ tiny head against his neck. “Of course. I was sure you would be hungry and…I wanted to speak with you.”

When Erasmus did not offer a response, the conversation lapsed into rapid Veretian, and he simply waited. One of the kittens leapt onto his lap, pressing tiny paws into his legs. With trembling hands he stroked its’ fine fur, careful that he did not hurt the tiny creature.

He did not feel himself crying until there was a gentle touch on his hand and he looked up to see his rulers looking at him with obvious concern. His cheeks were wet and the tiny cat was looking up at him in confusion as tears peppered and matted its’ fur.

“Forgive me.” He gasped, swiping his cheeks dry with his hands.

“It is no crime to shed tears in sorrow.” Laurent responded.

“Omega s-slaves are not to show discouraging emotion. It goes against training.”

Prince Laurent gave a long look to Damianos and Damianos nodded as if he understood something unspoken. “I have told you before that we do not allow slaves in our palace. You are a free man here. Free to make decisions and show emotion.” His voice was undercut with fire over a topic that was obviously very close and personal to him.

Erasmus was touched but he knew the truth. “Your Highness…this is all I have ever known. It is my nature…”

There was a long pause and Erasmus wondered if he had spoken out of turn or was contradictory to his prince.

“Erasmus. I will not push you for this,” Prince Laurent spoke and patted Erasmus’ fingers lightly with his own, “as each man’s past is his own to share or hold close to heart. But I would see any man who has wronged you pay for his crimes. If you give name to him, I will see it done, I swear.”

His voice was gentle but there was something cold and stark in his eyes that would surely convince anyone that the Prince of Vere was not making threats lightly.

“You are too good to me.” Erasmus bowed his head again, unable to take such intensity. “But I… do not know my former masters’ name. I don’t know how he came by his riches or where he lived. I am not clever, forgive me.”

“Erasmus…”

“And what is done cannot be undone. The one I loved killed him.”

“Your lover killed a man?” Damianos sounded shocked. “I had not heard of anyone being killed.”

Prince Laurent glanced at him for a split second before focusing once again on Erasmus. His next words were expected but no less chilling for the reveal of his ability to deduce so much from only
tidbits of information. “Correct my wrongs but…your lover killed your master and the two of you escaped to the forest to…” He did not finish his thought but Erasmus remembered how he had let slip in the doctor’s quarters that he did not want to be forced into his heat again; he doubted Prince Laurent had forgotten. “But… they were not with you when I found you outside of Marlas.”

He paused to take a breath and Erasmus could not hold back. “Please, Your Highness,” he whispered, bowing his head, “please do not command me to say it aloud…”

Laurent spoke quickly in Veretian and then switched back to Akielon for only a few words, though his words were thick with his accent and anger. “You cannot find honor in this. No one good or noble could find beauty in this.”

“I understand.” Damianos responded, his deep voice soft and contrite. “We will call the kyroi to council when we return to Ios.”

Prince Laurent nodded, intensity clear on his beautiful face.

The baby cat purred on his lap and Erasmus wondered what was to become of him.

After breakfast, Prince Laurent kissed the king on the corner of his mouth, soft but lingering, ignoring the fire that caught in Damianos’ eyes even with such a simple kiss. If Erasmus had been raised with any sort of spite, he might have felt jealousy over their easy intimacy. But he was so destroyed by his own experience that he felt nothing more than a hazy sadness.

“I am to the blacksmith.”

“When you have finished, come to the training grounds and we can go for a proper ride… together.” His long, dark fingers lightly took the tips of Prince Laurent’s pale golden hair and rubbed them.

The smell of alpha arousal was unmistakable and overwhelming, especially with ones so confident and powerful as a king and a prince. Erasmus knew what to do in such situations, and kept his eyes downcast in case the two of them dissolved to private intimacies in front of him.

But Prince Laurent managed to pull away from that vice-like scent and walked to Erasmus’ side. “Come with me, Erasmus.”

“Exalted One.” Erasmus bowed to his king before following the prince of Vere.

Despite keeping his eyes lowered respectfully, Erasmus took care to continue memorizing the layout of the palace so that he could find his way back to his room. It was busier in the halls now that the sun was high in the sky and the prince greeted every person they passed by name in his lovely Akielon.

Erasmus followed him to a small building off set from the main halls simply because of the vast amount of heat that the forges gave off. Though Prince Laurent walked inside without a second thought, Erasmus balked at the first sight of the glowing orange of fire and liquid hot metal.

“Erasmus?” Prince Laurent was quick to notice things.

“You will not brand me, Your Highness.” It was less of a question and more of a reassurance as he was coming to believe that these people would not hurt him. There was a hiss, like that of a snake and when he looked up he saw Prince Laurent barely restraining his frozen fury.
“Never. It is a practice for…for beasts.” He shook his head. “For men who are monsters. I have stopped it in the cities. I will abolish it all: the branding, the gardens, those foul places near the docks…You will not fear it again.”

He certainly could inspire confidence and Erasmus crossed the threshold.

The royal blacksmith was a man from the border with what were probably pale hair and skin but he was already half-coated in soot and ash despite the early hour; he smiled at Prince Laurent’s approach. Their words were swift and it took only a moment before the man was smiling kindly at him and extending out one calloused hand.

“Give me your hands, little one.”

A nod and smile from Prince Laurent was all that was needed for him to offer his gold-clad wrists for inspection. The blacksmith looked at them carefully before setting Erasmus’ arms on the table and retrieving his tools. Under Prince Laurent’s careful, curious gaze, the man gently chiseled through the soft gold of Erasmus’ wrist cuffs until they fell from his skin like discarded petals.

It took Erasmus a moment to realize that he had not seen this skin for prolonged time since before he was nine and his arms tingled from the loss of the metallic weight. His skin there was ghostly pale and soft from lack of sun; it looked sickly in comparison to the rest of his skin.

“And the neck, Your Highness?” The blacksmith asked. “Would you like that removed as well.”

“Erasmus.” Prince Laurent turned the choice to him. “This is your decision. I will not have slaves or any mark of them in my home. But if omegas feel safer with protection on their necks, I do not mind if you keep the gold around your throat. It is for you to decide.”

Erasmus touched the gold at his collar and pondered the second choice Prince Laurent had given him.

He was not brave enough to break these ties so easily and…if he were being honest with himself, he would have kept his cuffs as well, had Prince Laurent allowed it. He thought of someone other than Kallias biting at his nape, claiming him, and the revulsion in his stomach was almost more than he could bear. His curls shimmered past his eyes as he shook his head.

“I would keep it.”

Prince Laurent did not seem upset by the revelation and gently rested his fingers at the base of his collar. “Wear it with pride then. And if anyone mistakes you for a slave…they will answer to me for the disrespect.” Erasmus simply nodded, too afraid to say that he still felt like one at heart.

Slender fingers picked up the ruined gold cuffs.

“I will have these melted to coins for you.”

Erasmus looked up in a panic at the offer but Prince Laurent pressed the gold into his hands. “Y-Your Highness! I cannot…I cannot accept this…” It would be more riches than he had ever held in his life. But that gold could buy a horse and supplies. Maybe even a cottage near Delpha…Tears welled in his eyes.

“You must take it.” Prince Laurent insisted, closing Erasmus’ fingers around the warm metal. “It is a pale sum for all that has been done to you.”

It was useless to argue with him and Erasmus nodded as he accepted the gold and handed them to
the blacksmith.

A few more words in Veretian were exchanged before the two of them bid farewell to the royal blacksmith and exited back out into the light of day. Prince Laurent looked past rings of hard packed dirt to a large building that Erasmus guessed were the stables.

“Erasmus, would you like for me to show you the rest of the palace? Or would you like to return to your room? Or…”

“You are too kind, Your Highness.” Erasmus responded, lowering his eyes to the path. “I can find my way back on my own. If you would like to…” he made a bold guess, “hasten to Exalted One’s side.”

His guess was well-placed as Prince Laurent’s ears and cheeks burned slightly pinker.

“I should return with you. If only to make sure Pallas and Lazar are doing as they should.” His steps were quick and Erasmus noted that he did not glance back at the stables even once.

“While I am here, Your Highness, what should I do to make myself useful?”

“Whatever pleases you.” Prince Laurent responded immediately and Erasmus bit his lip in gentle despair. He had no idea what he could do to fill his time so that he did not…remember. “You are a free man now and your time is your own.”

Erasmus pondered what Kallias would do in the situation and his chest stung as he reached his conclusion. “Do you…is there a library here in Marlas?”

His regret was swift and overwhelming, as Prince Laurent turned to him in obvious delight. “There is one here in Marlas. My Da—my husband had one built for me when we remade the palace here.” This revelation certainly explained the mixed styles in Marlas. “You like to read then?”

“You misunderstand me.” He whispered, suddenly ashamed. “I…only wish to see a map. I…I do not know how to read…” He had heard the delight in the prince’s voice and knew that this would be a disappointment to him. “I…only wish to see how far the border is from here.”

“The border of Vere?”

“I-I must decide…where I will go after…” He could not bring himself to say or think about how even this peace would not last.

Prince Laurent stopped in his tracks and turned to Erasmus. “Erasmus…look at me. Please.” He did not look disappointed or angry. “We are to return to Ios within ten days. If…you wish to join us, we would welcome you in Ios.” His elegant hand gripped Erasmus’. “You would be safe. I will teach you to read and you could stay as long as you like. And then if you wish to travel somewhere else…you may.” The feeling of freedom was more than Erasmus could bear.

“I am…” Erasmus was about to say he was unworthy of such kindness but he was sure Prince Laurent would disapprove.

“You need not give us an answer today.” Prince Laurent squeezed his hand before continuing to lead Erasmus through the halls. “For now you must recover and heal your mind.”

The library was quite close to the royal chambers and Erasmus had the distinct feeling that Prince Laurent was a frequent visitor to the room. Smelling of cedar and paper and lilac, the room was floor-to-ceiling books, with several more stacked by ornate armchairs and on top of every available
flat surface. Erasmus saw the elaborate map, almost as tall as he was, pinned across one of the tables. He had never seen a map before…

“Stay as long as you like.” Prince Laurent murmured.

“Thank you…Your Highness.” Erasmus responded, unable to take his eyes from the map in front of him.

He waited until he heard the door shut before he allowed himself to cry. He caught each tear to keep them from falling on the expensive map and ruining it.

All the rivers and mountains painted with a loving hand, the dotted and straight lines carving the land into parcels…but Erasmus could not read any of it. He could not tell where Akielos ended and Vere began. He could not point to Marlas on the paper.

Even in this safety he had always wanted, he felt completely and utterly lost.
XI. L’échapée belle

Chapter Notes

Now we get some confirmation! Poor Sussie...
To be honest though, I kind of like that Pacat left her universe without a lot of extra
details (like religions) so that way I can just sort of fill in the blanks wherever I like.
This particular myth is taken from the Greek and it was always kind of heartbreaking
to me that someone could deny another coins.
On a lighter note, I love writing imperfectly bilingual characters. You'll see a bit of it
with Laurent; sometimes his speaking is a little stilted, not quite right, or he has to ask
for vocabulary help. But Lazar is even more fun. If he can't figure it out he just makes
up something new. I'm sure Pallas teases him all the time :)
In any case, I hope you all enjoy!

XI. L’ échapée belle

Erasmus did not make his decision until he had been living in the royal palace at Marlas for six
days. He drifted through the days in a mindless haze at first. Food tasted like ash in his mouth, he
slept through the day and was tormented by nightmares and memories in the night, and it was a
struggle for him to find the energy for simple tasks, like taking a bath or walking down to retrieve
more medicine and bandages from the doctor.
He felt drained, which was somehow worse than the sorrow this deep emptiness had replaced. But
he knew in his gut that the world had robbed him of his innocence in the worst way: the Erasmus
he had been, the sweet and beloved Sussie, had crumbled from his as swiftly as his golden wrist
cuffs and he did not know what to do or feel anymore. He was ruined.
The only time he felt any emotion stir inside of him was when Prince Laurent visited him.
The golden prince visited him at least once a day, often in the company of King Damianos, the two
of them warm and sunny and gentle. Occasionally Prince Laurent would bring an armful of kittens
and place them around Erasmus so that they could run around his legs or sleep on his lap.
It was...soothing in a way.
They did not always speak, as sometimes Prince Laurent and King Damianos were content to
chatter in Veretian and pore over official documents. Just their presence was enough to comfort
him and he felt he was somewhat useful when he could bring something to the two of them or
watch their body language.
From his king alone, Erasmus could discern immediately that no man was half so adored in the
world as Prince Laurent of Vere.
And Prince Laurent was equally enamored, though he was more restrained in his affections. The
soft smiles, the brief touches that almost no one saw, and words in Veretian that Erasmus could not
understand, but his king’s smile was proof enough that his husband found him incomparably dear.
Erasmus could never speak in those moments as he had been trained to see everything and nothing.
When he and Prince Laurent did speak, it was always the prince who asked him questions about himself in his lovely voice. Questions no one had ever asked him before and oftentimes he did not know how to respond. Things like his favorite colors and foods, the animals he liked and the things that brought him comfort; never did he push Erasmus for answers and—as he was just as perceptive as any palace-trained slave—the prince immediately abandoned any question that caused Erasmus distress.

When he could be persuaded to walk with His Highness through the ‘small’ but beautifully manicured grounds of Marlas, Erasmus listened carefully as Prince Laurent told him simple Veretian words for the things around them. The words were like music and Erasmus often repeated them to himself in the dead of night when he could not sleep.

“Sun, moon, rose, fountain, gold, water, kitten…”

There was something so gentle about the prince, so nurturing that Erasmus hesitantly began to look forward to their daily meetings.

His decision was made on his sixth day when Prince Laurent and King Damianos entered the library to find Erasmus already there. He had been looking over the map again, hoping that another look at the strange symbols would somehow make him able to make heads or tails of the map. No such luck and Erasmus ducked from the table, bowing his head to them.

“Your Highness. Exalted One.”

“Carry on Erasmus.” King Damianos sounded pleasantly surprised to see him. “I was unaware a slave could show such vested interest in cartography.” Although it was probably meant as a compliment, Erasmus felt acute shame over his inability to read, something his king was probably unaware of.

“He is not a slave any longer.” Prince Laurent corrected quickly and his tone was frozen over.

Erasmus could not help but glance up in panic, wondering if he would be the cause of an argument between the two to whom he owed so much. But his king simply looked embarrassed at his slip.

“You’re right Laurent. Erasmus, forgive me for…any slight. I am still getting used to our new laws.” Erasmus was about to protest that a king should not stoop to apologize to him when he saw the pleased smile on his prince’s face, the quick squeeze of the hand.

“Please, continue.” Prince Laurent offered. “Or…you may join us if you wish.”

Erasmus stopped pretending to read the map and slowly wandered over to the small alcove where the prince and the king had placed themselves. It was unusual to see Prince Laurent not surrounded by a small tower of books, this time only one large, old tome in his lap and his husband’s head on his shoulder. Erasmus sat on the floor a safe distance away, folding his legs underneath him as Prince Laurent began to read softly to his husband.

Erasmus listened carefully to Laurent’s lilting accent, waiting patiently and stone-faced whenever his vocabulary failed him or he had to ask Damianos for a translation. They were very pretty stories though, ones that he had heard as a child in the Gardens, of gods and heroes and creatures that lived in the quiet parts of Akielos.

The king occasionally interrupted between the short stories. “Your Akielon improves by day.” “This was my favorite tale as a boy…” “I would have you translate Veretian tales to Akielon if given the time.” “Vere has not the pantheon that we do, correct?”
Prince Laurent smiled at that. “We have only three gods in Vere: the One who Journeys, the One who Brings Victory, and the One that Bears Joy.”

Erasmus was intrigued and wanted to ask about these foreign gods but his king did not ask any further questions and Prince Laurent went back to the text before Erasmus could work up the courage to ask him. He lapsed back into a quiet serenity until Prince Laurent began a story about two lovers reunited after death.

That comforting voice stopped mid-sentence as Erasmus stood slowly and kept his head bowed, determined to leave the library before the story could lead to the depths of the underworld.

There was the sound of a book closing and Erasmus paused as the prince called out to him. “Erasmus? Are you in distress?”

“I cannot stay.” Erasmus murmured, without turning around.

He could not think of an excuse as to why he would be leaving so abruptly but Prince Laurent seemed to have mistaken his meaning.

“You have decided to come with us to Ios?” He had not forgotten the choice that would possibly determine the rest of his future. And his resolve crumbled a little as Prince Laurent continued to give gentle promises. “No one will harm you in Ios. We will do everything in our power to keep you safe. I can teach you to read. I will teach you what your teachers and masters did not give you: the ability to live free.” It was a beautiful thing to promise, a near-tangible dream.

Erasmus took a steadying breath.

“If you wish to wait here until your lover returns—.”

Pain struck him both hot and cold in the chest and it was such that Erasmus did something that was utterly unnatural to him: he interrupted someone. “He will not return.”

“You cannot know that.” The king insisted.

Erasmus turned to them then. He did not fear tears as he had cried enough for a lifetime. All he felt now was the pain and emptiness.

Erasmus did not want to say it but he would never be able to leave Marlas, would never be able to move on with his pain if he did not accept what he knew was a bitter and torturous truth.

By the grace of the gods, he managed to keep the pain at bay as he looked at his saviors. “Before we were parted...my love told me...he told me to meet him by the banks of the river...and to bring four coins.” King Damianos closed his eyes in regret, obviously recognizing the meaning of such a promise. “I swore to him that I would. And I know he is gone from this world.”

Erasmus let the pain wash over him. He embraced it as Kallias’ beautiful face and sweet voice and the salt-sweet smell of his bare skin sliced through Erasmus’ mind. One day this memory would fade but...for now he did not want to forget.

“How can you know this?” Prince Laurent looked as though he might set the book down and come to Erasmus’ side, but Erasmus took a cursory step back.

“The story, ma—Your Highness.”

Prince Laurent’s blue eyes flicked in confusion to the book in his hand and then to his husband in
search of answers. King Damianos looked as though he would spare his beloved partner such grim knowledge, but he steeled himself, perhaps knowing that Prince Laurent would not let him alone until he understood.

The king began in Veretian but glanced to Erasmus and switched to Akielon out of courtesy.

“In Akielos…after death we believe that there is an afterlife for good and honest men. The entry to the afterlife is blocked by a river, wider than any human could ever swim, and the only way to cross it is by paying the ferry. You saw when we buried Ka—when we buried him…”

“You place coins on the eyes of the dead, to see them to the afterlife.” Prince Laurent spoke slowly as if getting himself used to the idea of such a practice. Erasmus nodded softly as that whip-quick mind worked with the bits of information he had been given. “It was no earthly river then; he spoke to you of meeting again on the banks of the underworld.” Though his expression did not change, his wide, expressive eyes were brimming with pain. “And the four coins? Kastor only had two on his eyes…”

Erasmus took another half-step back; this he was unwilling to say or believe. That Kallias would suffer for him.

King Damianos cleared his throat and it was clear he hated this explanation even more than explaining the afterlife. “A slave who murdered his master and stole his property? Many men would put him to death for such a thing.” There was a swift hiss as Prince Laurent sucked his breath in. “And he would be buried as a criminal, without honor and without coins. His spirit would wander forever, unable to pass on…”

There was a long moment of silence, so long that Erasmus’ felt safe glancing up.

Prince Laurent was furious and it was a strange expression to see on him, as he was normally so gentle. But his fine body was rigid under his chiton, his beautiful face was a careful mask and fury was rolling off of him in frozen waves. It was how Erasmus imagined it felt to stand next to a coiled snake. It did not move and yet was terrifying.

King Damianos was looking at his husband with a steady gaze though…Erasmus must have been mistaken, but it looked like he was almost ashamed. He shook the fool thought from his mind; surely his king had nothing about this matter to feel shame for.

They waited for Prince Laurent to move.

“Erasmus.” His voice was light, silky and deadly. “If you wish to return to your chambers, you may. I would have words in private with my husband.”

Erasmus needed no further invitation and bowed to the both of them before scurrying back to his room. He would leave his king to whichever fate Prince Laurent found suitable.

Pallas and Lazar, his wayward guards were nowhere to be found and part of him was glad for it as he was not exactly in the mood for more company. He mostly just wanted to sit and be still and remember.

Erasmus looked at the fading kiss marks on his skin and wondered if there was a way he could keep them just a little longer when there was a soft knock at his door. Erasmus found it completely inappropriate that Prince Laurent had to announce himself and ask permission to enter a room in his own home and Erasmus bowed his head.

“Erasmus.”
“I apologize if I caused any strife between you and the Exalted One.” Erasmus began immediately. “It was not my intent.”

Prince Laurent did not immediately speak. He was thinking very carefully over his response. “I am not angry with him. I am not angry but…annoyed, only less.” His brow furrowed as he grasped for the word he wanted.

“Irritated?” Erasmus offered. “Frustrated?”

“Yes, frustrated.” Prince Laurent said. “I am frustrated that so many high Akielons cannot see what is in front of their eyes. And I feel responsible to show them this pain they have created.”

“You are too kind…”

“Akielos is mine as well now. The land, the people, the king, all of these are mine as well now and I will see them defended. I would see you have…reparation, for your pain. If you choose to stay in Marlas, know I will give you anything you need if you wish to continue your search for your lover. As husband to your king, I regret that we could not have done more for you.”

The prince did not avert his eyes but it was clear from his tone that he was not lying about the guilt he professed and Erasmus could have embraced the man, would have willingly given himself to Laurent of Vere’s services for the rest of his life if the prince would not take offense to such a gesture.

He knew with his entire being that he would never love another even half as much as he loved his dear Kallias. But there was another gold-clad truth that had overcome him.

He did not want to part from the people who had saved his life, specifically Prince Laurent.

He had made his decision.

“You are good to me. You are a good man.” He murmured, feeling his heart swell and break at the same time. “And I will go with you to Ios.”

In the few days they had remaining before going to Ios, Prince Laurent had given him a few memorable lessons on riding; everyone in the palace he had felt comfortable speaking to told him that Prince Laurent was the finest rider in Four Kingdoms. That at least allowed Erasmus to overcome his embarrassment at being tutored by royalty, though…praise from the prince was nearly as precious to him as the gold around his neck.

A small, placid mule had been produced from the stables and she held completely still as Erasmus sat across her barrel-shaped back.

Under the prince’s firm but gentle tutelage, Erasmus was now able to ride the little mule in a circle or a straight line in the packed dirt of Marlas’ riding grounds, but he was in no condition to ride all the way to Ios on her.

In the chaos of the royals moving south, Erasmus could not find the time to ask anyone how he would get to Ios, as he could not very well ride Kapnos or one of the other enormous beauties his king and his prince rode.

In the madness, even he had been enlisted in packing some of the smaller, more delicate household items, in keeping the kittens out from underfoot. He found that he quite liked feeling useful and
speaking softly with the servants in Marlas. Prince Laurent must have explained his timidity as everyone approached him with slow steps and gentle words.

Most of him was still frightened and cautious but...a small part of him was recovering in the safety he had always dreamed of.

The morning they were set to depart, Erasmus woke at dawn due to the unusual clamor in the normally quiet halls. Erasmus washed and made his bed quickly before putting on one of the three simple chitons he had been given by the royal laundress. As he had no possessions of his own, he simply walked down to the courtyard, avoiding the mass of activity as he looked for his little mount amongst the phalanx of fine horses.

He stroked the mule’s floppy white ears and she butted her head into his stomach by way of response.

“You like animals.”

Erasmus jumped away from the little mule as King Damianos walked towards him with a bright smile. It seemed the early morning and the slight chaos agreed with him.

“Y-Yes, Exalted One.”

“Then you will like Ios. My—Prince Laurent keeps us in a menagerie there. Perhaps we can have you corral some of them…if it pleases you, of course.” He added the last part as an afterthought, as though he had briefly forgotten that Erasmus was now free to make his own decisions.

“It would please me.” Erasmus responded, lowering his eyes at the attention.

“Excellent!” Never content to stay still for more than a moment, his king swiftly moved on to the next person who caught his attentions. But the next person to fill the king’s spot was equally welcomed in the form of sweet Pallas leading a matching mule.

“Hello, little one.” He said patting Erasmus’ curls with his free hand. “Your litter is over here.” Erasmus’ confusion must have shown on his face, for Pallas amended his explanation. “It is a Veretian invention, usually used for children or the elderly or those who cannot ride.”

Erasmus led his mule behind Pallas to where Lazar was waiting with a new frond of wheat between his teeth. He grinned at both of them. “Erasmus. Pallas, *vixen*.” He was so fond of such rude language that could make Erasmus flush but Pallas seemed to find it endearing. “We are ready for the…” His lips twisted around the wheat as he tried to think; his Akielon was somewhat limited when it came to specific words, “the ear horses?”

He glared good-naturedly as Pallas went into hysterical laughter at his mastery of Akielon language.

“Yes…sir.” Erasmus replied, unsure of what title to give Lazar. Pallas and Prince Laurent had both told him that such a scoundrel did not deserve a respectable title. Lazar liked him for it in any case.

“Step back then and we will harness them.” Pallas said clearing the tears of laughter from his cheeks. Lazar slapped him hard on the ass the moment he passed and Erasmus stepped back to allow them room to harness the mules to what looked like a large wooden crate suspended on two long poles. He had to avert his eyes not long after, as Lazar finished hitching his mule in record time and then busied himself with attempting to lift Pallas’ riding chiton while pretending not to understand the slightest bit of Akielon.
A flash of pale gold at the corner of his eye and Erasmus turned in time to see Prince Laurent stride across the courtyard in a knee-length riding chiton with a curling green snake pattern around the edges. It could have been a trick of the early sunlight but the prince looked a bit tired.

Erasmus debated for a moment before trotting after him into the cool interior of the palace.

Such was his intent to speak with his prince, and perhaps offer words of comfort or his assistance in fetching a cup of tea, that Erasmus nearly rounded the corner into a passionate embrace.

King Damianos must also have seen Prince Laurent’s slight exhaustion as he too had followed. His large body was curved protectively around the prince’s and he was holding the prince’s face in his hands; they looked like the beautiful statue in the royal suite here at Marlas.

Prince Laurent whispered in Veretian, his tone pale and unsure.

The king responded with a discontented grumble in his chest and two slow, soft kisses to the prince’s cheeks. His response was in Akielon. “He will come next time. I am sure of it.”

Erasmus turned and left as Prince Laurent leaned into his husband’s hands, his own cupping the wrists as if he would hold the man in place forever. It was too private a thing to intrude on. He left them in favor of going back to Pallas slapping Lazar upside the head while Nikandros carefully ignored them.

When he was able, Erasmus inspected the litter and found it to be a comfortable lined seat wide enough for two people of his size and Lazar explained in his broken Akielon the the ride was smoother than travel by wagon. His two guards left him not long after in order to continue assisting with travel preparations.

Left to his own devices, Erasmus soothed the mules and brought them sweet grasses to munch on while the chaos frothed around them.

Their departure was officially begun when King Damianos and Prince Laurent reappeared, all smiles now, and mounted their horses. Prince Laurent was unable to commandeer his husband’s horse again and was astride his own fine beast, but there was something incredibly awe-inspiring about seeing the impressive, dark form of the king on his equally enormous horse.

The two royals bid farewell to the steward and staff of Marlas and Erasmus settled himself into the comfortable litter before their group left the palace into the city streets.

Despite the early hour, there were some townsfolk who peered out of their windows or stopped in the street to wave.

Though they led the procession, Prince Laurent pulled back once Marlas had faded somewhat into the distance and they had reached the farmland to see to Erasmus’ comfort. Erasmus smiled softly at his welcome approach. “Your Highness.”

“Erasmus, how do you find the litter?”

“Very well, thank you. It does not jostle so badly as a wagon.” Indeed, the litter only seemed to sway gently with the motion of the mules. “It will be a very easy ride to Ios.”

“One that will only take three to four days if we make good time.” His prince responded. “We will rest in inns along the way.” There was a small beat of silence, quite common, Erasmus was realizing, as Prince Laurent liked the silence to think and prepare his careful Akielon replies.
Erasmus followed his lovely gaze to where he could see the vast shadow of the dark green forest on the horizon. He inhaled at the pain of the memories he held there. Erasmus longed to ask if Prince Laurent had recovered from his earlier exhaustion and melancholy, but he could not bring himself to confess the intimacy he had accidentally witnessed.

“You will miss Marlas?” He asked instead.

Prince Laurent blinked before turning back to Erasmus. “Marlas…reminds me of my former home, as it is close to the edge of Vere. It is always regretful to leave.” His expression remained untouched but there was some deep sadness in his eyes.

It seemed a lonely existence, Laurent of Vere’s. He was far from his homeland with only Lazar counted among their party as his countryman. Surely it was not as easy as he made it look, even with the king’s great love for him.

“Akielos is your home now.” Erasmus responded in attempt to soothe.

Prince Laurent smiled towards the front of their procession. “Yes. It is. And the south is beautiful in a different way. You will find it comfortable there.” He murmured something in Veretian that had the same tone as when he was antagonizing Nikandros, then, “The kyroi will not know what is coming for them.”

Their journey was as Prince Laurent had said and took four days for their company to reach the coastal roads of southern Akielos.

Erasmus spent the days in a drowsy haze as he was rocked by the steady, plodding steps of the mules and watched the landscapes change. Occasionally the king and Prince Laurent fell back to chat with him or he listened as Pallas tried unsuccessfully to teach Lazar more appropriate Akielon.

In the nights at the inns, Erasmus stayed far from the crowded common areas—despite Pallas’ assurances that the king and the prince would utterly destroy anyone who made advances on him—and managed to irritate Lazar for the sole virtue that he shared a room with Pallas.

On the fourth afternoon, the capital city and the ocean became visible from the crest of the hill they stood on.

Erasmus smiled as he saw the vast turquoise expanse of the sea and smelled the sea salt in the air. Just the smell was enough to bring memories rushing back up his heart into his throat. It was visceral and his whole body ached.

He could hear Kallias’ accented voice. There were the taste of the small blood oranges that grew in the Gardens. The rustle of cotton sheets on his bare legs. He could feel the kisses and soft touches that burned across his skin and lips. And over all of this was the faint scent of the sea.

He looked at the shadows of the sea to the darkest parts that were the same color as Kallias’ thin eyes.

Kallias would not have wanted him to wither away, to become a shell of himself in Marlas. Erasmus swore to himself and the pain in his chest that he knew would dull, but never cease to exist that he was going to live.

“Live Sussie. Live.” He whispered to himself as their party rode through the enormous gates of Ios.
XII. Les péchés des puissants

Chapter Notes

You all don't know how close I was to losing this fic ahaha! My poor old computer needed an update and froze and I had forgotten to back up the newest chapter. Luckily the files were not corrupted and I avoided a crisis!

Since Laurent was never abused in this fic, I want to explore other small snippets of his personality in this story, particularly his love of animals and his complete hilarity when it comes to naming them. Of course Erasmus would gravitate to the prey animals though: chicks, ducks, bunnies...so soft and shy like he is.

(Just an aside: Aspasia means 'greet or welcome' and 'Mout-Mout' would be like a nickname given to a curly sheep)

In other news we get to see Laurent terrorizing all of the kyroi and this is where I kind of miss Damen/Laurent POV; I so love to write him tearing into people even if Erasmus is shocked by such a change!

And just like a pokemon Erasmus has learned a new ability! Anger ;)

Haha Enjoy!

XII. Les péchés des puissants

Ios was overwhelmingly enormous, the palace a frothing hive of activity, but it was very peaceful in the early mornings when Erasmus stood on one of the many balconies that faced the sea and watched the sun rise. He had been in Ios for a week and he was slowly becoming used to the cadence of life here.

He had been given a small room of his own close to the servants’ wing and though it was smaller than his quarters in Marlas had been and he shared a bathing room with some of the other male servants, it was perfect for his needs. And he liked being close to the servants so that the noise roused him early.

And it was as Prince Laurent had said: there were no slaves in the palace.

There were omegas to be sure. Servant girls with leather collars, young men who smelled sweet of sugar and flowers, and obviously former slaves who had been retrained in some other task and were now earning coin for their skill in singing and dancing and fine embroidery. Erasmus envied them their usefulness.

Prince Laurent had made good on his word and spent an hour and a half each day going through the letters of the Akielon alphabet and asking Erasmus gentle questions about his life growing up in the gardens, allowing him to avoid some questions if they brough him pain; Erasmus spent the rest of the day wandering about in hopes of familiarizing himself with the layout of the palace and hoping to find something useful to do. If he did not keep busy he feared he would lapse into depression that always threatened to overwhelm him.

When the scent of baking bread wafted up from the kitchens, Erasmus finally found the motivation to move from his perch.

He shied away at first from the bustle of the roasting hot kitchens, but upon seeing the gold at his
neck, most moved aside for him to pass. The head cooks were an elderly married couple who looked as though they were older than the stones of the palace and both clicked their tongues at his approach. They were appalled by his slender figure and constantly schemed to put more meat on his bones.

“Eat little one.” The old woman wrapped a linen napkin with warm bread and goat cheese and grapes. “No Veretian food today, I swear it.” Erasmus smiled and accepted his breakfast in thanks; the creamy, sweet flavors of Veretian cuisine that the prince favored had left him feeling a little queasy.

“Thank you. Do you need my help with anything?”

Normally the both of them grunted in displeasure and chased Erasmus from the kitchens with a good-natured slap of a wooden spoon, but today the old man seemed to have expected his offer. With a similar grunt, he motioned for Erasmus to follow him and led him to the larder.

He was shown a knapsack stained with grease and was given a few gruff instructions. “Take these out to Aspasia and the others. Be warned; she is aptly named.”

Erasmus was highly confused until he was escorted to the fine gardens nearest to the stables. As the cook went back to his duties, Erasmus set his own breakfast on a low wall and opened the bag in front of him. Great was his confusion when he saw the contents inside—what looked to be soaked bread and piles of bones—until he heard what sounded like the howling of a storm.

He shrieked as a furry sea sprinted around the corner and one beast leapt at him, catching him squarely on the chest and knocking him to the dirt. He would have been terrified had it not been for a long, smelly tongue that lapped at his face enthusiastically, showing no other signs of wishing to eat him. He tried to push the creature off of him, but by the gods it was heavy, and other noses bumped at his head and feet.

“Aspasia, OFF!” Someone shouted and the weight left his chest.

It was Nikandros, flustered from running from the stables, who hoisted Erasmus to his feet and nudged the sea of dogs aside so he could grab the sack Erasmus had dropped. Erasmus attempted to smooth his hair and looked down at the dog that had tackled him.

Erasmus had seen dogs before—mangy, tough street dogs—but never had he been close enough to touch one before. The girl in front of him was stout and leggy with dark brown fur and a tail that whipped back and forth with obvious delight. With her tongue hanging from her panting mouth, it almost looked like she was smiling at him.

“Thank you.” He gasped to Nikandros. “I d-did not imagine—.”

“They are all friendly.” Nikandros assured. “Just…excitable. Especially when you bring them meals.” It all clicked then; Erasmus had been given the task of feeding the royal hounds and though he was now covered in dirt and smelled of a dog’s mouth, he felt pleased to be helping out in some way. “Perhaps this might inspire Prince Laurent to bring in less of them.”

Erasmus did notice that, amidst the sleek alaunt hunting hounds, there were some scruffier mutts including a pregnant black pug dog, a larger mastiff mix, and a few scruffy terriers that the king could probably hold in one hand. He wondered where the prince found them all.

The dogs fell to their meal as Nikandros and Erasmus cast out the bones and breads.

“A-Are they safe to touch?” Erasmus asked.
“Just know that once you start, they will wish you to never stop.” Nikandros commented. “These gardens are where we keep all the royal animals and you are more than welcome to wander through them. I am to the king.”

“Thank you.” Erasmus bowed his head as Nikandros took his leave.

He decided a moment later that he quite liked dogs. Their ears were velvety soft and their bodies wiggled with excitement as he petted them; a few trotted after him as he moved deeper into the garden and nibbled on his breakfast.

The garden, though not as large as the one behind the main building, was completely and utterly delightful.

He felt like a character from a story as he was trailed by some of the dogs and discovered some of the other animals hidden within the lush greenery.

There was a chicken coop filled with fat waddling hens and seas of their cheeping, fuzzy babies who ducked away from the dogs and another area for the quail; the quail chicks were the size of grapes and Erasmus delighted in watching them scurry into their burrow as he approached.

Goats for milking and cheese-making munched on tall grasses in their paddock and ducks and geese floated lazily in the small pond or sat on their nests in preparation for tiny ducklings. But his true delight came when he found a fenced-in area with a small wooden house and two dozen rabbits curled up peacefully inside. These he could not withstand and the dogs behind him drooped a little as he left them on the other side of the fence and entered the rabbit hutch.

He could have sat motionless on the dirt forever.

These tame rabbits were curious and obviously used to people. It was not long before he was surrounded by their soft, round bodies and they allowed him to stroke their soft fur and pert ears; Erasmus smiled at the thought of Prince Laurent feeding them leafy greens while the king held two in one of his giant hands.

When one hopped into his lap of its’ own volition, Erasmus could have cried in delight; just resting alone with these tiny helpless creatures in his lap was equally as therapeutic as spending time with the prince of Vere.

It gave him something to care about, something weaker than he was and not a single one of them cared that he was an omega or a slave.

He was just himself and the feeling was exhilarating.

When he entered the massive library that afternoon, Prince Laurent had one of his tame snakes wrapped peaceably around his neck and shoulders. The creature eyed Erasmus with lazy copper eyes, and Erasmus took it as a sign to broach the subject with the prince.

“Y-Your Highness.” He greeted as Prince Laurent spread the practice sheets over the top of the table. “I…would ask something of you.”

“Of course Erasmus.”

“You have…a great many animals in your garden.”

The prince nodded and, as if to support Erasmus’ statement, the little tan and red snake began craning its’ delicate head towards the books and papers. Prince Laurent clicked his tongue and
gently pulled the snake back, chastising it in loving Veretian. “Mout-Mout, non.” Erasmus assumed ‘Mout-Mout’ was the creature’s name and he felt lightly pleased that he could now recognize the Veretian word for ‘no’.

“If…the position is not already filled, I wondered…if I might feed them and clean their pens.” He bowed his head as both the prince and the snake looked up at him. “It would…make me feel…I am idle and I want to do something useful here in Ios.” Normally he would never state his preferences so candidly but he knew it would please Prince Laurent if he spoke from his heart.

“It brings you joy?” Prince Laurent asked.

Erasmus thought on it and determined that, yes being with the animals calmed him. And he so badly wanted something to do to occupy his mind. “Yes. I swear…I will take good care of them…”

The prince remained silent long enough that Erasmus grew worried and looked up at him.

His smile was beautiful and all fear left Erasmus as swiftly as it had come. “If it pleases you, the task is yours. I will let the kitchens and the master of Grounds know and you can begin the feeding schedule tomorrow morning.” His eyes flicked down to the pages in front of him, calm and businesslike. “And I will instruct the lady of the Treasury to set aside payment for your services.” Erasmus nearly stood, such was his shock.

“Y-Your Highness! I-I am—.”

He could not even get the words out, as Prince Laurent guessed his intent. “I will not have you work for free. If you care for the pets, of course you will be paid. Such is the way of the world so do not try to argue with me.” Mout-Mout settled comfortably into the crook of Laurent’s neck, knowing already that its’ owner had won this particular battle.

“You are so kind.” Erasmus knew such words might sound hollow if spoken so often, but he did not know how else to express his gratitude. “I feel…I feel as though I should do more for you and Exalted One…” But that was not all; he felt as though Prince Laurent could sense the dishonesty in his tone. “If I do not find something meaningful to do with my life…I will dishonor the memory of…the one I have lost.” Though he was attempting to move past his pain, he refused to say Kallias’ name aloud.

The prince looked surprised by the offer but smoothed his expression. “There is…something that you might help with. But first, lessons.” Mout-Mout nestled deeper for a nap.

Erasmus was beginning to recognize the strange symbols and the sounds assigned to them and he could have tried to untangle words all afternoon, had Mout-Mout not slipped off the prince’s shoulders and upended a pile of discarded papers. Prince Laurent scolded his pet in Veretian and the snake ignored him.

Erasmus smiled at the scene and Prince Laurent proposed his plan. “Erasmus. You may refuse if you wish. But tomorrow Damianos and I meet with the kyroi to discuss the issue of slavery in Akielos and I think it is important to have a former slave there.”

In his heart, Erasmus knew the prince would never push him, but he still needed a spoken promise. “You will not…ask me to…”

Prince Laurent shook his head, the pale gold catching the light. “Never. Your past is your own. You need not share it with anyone.”

Erasmus nodded. “I am not clever but…I will go.”
“You are clever.” Prince Laurent insisted. “Clever and sweet and I have great need of your listening skills. You will stand on equal ground with the kyroi, I promise. They will not disrespect you.” The lightest touch on his knuckles for comfort and Prince Laurent withdrew his hand.

Erasmus was pleased to be of use, even if he still felt subservient.

He touched the gold around his throat.

It was Pallas who came to escort him to the meeting the following evening.

The convocation of the king and the kyroi was to be held in the royal audience chamber and Erasmus had never had reason to go in before. He balked at the entrance, if not from the beautiful interior than from the smell of strength and power that emanated from within. Not every chair had been filled around the massive dark table but Erasmus still felt as though he walked about unclothed in front of the men and women inside.

This was a place for kings and alphas, not slaves and omegas.

He was sure one of the people within would get up to inspect him and see if he was lovely enough for their tastes and the thought churned his stomach. But the only thing that touched him were gazes and it was most likely due to the solemn and observant watch of Prince Laurent.

He was seated on one of the two chairs at the head of the table and was dressed in the most magnificent chiton Erasmus had ever seen. It was the jewel blue-violet of the evening sky, hemmed with silver, and the fabric was elaborately embroidered with silver thread in approximation of stars. Everyone else seemed lackluster in comparison to the man who looked to be the prince of the stars.

He saw Erasmus and though his smile was cool and reserved, there was warmth deep in his lovely eyes.

“Behind me, Pallas.” Prince Laurent ordered smoothly, his Veretian accent more tempered than usual.

“Of course. Here, Erasmus.”

Normally called ‘little one’ by the large, gentle guard, Erasmus was even more surprised when a small stool was produced and placed immediately behind the prince’s chair. Normally slaves would stand in the corner if ever brought to such an event however decorum did not allow him to protest in front of all of these powerful people. He sat down without question.

As Pallas left, Erasmus remembered what Laurent had wanted of him—to watch and listen—and he glanced up from under his eyelashes so that no one could see his gaze upon them.

So fine was his training that he could immediately discern who was empathetic to the prince’s interest and who would be hostile and immovable. His suspicions were proved correct when the king and the rest of the kyroi arrived and the meeting could begin in earnest.

Erasmus sat back in the shadows and listened as best he could as the king and Prince Laurent and the kyroi spent most of the first hour discussing the local issues and taxes and what could be expected from the spring harvest. Mostly it was terms that Erasmus was unfamiliar with and he did not truly take note of every interaction until the topic of slavery was broached.
There was a lull in conversation and Prince Laurent organized his flawless notes before clearing his 
throat in demand for attention.

Erasmus, in his few weeks spent with the prince, had never seen him so aloof and unreadable.

“The main reason we have called such a formal meeting with you all is due to my continuing 
efforts to address the issue of slavery within Akielos. I am sure you are all intimately familiar with 
my views on this practice so I will spare you my usual introduction of the topic.” Nikandros 
pinched the bridge of his nose as the king coughed back what might have been a laugh. “Today I 
wish to introduce a new measure that would put severe restrictions on the whorehouses by the 
docks in the major port cities.” Only the fact that these people were so well-bred kept them from 
groaning aloud.

In Akielon so flawless it almost seemed rehearsed, Prince Laurent presented his argument.

These places by the docks were an affront to any man with decency or sense. They were frequented 
by foreign sailors and men of ill-repute as there was very good reason to believe many of the 
omegas within had been trafficked or sold there illegally. His sources had told him that omegas too 
young to have their heat were auctioned off and many slaves to old or too headstrong for their 
masters were sold there to recoup losses and used until their bodies broke down. Any pregnancies 
were dealt with in the most unimaginable ways.

The prince did not delve into graphic detail but the reports given to him must have been so horrific 
that his jaw was set in an angry clench and his hands gripped the paper with unnecessary strength. 
Erasmus bowed his head at times; such places had been described to him before as a way to strike 
fear into the hearts of wayward slaves.

When the prince finished presenting his facts and his opinion that any man who turned a blind eye 
to such practices was a callous boar, unfit to wield any sort of power, it was clear most of the 
kyroi 
were profoundly uncomfortable.

“We have drafted up a law that will ban such places.” The king spoke once his husband had taken 
his seat. “The proprietor will be arrested, any man found within will be fined, and the proceeds of 
the brothel will be seized funding the rehabilitation of all slaves under their ‘employ’.”

The first 
kyroi 
to speak against the matter looked to be Nikandros’ age. “Forgive me, Exalted One, 
but banning brothels may cause sailors to weigh anchor elsewhere and we may see a loss in trade.”

King Damianos did not even attempt to make a counter-argument, as Prince Laurent was already 
reaching for his enormous stack of papers. “You may recall, Aeschylus, that I do not seek to ban 
whorehouses as a whole.” He waved one pale hand dismissively. “Even in Vere such a thing would 
result in riots on the streets. I wish to outlaw ones that flaunt your laws. Under King Agapetus’, it 
was ruled that any such establishment is subject to taxes of the crown and inspection to make sure 
any torturous behavior is not indulged. Are you aware that many of the places I speak of, including 
some of the houses in your own city, have not paid their dues to the crown in five years or more? 
One might think your Steward of the Treasury was either incompetent or was being bribed— 
though I cannot level such accusations without due cause. In any case, I cannot imagine how you 
have not noticed the discrepancies in your ledgers… As for the matter of the sailors, they can 
attend the legal whorehouses just as any common man in Akielos; unless of course you consider 
the creature comforts of foreign sailors more worthy than the rights of your own countrymen.”

Aeschylus seemed at a loss for words and an older man took over, perhaps considering himself on 
more equal footing. “Such atrocities are surely rumors, Your Highness. Perhaps one or two 
proprietors have a heavy hand but you cannot place blame to what you have not seen.”
Prince Laurent’s eyes flashed with a spark of venom. “Forgive me Melanthios, I was not aware you shared my mind. Pray continue and tell me of what I have not seen.” The older man might have gaped if Prince Laurent had not continued. “Since you believe you know all I have seen, I’m sure it will come as no surprise to you that the most common method of birth control in these places is a most savage beating, or that the life expectancy of most workers within is less than a year.” He shuffled his papers again. “And naturally you will know that I have seen your expenditures as well.”

Silence.

The next to speak was a man who might have been the king’s uncle, such was his stature. He smiled at the prince with something like admiration. “Who would you have deal with such establishments?”

This time it was King Damianos who spoke. “An excellent point, Makedon. Nikandros and Pallas have expressed interest in searching out these places in Ios. I trust you as my valued advisors and protectors of Akielos to choose men and women whom you trust. We must remember, above all, that even omegas are Akielon citizens and should not be placed under collar or tortured for their birthright.”

“You speak as if you intend to see slavery done away with. Already you have understandably ceased the practice branding and the selling of young omegas in the ports. But you have also outlawed slavery in your own home? Where do you intend to draw the line, if I may be so bold to ask?” One of the others spoke with attempted lightness, but Erasmus could hear the nervousness underneath.

“It is my eventual hope that every aspect of it is done away with.” Prince Laurent responded with sheer and utter conviction. “How can any man judge us as good rulers if we do not care for those most in need of our help? Perhaps slavery brought kings and alphas glory in the past, but in the present time I see no use for it. I would see the gardens gone, collars melted down, and selling of Akielon citizens to Patras stopped. These omegas and slaves are my people now just as much as you and your illustrious families.”

A few more questions and concerns were raised about the potential loss of an entire practice and method of work for some Akielons but the prince and the king held firm. The drafted law was presented at the end of the meeting and the nine kyroi were presented with their own copies to peruse out of the prince’s enormous bunch of papers.

“You will be given a fortnight to make your decision and discuss with your advisors,” King Damianos explained, “a generous offer considering that every day we wait is more Akielon lives potentially lost to the violence that has too long gone unchecked.”

The meeting was adjourned, many of the kyroi filed out, and Erasmus moved out of the shadows in preparation to help Prince Laurent with his things.

It could have been a trick of the light, but it looked as though there were dark circles under the prince’s eyes as he spared Erasmus a brief smile.

“Your Highness—.”

“Erasmus. Will you stay here? Until all the others have left?” Erasmus was nodding immediately, even though he did not relish being left alone with so many alphas. It was as if the prince could hear his thoughts, “Pallas will be waiting outside the door if you need assistance of any sort. No one will hurt you, I swear it.”
Erasmus stepped back into the shadows and waited.

He did not have to wait long. Aeschylus, Melanthios, one of the other men who had been hesitant to the prince’s proposals had lingered behind and began to speak the moment the others had left the room.

There was something quick that pierced his gut in that moment and Erasmus let himself feel it; at least it was not sadness. It took him a moment of reflection before realizing that the emotion he was feeling was indignation, close to anger.

It was a feeling he had suppressed in the past, as it was unseemly for a slave.

But these handful of men, these two-faced rats attempted to appear understanding and willing to compromise when the prince was presenting his arguments, but when he and the king had left they voiced their complaints without fear of Prince Laurent’s brilliant counter-points or King Damianos’ righteous anger for his husband. It was a cowardly thing to do and Erasmus felt the heat build up in his throat.

He could now see his skill as a slave.

The collar around his neck made him as if he were invisible to these kyroi and so they spoke as candidly as if he did not even exist. And Erasmus listened very carefully, committing every hateful complaint to memory.

“This foreign prince thinks he can change Akielos in a single night.”

“And he looks down on us for our customs! He does not understand our culture and does not seek to try. How can we trust such a man to make laws concerning our lands?”

“Thousands of years of tradition and he intends to dismantle them with or without our permission.”

“Not to mention the trade that will be lost with Patras...”

“The consort of the king should be concerned with one thing, and one thing only,” Melanthios, the pompous, old kyroi proclaimed, puffing out his chest as if a prince becoming involved in politics was personally offensive to him, “and that is providing Akielos with an alpha heir.”

Erasmus clenched his fist in his lap as the insinuation went unspoken.

As alphas, it was almost impossible for either the king or the prince to impregnate each other and these men knew it. Any heir would have to come from another approved source and such talk was a slight against Prince Laurent. It was so incredibly rude he could barely stand it.

It was a lucky thing for all of these men that the king was not present to hear as they left the council room and one replied to the old man’s statement with a familiar Akielon adage that Prince Laurent would not hope to understand unless someone explained it to him in detail.

“Two cockerels bought and the farmer starves.”

Erasmus stood very carefully when the men had exited, fighting back the indignation he felt on his prince’s behalf. These fool men thought the prince useless because he could not easily bear the king’s children?

He was intelligent, he studied Akielon so that his speaking was smooth and assured, and he clearly adored the king. And he had a gentle heart. He rescued animals and wished only to see those most
oppressed in Akielos to freedom and safety. *He had given Erasmus something to live for…*

And aside from taking care of the prince’s animals, Erasmus knew what else he would do to be of service and repay his insurmountable gratitude to the Prince of Vere. He found his use as a former slave.

He was going to be Prince Laurent’s eyes and ears.

Prince Laurent listened silently to all Erasmus had to say about what he had overheard in the council room after he and the king had taken their leave. Not once did his mask of serenity slip, even as Erasmus reluctantly explained to him their degrading comments of his lack of children and their comparison of him to a useless cockrel. He remained calm and poised as if such harsh words did not affect him in the least and Erasmus felt the indignation even more acutely.

Erasmus felt as though he was winded after reciting all the indignities but Prince Laurent scarcely blinked.

Instead, he gave a soft smile, adjusted the papers on the desk next to him and spoke in his clean, level Akielon. “Not a word of this to Damianos, please. I’ll not have a war started over some rude comments.”

Erasmus bit his bottom lip and Prince Laurent waited patiently for him to find the courage to speak. “They…they should not speak of the royal consort like that.” Prince Laurent raised one eyebrow and Erasmus amended, his voice soft but filled with conviction. “They should not say such things about you.”

“Why not?” Elegant fingers brushed against Erasmus’ knuckles and Erasmus realized he was being encouraged to speak his mind. “Akielos is a nation where men can speak their minds without fear.”

“They are wrong.” Erasmus protested softly. “You are doing all you can. And they do not see it. You are not—.” He could not finish because he did not know how to phrase his thoughts in such a way that would not displease the prince. But he wished to say that Prince Laurent’s fate was not supposed to be like his.

He was beautiful and clever and royal and he seemed to be doing his best to improve the situation in Akielos. He was a prince of the blood and a link to Vere; was it really so devastating that his body could not bear a child? The king could create a baby on any royal Akielon slave and it was not unheard of for the alpha children of the union to be accepted as royal children by the public. Such issues were for omegas to worry about as their livelihood depended on it.

It was as if Prince Laurent could read every thought in his mind. “You are a free man as well. Speak your mind without fear.”

“You cannot help that the gods found glory in making you an alpha.” Erasmus whispered, ducking his head. The prince’s body was not his business to comment on and he wondered if his opinions would cause offense.

There was a smile in the prince’s voice. “You also cannot help your birth. We must all find our own glory.”

Erasmus gripped his stomach in response to this. He was unprepared to have his words turned back on him so skillfully.
Prince Laurent stood then to move deeper into the recesses of his rooms and his scent wafted around Erasmus in protective, gentle tendrils. For some reason it gave courage to his thoughts.

“I-I do not like it, Your Highness. I do not like that they say these things about you.”

“Neither does my husband.” Prince Laurent gave a breathy little laugh as he poured himself a glass of water. “But I love him. I have made my choices and I will do all I can to help Akielos. For this country and its’ king, I will take any insult.”
Looked it up: apparently 'milk' is hard to say in Greek and I think Damen would tease Laurent about it when issues of Delpha/Delfeur came up ;)
In other news this chapter title might be my favorite haha! And we are halfway through with the story now (unless I decide to write more chapters)! This just in, Erasmus makes foolish decisions but he's trying his best.
Thank you all for your support and lovely comments. Sometimes it can be hard to write this story but I'm glad some people are enjoying it. You all are the best! Enjoy!

XIII. Le coeur de Damianos

“Marlas.” Erasmus read the word shakily.

“Again.”

“Marlas.” Erasmus read it again, urged on by the gentle insistence in the prince’s voice “Marlas.”

“Excellent!” Prince Laurent’s expression bloomed with delight and Erasmus blushed at his praise. “You have made vast improvements since we have begun! And thank the gods I have been in charge of your studies so that you can pronounce things properly.” The last bit was mentioned with a slight wicked glance to the king who was off to the side poring over old laws; Damianos indulged his husband a moment later, his glare equally wicked.

“There should be a hard ‘s’ at the end of Marlas.” He retorted.

“Only if you wish to sound like a barbarian.”

“Bold words for a foreign beauty who has difficulty pronouncing ‘milk’ correctly in Akielon.”

“Bold words from a man who will sleep alone tonight.”

Erasmus was beginning to lose his anxiety over witnessing such exchanges, realizing that such whip-quick exchanges were commonplace in this marriage. He supposed it was just their way of expressing affection and he was in no position to judge his kings.

At least he was pleased that the prince and the king seemed relatively relaxed.

The time for the kyroi to make their decision was rapidly approaching and the prince had been spending long hours in the library and dark circles had appeared under his eyes. The king occasionally wandered over behind him and rubbed the tension out of his neck and shoulders.

“You practiced your writing, yes?” Prince Laurent asked Erasmus when he had finished his verbal sparring match. “You can write your name now, yes?”

He sounded so excited by the very thought and Erasmus glowed with pleasure. He had indeed been practicing writing at every available moment and his name was no longer a shaky mess. There was something about it that gave him pride; a month ago he would not have known where to start and
now…

His name looked lovely on the page.

“It is beautiful.” Prince Laurent responded looking carefully at Erasmus’ handwriting. Surely it was not even half as beautiful as Prince Laurent’s perfect script. Before he could begin to protest, Nikandros appeared in the library and his businesslike look cut their lesson short.

“There, Prince Laurent, the kyroi have made their decision and they would like to meet with you to discuss their votes.” The prince’s eyes flashed at the mention of his proposed laws and the sweetness of his smile tightened to a determined set. “They wait for you in the royal audience chamber.”

The king was already by his friend’s side, but Prince Laurent paused as he looked to the mess of papers and inks and open books on the table.

“Please go, Your Highness.” Erasmus offered. “I will set the library to order and then go care for your animals. This is important to you. Please…”

After the prince, the king, and Nikandros took their leave, Erasmus moved quickly to tidy up. He prayed silently to the gods as he cleaned the library table that the law would pass without question and then moved to the gardens to care for the royal animals.

It had rapidly become his favorite part of the day.

Feed for the animals had been left for him in a small tackroom next to the stables and twice a day he was followed by a small pack of delighted dogs through the small gardens. He so enjoyed the peace and serenity of it all, that he had taken to spending hours sitting in contemplation, allowing the sun to brown and freckle his skin without care.

Most of the time he spent there was sitting in the dirt of the pens, allowing the small prey animals to become accustomed to his presence while the dogs napped in the sun outside of the pens. When he did not bring a book or writing to practice with, his entire time was spent in thought.

Most of his thoughts were spent on happier times…because he did not want such lovely memories to fade into obscurity. But he could still not bring himself to think of or speak the name of the one he loved.

He sat on the ground of the rabbit pen, extending bits of dried grass for them to take with their velvety mouths while two dozed in soft lumps on his lap. He had named all the smaller creatures who had probably not been given names; secret names whispered when no one else was around to hear, and spoke to them of a few of his thoughts that he could not trust to another person.

Today he sat in relative silence and thought what would come about if the prince’s plans came to fruition.

He could not imagine a world where he had not gone to the gardens; otherwise he would have probably died on the streets or have been sold into a house of ill-repute. He would have never met —

The pain was swift and immediate when his carefully stored memories spilled over. He took a moment to seal them back up again, hoping that if he did not dwell on his pain that someday it might lessen. To an extent it was true—especially when he was surrounded with people he trusted—but there were moments when he was crippled by his own mind.
The pain was replaced by something almost like bitterness as he thought of how things might have been better without the weight of the collar and the scent at his neck. How things might have been better if Prince Laurent had come sooner to the omegas and slaves of Akielos.

*He would have had a family who loved him. He would have learned how to read. He would have never had his first heat forced on him. He would not have seen men die or had unwanted hands on him. His innocence would have remained intact...as would his heart...*

Where before sadness and pain had leaked in, now Erasmus fought back this bitterness with the fear of experiencing this feeling like poison.

A small, brown rabbit head—one belonging to a rabbit he called Karydi—bumped into his hand, breaking him free of his thoughts back into his normal sweetness. He lifted the rabbit carefully, so as not to frighten in, and whispered his thoughts on the law.

“I know so little because I am not clever. But if the king and the prince say that this will make things better...*I hope it is put into effect.*” He said the last bit as if praying to Karydi, the little rabbit god who simply twitched his nose in hopes that Erasmus’ curls were tasty.

The sound of footsteps a few moments later had him placing the rabbit back to the ground. He wondered if it was Pallas coming to check on him until he saw the familiar flash of white gold.

The dogs were roused into ecstasy at the sight of their master and he was ready for Aspasia as she leapt onto another hound’s back in her delight to greet him. He pushed her back before she could bowl him over and waded through the sea of wiggling bodies to the rabbit pen.

“Your Highness.” Erasmus bowed his head. He startled as the rabbits perked up and hopped from his lap towards the prince. Their noses were moving rapidly as they too congregated close to the fence.

“Erasmus.” It could have been a trick of the shadows, but he looked a bit tired. “May I join you?”

It was odd and somehow comforting that the prince asked permission for his company in the gardens Prince Laurent owned, though he must have known that Erasmus would never refuse. “This is your rabbit pen, Your Highness. Do as you like.” The words sounded foolish but the prince nodded carefully before stepping inside.

Erasmus felt the tiniest pinprick of what he realized was jealousy as all the rabbits crowded onto Prince Laurent when he sat in the dirt as well, heedless of his fine chiton. Only two—Faskomilo and Salata—meandered back to his side when it was clear they could not find an adequate spot.

They sat in silence, until Erasmus could no longer contain his curiosity.

“Your Highness. Forgive me if I offend but...your law?” Prince Laurent’s face was terrifyingly neutral. “Was it a success?”

He gave a soft sigh, his elegant fingers stroking the velvet of the rabbit’s ears. “The law has passed. But only by the barest,” he thought for a moment, grasping for the word, “edge. It has passed by one vote and will begin as soon as possible. I will see it done.”

Erasmus thought of the numbers of *kyroi* voting as well as the king and the prince, and the margin should have been a tie or a win by two. Eerily, Prince Laurent must have guessed his next question, because he answered Erasmus before he could speak.

“I am not allowed to vote on the laws created.”
“But…” The thought was unbelievable to Erasmus, “you are the royal consort.”

Prince Laurent briefly smiled down at the sea of rabbits on his lap. “Yes…I will not soon forget that. But there is a law in Akielos that if the king or queen marries a person who is not Akielon, they cannot vote on laws until,” he paused again, as if searching for the proper words, but when he next spoke Erasmus quickly realized that he was composing himself to broach a painful topic, “they have given Akielos a royal heir.”

That would explain the slight pain in his tone.

And immediately he felt the hot bite of indignation and anger. Surely those who had taken offense to the prince could bring this matter up conveniently within hearing distance. But surely it was frustrating for the prince to want to be involved with his new nation, with Akielos, and to be unable to do so.

There was probably little fear of him creating an heir since he was an alpha and had outlawed royal slaves.

“I am…” He felt his apology would be a pale offering, “It is a waste…that they do not allow this of you…”

“I have made my choices. I will find a way to better Akielos even with such limits.” He tilted his chin up in a way that made him look defiant. “If my body is unable then I will have the abandoned omegas as mine.” He smiled a bit to himself as if he found the very idea wickedly humorous. “See how those fool,” he hissed what was most likely a Veretian curse under his breath, “like bowing down to their sins. All those children they have sown and then tossed aside raised above them.”

Erasmus smiled too at the idea.

He would never ask it for himself, but he found comfort for any abandoned omega children that happened to be on the receiving end of such an offer. The prince would be sure to guard them a fiercely as if they were his own.

“I…only wish there were some way I could assist you in this.” He mused, once again feeling useless for his limited training and skills. “I am not…”

Prince Laurent looked at him in something like mild shock and confusion. “But Erasmus, you are very helpful to me. There are not many in Ios who will listen so carefully.” The full force of the compliment struck Erasmus nearly breathless with the feeling of being invaluable.

“You can rely on my discretion.” He said breathlessly, bowing his head.

“And,” Prince Laurent’s tone became even gentler, “when we begin to rescue those trapped in those terrible brothels, you can help them find calm.”

Erasmus wanted to protest.

How could he possibly help other lost souls when he could barely get through each day without caving in on himself? This offer, while kind, had him nervous; he was not strong enough for this. The prince was too kind.

“I…I wish I could do more.” Was the only response he could find adequate.

“Do what you can, Erasmus.” Prince Laurent assured.
Erasmus stroked the rabbits on his lap, feeling their rapid heartbeats and fragile bones through his palms, as he thought on what he could do. The answer that came to him brought him a feeling of sickness in his stomach, but surely it would bring the prince joy.

It was all he could do.

And when Prince Laurent smiled at him on taking his leave, Erasmus steeled his resolve. He would do all he could to bring this man joy.

When the king and prince returned from their daily ride the next day, Erasmus waited until Prince Laurent moved to the kitchens to inspect the menu for dinner before leaving his room. He sidestepped Lazar and Pallas—a task made none too difficult, as Lazar was causing a distraction by attempting to suckle Pallas’ neck and nipples in a somewhat private corner—and made his way to the royal quarters.

His heart beat unevenly as he announced himself and was bid to enter.

The king was in the midst of pouring himself a glass of water, his long black hair tied up in a messy topknot.

“Erasmus.” The king seemed surprised to see him and the natural charisma that rippled from his form was enough that Erasmus nearly supplicated himself on the floor. “It is rare to have you visit unaccompanied. Has my Laurent sent you?” His features seemed to brighten at the very thought of Prince Laurent and Erasmus felt the guilt of his unspoken offer even more acutely.

“No… I… I came of my own accord.”

“Are you in distress?” The king stood, his expression changing by turns from concern to a terrifying flash of rage. “Is someone giving you difficulties here in Ios? If so you must let me know immediately.”

“No, no, no!” Erasmus amended before the king did something rash. “I… only wished to…”

The words died in his throat; he was too bold.

“Speak, Erasmus.” The king ordered without realizing, concern deep in his voice.

“I—Please forgive me if I am too bold. I… worry only for His Highness.” Erasmus looked up with a plea wide in his gaze that was mirrored in the king’s expression. “I’ve heard the results of the vote proposed were not… ideal and I wish to be of service. He has— you both have done so much for me and… I only wish to do something that may… help.”

His pain he had kept at bay by keeping himself busy spilled over for just a moment and he silently begged Kallias’ spirit not to turn away from him for this decision. He would never allow another so deep into his heart but his body was the only currency left for him to show gratitude. He choked back the shudder of disgust he felt at the thought of foreign hands upon him and pushed forward. He tried to think instead of the prince urging him to express himself with nothing but the loveliest delight on his face.

“I—if the burden of an heir weighs heavy on your minds I… humbly offer myself as a willing vessel. Forgive me.” He apologized without knowing why.

The king was handsome and kind. He was all Erasmus had ever dreamed of but he belonged to
Prince Laurent and Erasmus did not want him. The thought of sharing a bed with the man had him feeling a little sick.

The oppressive smell of an alpha in possession of a willing offer nearly had Erasmus sink to his knees and rescind his offer. There was a slight inhale and the scent receded.

“No.”

Erasmus looked up and the king had averted his eyes for a moment, one hand covering his mouth and nose. The rejection was simultaneously a relief and a stab to his gut.

“F-Forgive me—.” He began, wanting nothing more than to be out of sight.

“No wait.” The king ordered and shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. “I am not upset with you Erasmus, I swear. Please, sit and let us both relax for a moment.” The king led the way to his balcony and the two of them sat quietly breathing in the sea air until Damianos was able to collect his thoughts.

“They are right you know.” The king murmured, his voice a low roll of thunder in contrast to the clear skies. “The kyroi. They are right. There is an issue of our heir that had never occurred to me when the arrangement was first made. I had always considered that a slave would be the one to bear our children but…my opinions have changed.”

“Did you speak to your former slaves so candidly?” Erasmus asked. His words sounded eerily familiar of Prince Laurent’s quick retorts.

The king laughed though there was a touch of sadness to it. “Perhaps I did but…I cannot remember. I used to…I used to see slaves as part of the background of Ios; they were nothing of note and it is my shame that I used them as such. I would never mistreat an omega slave but…I never once questioned their desires or thought of those not in my possession. I am trying to change my mind but it is hard. Like you, it is all I have ever known. But I swore an oath to my husband and…I can no longer find joy in any other.”

Erasmus breathed in the sea-soaked air and found—oddly—that he could relate to the king.

“In…in the Gardens where I lived, becoming a royal slave was the greatest dream for us.”

The king’s smile was somewhat chagrined. “And now?”

“My love…he smelled like the sea.” Erasmus whispered. “My greatest dream now is to feel him by my side again.” There was a hesitant pat to his shoulder. “Though I also wish to—.

The king must have anticipated his next words. “My Laurent would not find glory in you doing something you found distasteful. Even to alleviate the heat.” Erasmus recoiled slightly at the mention of the heat and Damianos looked at him with a small measure of sadness. “You can see my novice’s hand with the heat. I used to think…it was a gift of the gods to alphas but…”

Erasmus’ eyes watered as he recalled his first heat. “I-it is…terrifying, Exalted One.”

King Damianos nodded as though he had expected such an answer. “I had not even thought to ask…the omegas with whom I shared my nights.”

“Such slaves would be proud to serve—.”

“No.” The king interrupted his mantra again. “No, they are my subjects, just as any other, and I
failed to consider their torture. No…I did not see it. But now I will make amends.” There was a gentle tap to the pale patch of skin where his gold cuff had been, “If it brings you joy, you may one day bear children. But they should be with a person of your choosing, a person you come to love. You are too kind to offer your body to me—to us, but I will not accept.”

“…Thank you.” Erasmus whispered, bowing his head; he cradled his stomach as well, thinking of something so foreign inside of him.

He twitched a bit as the king tilted his chin up slightly. “You should treasure yourself, Erasmus.”

Such a thing he feared to be beyond grasp and it must have been evident on his face.

“Care for yourself as I do for my Laurent.” It was clear from his expression that they had touched upon one of his favorite subjects of conversation. “I signed the marriage contract without ever having met him and thought it to be a simple alliance but…once I saw him, when I heard him speak, what could I do but fall in love with him? The moment we returned to Ios and I was crowned, I set about courting him with every grace and courtesy he deserved.” Secretly Erasmus thought all the king needed to do to seduce a lover would be to smile at them and sweep them up in his arms. “Everyone thought him made of cast iron but…”

The king did not even need to finish his thought; Erasmus knew the prince was gentle and careful.

Even so, he indulged the king as he spoke at length about the prince’s charms. Erasmus entered an almost daze with the deep cadence of the king’s voice, the gentle feel and smell of the sea breeze, and the warmth of the sun.

He barely noticed when the king took his leave and went inside to handle his affairs.

Instead he daydreamt of hair like wavy black silk and cool fingers trailing down his flank. He wanted it. He wanted it so badly his stomach tingled a little.

The sound of an opening door jerked him from his reveries and he looked back toward the cool inner sanctum.

Prince Laurent arrived back in the room with a small plate of raisin bread and seemed not at all surprised to find Erasmus sitting on the balcony while his husband poured over papers and soaked his feet in lavender water.

“My Laurent.”

“Lover.” The king seemed utterly delighted when the prince—normally so restrained in front of others—kissed him on the corner of the mouth. “And Erasmus. What brings you here?”

“I have been regaling Erasmus with our courtship.” King Damianos explained before Erasmus could begin and the tops of the prince’s cheeks flushed pink. “As you know, it is a subject I will never tire of.”

The prince said something in Veretian that made King Damianos laugh. “Whatever he has told you, I am sure it was not enough. He courted—how do you say this?” There was a pause where the prince had to ask for a translation, “He courted relentlessly.”

“You liked the poetry.” King Damianos accused cheerfully.

“I’ve always liked children’s rhymes.” Prince Laurent teased and dodged his husband’s hands as they reached for his waist. “I tease you.” Another sentence in Veretian that was much softer and
King Damianos dimpled with a smile at what were surely sweet words.

As the king dried his feet, Prince Laurent moved to the balcony and sat on the chair next to him.

“Bread, Erasmus? Are you hungry?”

Normally not so fond of heavy, sweet Veretian fare, Erasmus was feeling a little hungry and he picked up one of the sticky buns with the tips of his fingers. The prince bit into his with relish and Erasmus hoped he would not have to spit out the crust in front of the prince.

But the sweetness of it seemed to suit him this time. He was changing, slowly but surely.
Chapter Notes

So...next chapter might be a little late, cause I'm going on a trip this weekend for my birthday and I'm going to take a pause from writing while I'm there! But hopefully this will tide you over till then. Poor Erasmus, things keep building up for him but he just kind of accepts his fate.
At least Nikandros is there to lend a hand.
Also, here we have another fantastic example of Laurent's fabulous ability to name his pets. 'Damianiskos' means 'Little Damianos', basically, and he is a big old Dogue de Bordeaux. A squish faced, big boy. He'll be around quite a bit as the story continues ;)
Enjoy!

XIV. Les créatures fertiles

Erasmus practiced writing simple sentences in the library as he waited for Prince Laurent to arrive. The kitchen had supplied him with custard and cream pastries to have as snacks during his lesson, but he had been steadily nibbling at them until two had already been finished; he wondered if being around a Veretian had fostered such a sweet tooth, as he had never craved so much sugar before.

He waited for the prince for a good half an hour before his concern set in. Usually the prince was incredibly punctual and Erasmus was struck with worry over what terrible things might have occurred to him.

No, the king would never allow such a thing.

He paced the library, practicing reading by saying the titles of the books aloud. He was on the ninth title before another soul appeared in the library.

“Erasmus?”

It was not the prince or his husband, but Nikandros who waited awkwardly by the threshold of the library.

“Nikandros, sir, is everything all right?” Erasmus trotted up to him, clearing the curls from his eyes. “The prince is quite late and—.”

Nikandros paused him. “The prince and the king are not here this day. Pallas and Lazar, unsurprisingly, must have forgotten to mention that to you this morning.” Erasmus had not seen either of them the entire day but did not want them to get in trouble, so he remained quiet. “In any case there is something important I must show you in your garden. If you are not otherwise engaged I would ask for you to come with me.”

Dutifully he followed Nikandros through the halls of the palace, occasionally glancing up to greet one of the servants he had become familiar with. It seemed he had become somewhat of a pet amongst the other servants as they slipped him small snacks and the women brushed his curls when he sat silently by them. Though he was content mostly to sit silently and listen to them gossip, it was nice to know he had allies amongst them.
And it was clear they considered him an anomaly. That he would have such favor from the king and the prince? Though it was never said to his face, Erasmus heard rumors and whispers that he had been brought in to bear the king’s child.

Those words he mostly ignored along with the soldiers and visiting politicians who quietly called Prince Laurent an ‘ice cold frozen bitch’ and a foreign terror. Those were slightly harder to ignore, hot indignation pooling in Erasmus’ chest, but luckily they did not see him tucked unobtrusively amongst the shadows and he never forgot who was rude to his savior.

“Do not listen to them,” Nikandros scoffed regardless, turning his flinty gaze toward where the whispers had come from. “They speak only from their own desires.”

Erasmus smiled to himself. “I think not even the gods would stand a chance of coming between them. They seem as though…” He wanted to say ‘perfect’ but Nikandros must have expected such a response.

His laughter was soft and controlled, but no less genuine. “To the outside eye. They are men just as any other. And they fight just as any married couple. I wish you could have heard some of their disagreements from the early years of marriage; sometimes I thought it a miracle that the palace stones stood after some of their arguments.”

Erasmus could not imagine it. But then…they were both very headstrong men. He felt he might cry from fear if he witnessed such a thing. “Thank the gods they have found common ground.”

Nikandros smiled and softly patted Erasmus on the shoulder. “They are forever vexing me…but they are doing all they can. As are we all.”

In the kitchens they paused for a moment so that the elderly head chefs could attempt to ply them with more food.

Nikandros accepted flatbreads smothered in hummus and olives but Erasmus gracefully refused. Perhaps it was all the sweet breads resting heavy in his stomach, but the salty smell of the olives turned his stomach to nausea. He had been unable to stomach things that stank of salt and planned to visit the resident doctor later that afternoon.

Nikandros waded through the sea of dogs, carving a path for Erasmus to follow him into the shade of the garden to where the pond was.

The ducks eyed Nikandros and the dogs cautiously as their group approached; when he was alone, the ducks would congregate around Erasmus’ legs and eat the handfuls of peas he tossed to them.

Upon separating the reeds on a bank, Nikandros showed him a duck’s nest made of sticks and reeds and soft down, with a dozen pale green eggs nestled inside. Erasmus knew the location of every nest and he was a bit alarmed to see that the mother duck was nowhere to be seen.

“A stray cat unfortunately got the mother.” Nikandros said, “A servant girl found it this morning.” Grief and horror must have been readily apparent on Erasmus’ face as Nikandros awkwardly reached out and patted his bare shoulder. “I know you care for the animals here and…if you would like to attempt to hatch them inside the palace, I can have the Master of Grounds instruct you on how to incubate the eggs inside your chambers.”

Erasmus was about to protest that he was not clever enough to care for these fragile eggs but…the thought of that sweet little duck, with her tiny orange beak and her smooth, fat body, he could not bear the thought of her babies following so soon after.
For fear of upsetting the nest and ruining the eggs, Nikandros unpinned his cape—in spite of Erasmus’ weak protests—and tucked the eggs inside. Erasmus held the bundle to his chest as if it was the most precious thing to him.

And Nikandros—though he seemed so tired and taciturn at first glance—stood with Erasmus as the Master of Grounds explained the proper way to care for the eggs, how to keep them warm, and to keep the eggs and ducks far from Mout-Mout and the prince’s other snakes. Nikandros also helped him set up the warming pan in his quarters as Erasmus fetched some rags for the nest.

“Forgive me if I am out of line but…the king and the prince, where have they gone?”

Nikandros gave a wry sort of grin as he arranged the eggs. “They do this from time to time. The two of them leave the palace occasionally to go out into the city or into the countryside without anyone outside the palace knowing. I suppose it is the best way to know what goes on inside of Akielos firsthand. I have no doubt they will be back by nightfall.”

“And who makes decisions in their stead?”

“An excellent question, and one I am fond of asking them myself.” Nikandros replied, shaking his head slightly at his king’s headstrong ways. “If it is an issue within the house then the matter would go to the Palace Steward; if it is something more…pressing, then it falls on my capable shoulders to handle it.” His tone made it very clear that he was simply repeating what someone had told him about himself.

“You must feel very…” he searched long and hard for a word that would not sound patronizing or insincere, “honored by their trust in you.”

Nikandros smiled genuinely at that and it made him look so much younger. “The king is my dearest friend. It is my honor.” Tucking the last of the rags into their makeshift nest, he moved back to allow Erasmus to look. “There. It does not look half bad.”

Erasmus looked at the precious eggs and, gods help him, he could not help but imagine the hardboiled eggs served for a simple luncheon and the memory of the taste had his stomach twist in nausea.

“Erasmus, are you quite all right?”

“I should go to the doctor.” Erasmus said, doing everything in his power not to think about eating eggs. “I feel—.” It felt as though he had eaten bad cheese and waved aside Nikandros’ offer to carry him down to the doctor’s quarters.

“At least allow me to walk you down.” Nikandros insisted, worry etched clear on his brow.

Luckily the man had more tact than his normal guards and left Erasmus alone with the doctor so that any prognosis would remain between Erasmus and the doctor. Unfortunately for Erasmus, the head doctor in Ios was a man and Erasmus was distinctly on edge as the doctor put hands on his bare stomach.

“How long has this been ailing you?”

“Only just recently.”

The doctor furrowed his brow. “And have you had any other symptoms?”

Erasmus thought back and mostly it was his change in taste. While before he had found Veretian
food appallingly sweet but now he quite enjoyed the pastries that Prince Laurent ordered from the kitchens. And now a great many Akielon foods turned him to nausea as well. Eggs and olives, even the thought of them, made him feel queasy.

The doctor listened to him with a furrowed brow and moved to feel the temperature of his forehead before getting up to his shelves of oils, dried herbs, and powdered ingredients.

“I do not need you to drink this.” The doctor said, “Only smell it.”

Erasmus inspected the goblet and saw a liquid that merely looked like water. Raising the cup to his nose he inhaled—

The cup shattered on the floor as Erasmus began to retch. This was beyond any feeling of shame he might have felt for having damaged the doctor’s ceramics or sullying his floor. The smell coming from the cup was an indescribable mix of every taste that had been turning his stomach as of late. He managed not to vomit on the mosaic floors…but only just.

His eyes were watering and he clutched the gold at his throat to keep the bile down as the doctor calmly picked up the pieces of shattered pottery.

“How…was that?”

The doctor looked at him and there was something like pity and also the look of a man who had expected just such a reaction. “Please get comfortable first. I’ll fetch you some water.”

The doctor waited until Erasmus had taken a few hesitant sips of water, waved aside his apologies for ruining the cup, and then took a seat. His gaze was so serious that Erasmus felt ill in an entirely new way.

“Erasmus, rejoice.”

His next words were drowned out to white noise as an explanation was given. Erasmus felt as though he might faint.

Prince Laurent and King Damianos did not arrive until nearly nightfall, the both of them smelling of horse and smoke, their skin coated in a fine sheen of dust. The both of them seemed surprised to see Erasmus waiting outside the doors to their chambers. He got to his feet the moment he saw them.

“Erasmus.”

“Young Highness. Exalted One. Forgive my impertinence but…I needed to speak with you. It is…very important to me…”

He could not gauge their reactions to his request as he saw an enormous red-brown head peek around from behind Prince Laurent’s hip. Knowing the other dogs the prince had adopted, Erasmus instantly cradled his stomach and braced himself for the beast to try and leap at him.

But this newest one stayed behind the prince, his yellow eyes cautious as he looked at Erasmus. And it was a good thing too, because he looked positively enormous.

The prince must have followed his gaze because he smiled softly and patted the enormous, square head; a tail like a ship’s cable beat slowly against the king’s knee. “Ah, you see this fellow? We
have taken him from a dog fighting pit,” the prince’s eyes flashed with absolute fury, “so he is still quite shy around men and other dogs. I am going to call him Damianiskos.” Even Erasmus, with all his anxiety, could not help but laugh a little at the very apt name.

“You are ridiculous, lover.” The king laughed. “Please come in, Erasmus.”

While the king and Prince Laurent retired to their bathing chamber to clean the dust of the road from their bodies, Erasmus rubbed his stomach and sat on one of their chairs for guests; gently barred from entering the bathroom, Damianiskos sat close to the bathroom door watching Erasmus while trembling slightly at being left by the prince. Erasmus understood the feeling.

The dog was enormous; he was probably as tall standing on his hind legs as Erasmus was and probably twice as heavy with his giant block head and muscular body. Truly his name was well deserved.

It took the dog a bit to feel comfortable enough to approach Erasmus and Erasmus forced himself to remain very still as the giant hound took steady steps to his side. A head heavier than any human’s rested on his thigh and Erasmus looked down to meet the dog’s gaze. The wrinkles on his handsome face made it looks as though he was always somewhat concerned.

With a slow hand, Erasmus scratched his matted ear, uncaring of any dirt or mites the dog might have, and Damianiskos leaned into the love with a contented sigh.

“Don’t be frightened.” Erasmus whispered, seeing dried cuts and knots on his noble body. “I am the one that…should fear the coming day…”

He jerked, his body tense and alert as the two royals returned from the bathing chamber, and Damianiskos wagged his tail at the sight of Prince Laurent. Perhaps sensing Erasmus’ anxiety, he gave a gentle lick to Erasmus’ knuckles by way of comfort and then trotted over to the prince’s side. Prince Laurent nearly toppled over as the dog leaned his entire weight against the prince’s clean legs.

Babyish Veretian poured from the prince’s mouth, interspersed with ‘Damianiskos’, and, “I will wash you soon. Nice and clean, yes.” The king looked at him like he had never adored another human being so much in his life.

Erasmus might have felt a rush of fondness for the two of them had he not been sick with fear. The king poured himself and his husband goblets of wine as Prince Laurent unpinned the king’s long, black hair and ran his fingers through the wavy strands. Something much like envy pricked at Erasmus as he remembered the feeling of his beloved’s hair in his hands.

“Wine, Erasmus?” Prince Laurent asked when the king forgot to offer.

“No…thank you.”

“And your day was spent in peace?” The king asked as if he had just remembered Erasmus’ presence. “Pallas and Lazar did not vex you?” Erasmus’ blush must have given them away, for the king sighed, “It is a marvel of the gods that either of them can stand.”

Erasmus could not yet bring himself to admit the wide array of emotions he had gone through in a single afternoon. But the prince was sensitive to his dismay.

“You would not so easily come to us.” He could see the whip quick workings of Prince Laurent’s mind; it was as if he knew, as if he could read minds. “Does something ail you?” His eyes flashed
that way that made Erasmus remember the cold bite of the wind. “Does someone trouble you?”

“No, no.” Erasmus amended before either one of them could rise to arms. “I…”

He felt a bit of sickness at the thought but…Prince Laurent was a good man. Good and kind. Surely he would not be turned out for this. The thought of trusting another with this was terrifying; it went against every lesson he had ever learned.

He touched the gold at his throat.

“I am…no longer a slave.” He said.

“No. No longer.” Prince Laurent said without hesitation.

Then every lesson was useless to him. Erasmus steadied himself and thought of what was at stake. He had lost his feeling of safety, his innocence, the one he loved…no one would take this from him.

And he would do all in his power to keep any other person in his position from suffering the same.

“Young Highness, you told me once, that every man’s past is his own to share.” Even the king could not turn away, his dark gaze boring holes into Erasmus’ eyes. “I would share mine with you.”

Prince Laurent smiled softly as he sat down, nodding in a gentle allowance to continue.

Erasmus took a deep breath and began.

In the level, soft voice he used when repeating poems over the strings of the kithara, he told them everything, all he could remember. From the moment he had left the city of his childhood and entered into the Gardens. He spoke of his teachers, of Adrastus and Kolnas and Aleksis, of the other boys, and his master who had forced him to heat and tried to lay hands on him. He told of his First Night spent with the most beloved of men, the memories made ethereal and dreamlike through an orange-scented haze.

And Kallias.

Woven through the entirety of his being was Kallias. His voice like the tide, his eyes, his smile, the untameable nature of him and the scent of his nape like the smell of the sea. The memories surged through him, no longer a sharp spear of pain into his heart but an ache that wrapped around him and settled around him like an embrace. His dearest Kallias…

When he had finished he felt…lighter.

All of the stress and anxiety that had filled his body seemed to have disappeared and it felt as though he could breathe properly.

The king stared at him levelly, as though his intense focus was the only thing keeping him seated. His fist clenched and unclenched in turns. Damianiskos whined a little in his barrel chest as he gazed up at the prince. Though the prince seemed calm, something about him must have caused distress within the dog and Erasmus could sense that he was on the razor edge of something.

With speed like an adder, the prince whirled on the king and all of his fury could not be expressed in Akielon. His Veretian was so rapid that the dog cowered away from him. The king listened carefully and made occasional comments in reply. He only spoke in Akielon once or twice and it seemed to be in attempt to calm the agitated prince down.
“You cannot make such broad statements, lover.” “I know for a fact there are pets who suffer the same.” “We cannot change everything in a single day or even a single year!”

“I KNOW.” The prince hissed and slapped his palm flat on the table and then sighed. “I know. I am frustrated.”

Erasmus remembered his discussion with Nikandros earlier and decided that he very much did not want to see his king and prince fight due to him. He mustered his courage.

“I carry his child.” Erasmus whispered. And when the two royals did not appear to have heard him, the words bubbled out in a scream that surprised him for its’ intensity and caused Laurent and Damianos to turn to him. “I carry his child!”

He had never thought such a thing possible, even with a master.

It was as foreign to him as his own pleasure had been and surely this was punishment from the gods for going against his training. He had been raised on horror stories of slaves being taken by a heart’s choice or a stranger during their heat…and what was done as punishment for being so careless.

The thought of such pain was too much to bear and he gave a small noise of distress before putting his head between his knees; the doctor had instructed him to do so when he felt sick or nauseous.

The voices ceased their heated argument and there was the sound of long toenails on the marble floors. A long, smelly dog tongue lapped at his exposed cheek and he felt a little better upon petting that enormous, matted head.

When he finally found the courage to look up and gauge their reactions, he found the prince kneeling in front of him.

“You are sure of this?”

“The doctor has told me.” Erasmus whispered, cradling his still-flat stomach. “There was no doubt in his mind.” The prince’s blue eyes were so gentle, so understanding, that Erasmus’ eyes misted over and his lip quivered. He felt as though he personally had insulted the prince and his king by revealing this. “I…have shamed myself.”

“Never.”

“If you wish it,” the king spoke up looking unquieted by the entire situation, “there are herbs in the city that can—.”

Before the prince could rise to anger, Erasmus cut in with a feeling of protectiveness that he had only felt once before. “That I cannot do, Exalted One. Though I may be turned from the palace, though I may be scorned from all who know I am unclaimed…this is all I have left of the one I love. I will not rid myself of it. Surely…the gods want this as my fate if I am given it from a beta.”

He could not describe it but…the moment the nausea and fear had passed, he felt a deep possessiveness in his chest and his stomach.

*Kallias’ child.* He had never thought it possible but now that it was a reality, he could think of nothing more than protecting it. Even if they sent him away, he would take his gold to Marlas or Vere and work himself to the bone to see this child safe.

“Is this true?” Prince Laurent turned to his husband.
“There would be some…who would make his time here difficult when they discover his condition and know he is not spoken for.” The king admitted, looking apologetically towards Erasmus. “It is…leftover bias, not so easily erased.” Erasmus nodded in understanding and the giant dog rested his heavy head on Erasmus’ lap by way of comfort.

Prince Laurent stood up and the king could ill-hide his love and delight as his husband paced, knuckles at his lips as he thought deeply. The dog had drifted off, a brick on Erasmus’ knee by the time the prince had finished thinking.

He had gotten another one of his snakes from their cages—a simple dun creature he called ‘Patate’—and was petting it with two fingers as he pondered.

“Those servants who would slight him…they are the same who think us to take him to bed with us.” Erasmus blushed at the very mention of it. “Let the rumors spread the child is from us. No one would dare insult the potential heir.” He did not sound bitter or upset in the least, speaking of a child that was not his own nor the fact that people spoke of the desecration of his marriage in hushed voices.

The king laughed at his cunning. “Anyone who is not a fool would see I never waver from you.”

“And yet your kyroi are fool enough to think I cannot read.” The prince’s smile was positively serpentine. “I would see them panic when word reaches their ears that an heir is possibly imminent and I would be given a chance to vote.”

“And when the child is born without looking like either one of us?”

“We will not spread the rumors ourselves.” The prince responded lightly. “Only discourage others from stopping them. Let it happen in natural ways.” Erasmus wished to protest that he was unworthy of even the rumor but Prince Laurent’s smile gave him pause; he was flushed rose and gentle as the breeze as he cupped Erasmus’ tanned hands. “You need not fear or leave the city. Keep your joy.”

“You are too kind…” Erasmus responded and the tears poured out before he could help himself.

The pit of his stomach was warm.
Hello all!
There's been some drama swirling in the fandom recently and I've been coping by writing more fic! Nothing better to escape and make the fandom a little brighter ;) It's a little later than usual but I hope to get back on schedule soon.
Anyways, here's the most recent chapter and it's got some fun stuff and some real stuff. Erasmus sees just how much Damen and Laurent love each other and Lazar and Pallas really shine. Erasmus' fear of fire in canon really stuck with me and in the fic he's a bit afraid of a different kind of heat...
Also get hype: tragic backstories incoming ;)
Enjoy!

Erasmus cupped the plate in his hands and wondered to himself who was responsible for catching and killing the mice on the dish. Still, there was some fascination to drop the dead creatures into the glass tanks and watch Prince Laurent’s tame, pet snakes stalk their lifeless prey. He knew all their names and though he would always have a preference for the small, soft animals of the garden, he had developed a slight fondness for the smooth snakes.


He attempted to call their names as the prince did, in his sweet babyish lilt. The snakes did not respond as well as the dogs and goats did, save Mout-Mout who was the most curious of the lot.

He scratched her red brown head as she craned up to see him and her dinner.

As he watched the snakes eat, their bellies swelling with their large meal, Erasmus cradled his own stomach. It had become his habit as of late. It was almost as if he was holding himself to see if his stomach had begun to swell or if he could feel life move within him, like the wriggling of a baby snake.

The prince and the king had promised to keep such a thing secret from the rest of the palace for the time being—surely the rumors would cause an utter scandal—and Erasmus was grateful for it.

For now the knowledge was his alone.

A human. A baby with dark wild hair and slim, dark eyes.

The thought was foreign to him and at the same time it felt right. This was what he had been groomed to do. It inspired the greatest desire and the deepest terror in him. His body was no longer his own and yet…it never had been his.

He thought of babies in abstract; never had he been close to one for long periods of time.

But thinking of Kallias as he might have been as a baby…that was not terrible to think of. For now
the tiny speck of a baby inside of him was his and he wondered if it could feel his touch and hear his voice.

“Baby…” He murmured. His whole body seemed to warm.

Something heavy pressed against his legs, nearly toppling him.

Damianiskos had been cleaned and given good food for a few days now, but he was still skittish around other dogs so the prince had made it clear that the dog was to remain in the palace at his leisure. And whenever Damianiskos was barred from sticking to Prince Laurent, he inevitably sought Erasmus out. Erasmus liked him because his former masters had so poorly treated him and as a result he was shy and gentle. Much like Erasmus…

It was becoming habit for the dog to wander into Erasmus’ room in the dead of night and curl up next to the nest of eggs. Having the giant, gentle dog by his side was soothing.

Now when Erasmus woke from nightmares of hot hands gripping him and monsters chasing him through the forest, Damianiskos also woke up and allowed Erasmus to hug him. The hound’s slow, steady heartbeat lulled him back to sleep.

His tail wagged as Erasmus scratched his giant head.

“Why have you been abandoned again?” Mout-Mout glared at him as he put the top back on her cage, “Shall we go find them and see?”

Damianiskos seemed thrilled to follow and Erasmus traced the familiar path to the library. Just as he had expected, he heard voices coming from inside and opened the door just a crack so that he did not disturb the royals within. Upon seeing the situation within, Erasmus clapped a hand over his mouth to keep anyone from hearing him breathing.

Prince Laurent was bent over the table, gazing at a letter on its’ surface, and he looked as though his heart was breaking. His beautiful face was crumpled in defeat and the king hovered nervously at his shoulder. Dark hands stroked his silvery-blond hair and Erasmus could hear a steady stream of gentle Akielon, whispered soothingly into the prince’s ear.

It did not seem to be working, as Laurent put his head in his hands.

His Akielon was anguished. “What should I do? He refuses to come to Marlas or Ios. He tells me…not to return. All this time and…” his hand crumpled the sheet of paper, “only three lines in reply?”

He spoke in Veretian next and what he said must have truly been heartbreaking, because the king made a noise of distress and pulled Prince Laurent to his chest and kissed the top of his head.

“Sweetheart, My Laurent, you are beloved.” In the king’s arms even the prince looked delicate. “He loves you.” And when it did not appear to assuage his husband, “I love you.”

Erasmus was transfixed, his own body becoming an afterthought as King Damianos cupped Prince Laurent’s jaw and placed deliberate kisses all over the prince’s face.


Kiss.

He switched to Veretian and Prince Laurent responded in hushed tones, obviously repeating similar
sentiments until the pain had eased from his features and he was flushed rose.

By the time these sweet words had concluded, there was a very distinct change in the air.

The smell was sharp, heavy, and possessive.

Two alphas in a state of arousal was unmistakeable and it came as no surprise when the prince pulled his husband closer and slipped a hand under the sash of his chiton. “You love me. My Damen, lover…show me the extent of your love…”

They moved with the ease of lovers who had been making love for years and had the rhythm of dancers.

Their chitons were unpinned and pooled at their feet, leaving the king naked and the prince nearly so. Damianos smiled at his husband’s loincloth—the kind only worn while on horseback or by women during their monthly cycles—and tugged at it expertly. “You still hold onto your Veretian modesty?”

“Tease me and you will never know the day I grow out of it.” The prince warned.

They were beautifully matched—dark and pale—their bodies like sculptures of the gods. Erasmus felt as though he was breathing honey in and his face flushed. It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

The sensible part of Erasmus knew he should turn away from this intimacy but he was held captive by the smell of alphas in rut. The king spoke heatedly in a garbled mix of Akielon and Veretian and his arms snaked across Prince Laurent’s waist and neck; the noises that came from the prince were precious and subdued but his arousal was clear from only the color of his skin and the flutter of his eyelashes. There was something god-like about the two of them, if not from their sizes then for their raw, naked beauty. It was…it was…

Erasmus wondered if this was even comparable to how he and Kallias had looked in each other’s arms.

‘Sussie.’

The voice was tangible, he could feel Kallias’ touch, taste his lips and Erasmus felt his body tingle. He tore his eyes away and stumbled back. The front of his chiton was bulging upward and he forced himself to move away from the library, if only to get some fresh air and clear his head.

He practically stumbled to closest window and gulped in the sea air.

Though his head did clear after a few deep breaths, the heat in his head did not abate and his cock did not go down.

He remembered Kallias, ethereal and laughing in the cool ocean, and—though it did not help his arousal—he did think to find some large amount of cold water and throw himself into it.

He only got a few more paces.

It hit him slowly but he felt it coming, like the slow rise of a fever, the heat of coals, of a small fire and the fear of it nearly crippled him. It smelled of orange blossoms in his head. At least it was not a swift punch to the gut, as his first heat had been.

Damianiskos looked up at him in confusion and concern, perhaps smelling the change in the air
and he whined.

He calculated quickly the distance from his current spot to his little bedroom or the doctor’s quarters and wondered if he should run or walk slowly to prevent the heat inside his body from spilling over. He decided on a shuffling pace and Damianiskos trotted dutifully beside him, his giant brick of a head occasionally knocking into the side of his knees. Erasmus had to stop every few paces to steady his breath and pray to the gods he did not bump into any alphas.

It was a tall order, even for the gods, in a palace so populated.

He was about halfway to his destination, his entire body clenched to keep the heat from spilling from between his legs, when he heard footsteps behind him. Though he should have run, his body did not react as he liked and his entire body froze. The dog froze when he did.

“—you don’t smell that?”

Three guards rounded the corner, and while the man who was speaking had his nose wrinkled in obvious distaste, the other man and the woman with him had a dazed glassy look in their eyes that he recognized with fear. Their recognition and hunger was obvious when they caught sight of him and the smell of alphas in rut mingled with his scent.

The man who had spoken—most likely a beta—looked between his companions and Erasmus. Even the most foolish of men would understand immediately and recognize the former slave favored by the kings.

“Fuck.”

The alpha man stepped forward unthinkingly and Erasmus thought he heard the man growling like a predator would. Instead Damianiskos bumped Erasmus backwards with his bulky body and Erasmus saw his sweet, wrinkled face pulled back into a terrifying snarl. That would give even the most determined alpha pause and the man and the woman stopped as the dog blocked their path.

“Oh gods.” The beta guard seemed torn. His hands moved to cover his nose and he looked as though he wanted to step forward to help Erasmus, hold his comrades back, and escape the smell all at the same time. “Oh gods. Everyone please just—be still.”

The man did not mean it. He could not have known.

But Erasmus remembered those words from his first heat. He remembered them as he had been pinned down underneath a man he recalled as more monster than master.

That, of all things, had his muscles unlock on instinct and he ran.

The sound of deep, angry barking filled the halls behind him, and Erasmus hoped Damianiskos would deter any others from following him as he ran. Liquid ran down his leg and splattered on the marble floors, but he was beyond caring.

It had become almost instinct: when the heat came, he needed to run.

When he encountered another person, he was not so lucky. He heard running behind him and was gathering the air to scream, when strong arms wrapped around his waist and tossed him up in the air. Erasmus’ world spun and he found himself staring at the marble floors.

“You stink.” Came the cheerful, heavily-accented voice.
“S-sir?” Erasmus asked, immediately flooded with relief over seeing Lazar’s familiar smiling face.

“Yes, I am Lazar. Hello Stinky.”

Relief was immediate. He knew Lazar and Pallas were both betas and that the prince would ream Lazar if he put violent hands on Erasmus. He went limp and allowed the man to carry him through the halls. With his free hand, Lazar lazily drew his short sword in case any errant alpha decided to press their suit.

“Lazar!”

“Vixen!” Lazar paused as his lover called out to him.

“What in the name of the gods is going on?” Pallas asked, coming abreast of them. “Gods, the smell!” And then, upon noticing Erasmus. “Erasmus are you all right? Are you—gods above!”


Pallas carried him with a great deal more dignity than Lazar, holding Erasmus’ weight in his enormous arms rather than tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of grain. Erasmus looked up at him with wide eyes and Pallas gently cleared the curls from his feverish forehead.

“It’s the heat.” Erasmus said, his voice sounding weak and timid to his ears.

“I know, Little One,” Pallas tried to soothe him, “We’ll get you some medicine to suppress it. Hold on a little longer. Lazar!” Lazar looked up from where he was inspecting the wet spot that Erasmus had left on his chiton and grinned at his lover. “Medicine. We need medicine. For the heat.” Pallas sighed impatiently as Lazar’s expression remained blank with ignorance.

“Docteur.” Lazar perked up, surprised to hear Erasmus speak in shaky, poor Veretian. “Please.”

This was one of the few Veretian words he had not learned from the prince and he held it special in his heart.

Understanding took hold in Lazar’s eyes. “Ah! Erm, how you say it—potion? Heat potion?”

It took Pallas a few more moments to convince Lazar of what they needed before they parted ways and Pallas took Erasmus to his modest chambers. After placing Erasmus on the cool sheets, Pallas made sure the window was open and a pitcher of water was placed close to the bed, before trying to soothe Erasmus a little more.

“Your eggs are still doing well. Will they hatch soon?”

Erasmus’ breath was getting shallow and he was beginning to wonder—with no small amount of concern—what it would be like to have the guard on top of him. But the warm green eggs were a welcome distraction.

“I…I hope so.” He gasped, yanking at his chiton. “I keep…keep them warm…everyday.”

There was a scratching at the door and Pallas’ hand went to his sword as the door swung open. Damianiskos trotted into the room and bumped his wet nose into Erasmus’ foot as Lazar followed him in. The man’s chiton was bloodied but he held a vial aloft with a cheeky grin.

“Lazar!” Pallas stood and rushed to his lover, inspecting him carefully for injury. “What in the name of the gods—?”
Erasmus felt a quick pang of jealousy as Lazar grinned at his lover and kissed the corners of Pallas’ mouth in the Veretian custom. “Not me. Stinky got fuck water on me. Now I stink. They thought me omega and I break noses.” Even through his discomfort, Erasmus couldn’t help but smile at the thought. “No smiling, Stinky.”

“Forgive me.” Erasmus responded.

Lazar was gentle as he helped Erasmus sit up and tipped something sharp and medicinal to his lips. Erasmus dutifully swallowed only because he knew the two were betas and would not put hands on him.

“Wh-what did I just drink?” Erasmus asked Pallas, his head thumping back onto the pillow.

“A suppressant.”

“A…what?”

“You’ve never—? Oh yes.” Pallas’ cheeks colored. “They would not have allowed such things in the Gardens. In the city there is medicine to make the heat less intense. Within an hour or so the smell will die down and you will feel more yourself again.”

This knowledge hit him with something much like the bitter twist of the medicine and his eyes began to well. “Wh-why?” Pallas seemed to panic at the sight of his tears. “Why did…the teachers n-not allow us to take it? Wh-why did they t-torture us?”

Damianiskos whined and leaned his head in as close as possible so that he could lick Erasmus’ ear.

“No one will torture you any longer.” Pallas promised, kissing Erasmus’ forehead before placing a cool, wet towel there. “Rest until the medicine sets in and we will keep you safe.” Damianiskos hopped onto the bed and settled in beside Erasmus, closing his eyes with a sigh.

Erasmus closed his eyes and was lulled by the sea breeze, the dog snores, and Pallas and Lazar attempting to communicate through their language barrier. The heat seemed to blaze healthily inside of him, but it was not even half as unbearable as the first time.

He was roused from it when there was a knock and the door and Damianiskos growled in his chest. Erasmus opened his eyes to see Pallas and Lazar drawing their short swords with twin looks of fury. “If you are an alpha, you should turn away or die.” Pallas warned and Lazar snarled something in Veretian.

“Please do not trample my eggs.” Erasmus pleaded weakly, hoping a battle would not break out in his tiny quarters.

“Oh put those away,” came an authoritative voice, “you know I cannot smell him.”

“Nikandros, sir.” Pallas stepped away immediately, sheathing his sword.

The man stood awkwardly to the side as he saw Erasmus lying on the bed, sweating orange. “Ah, Erasmus. I would ask you if you were all right but it is quite clear to me that you are discomfited.” Erasmus thought the man was an alpha and seemed surprised that he seemed unaffected; Nikandros must have expected such a question. “I cannot smell. You need not worry about me losing my mind to lust. I came to see if you needed anything from me.”

“Could you…apologize to the prince…for me?” Erasmus asked. “I won’t be…meeting with him
this afternoon.”

“I shall let him know.” Nikandros promised.

Remembering the state in which he had last left them, Erasmus sat up with some degree of discomfort. “Do not—not now…please. They were…occupied last I saw them.” And Lazar laughed wildly at Erasmus’ blush.

“ Fucking.”

“God above.” Nikandros hissed at him.

“It is…t-true.” Erasmus admitted, trying his best not to conjure the image to mind. “Prince Laurent had received…a letter that gave him some pain. So…he was comforted.”

This statement shifted the mood entirely.

Nikandros looked aside as if he had expected such an answer. Pallas went rigid and uncomfortable, gaze darting from Erasmus to Nikandros to his own feet. But the most alarming reaction came from Lazar. He went from smiling at the idea of fucking to a face taken by quiet fury. It did not suit him.

“No good. That bastard.” Lazar hissed.

“Who?” The fire took on a bit of sharpness in Erasmus’ chest, a familiar feeling whenever someone was cruel to the prince. “Who is…the one who sent him…that letter?”

Pallas and Nikandros looked to each other, perhaps silently questioning if they should reveal something so personal to a former slave. But Lazar was too quick for them and his anger must have been very deep indeed.

“The king. King of Vere. Laurent’s brother.”
Of course the chapter where I get the most questions, comments, and concerns is the one where Laurent is in any sort of distress haha! Well, now I'm going to indulge you and I am introducing my newest take on Auguste. Truly a tragic tale what kind of shit the Veretian court has caused this time. And there's always that mystery villain too...
Also if we have any poets in here, forgive my sad and feeble attempt to imitate a Pablo Neruda sonnet. I tried my best haha! Enjoy everyone!

At first, Nikandros seemed somewhat unwilling to begin telling the story but Pallas pointed out that it was better that Erasmus hear the truth from them than to hear half truths from the loose-lipped servants in the palace. Lazar simply watched the two of them with the careful gaze of a man who could not understand the language but knew exactly what was being said.

Erasmus simply watched them all as they came to a decision and attempted to fight back his heat.

In the end, it was decided that Lazar would tell the story in Veretian and Nikandros would translate into Akielon. Though Erasmus recalled Prince Laurent saying each man’s past was his own to share, he wished to do anything to take his mind off of the heat. There was no surer topic than the lovely prince to have him so engrossed.

And he wondered how a brother could cause a man so much pain.

Lazar settled down next to the nest and stared off into the distance for a moment, as if deciding where to start. When he began, Veretian poured from him rapidly and Pallas got a glazed, hungry look in his eyes that made Erasmus think he very much liked listening to his lover speak Veretian.

But he could not dwell on it too long because Nikandros had also begun to speak.

Vere was more rigid in some ways than Akielos.

Betas were not permitted to have children outside the confines of marriage, omegas had strict curfews to prevent ‘disturbing the peace’, and—as any alpha born to a family was perfectly within his or her right to inherit their parent’s estate and title—it was not unheard of for siblings to kill one another to stake their claim on their inheritance.

Lazar, like his prince, had been born into such a world. But, by his own admission, he had been cunning enough to fight his way out of the slums of Arles into the King’s Guard.

And that was how he had come to know King Auguste of Vere.

The man was a golden king, an alpha raised since birth to rule, and it was clear he adored his country. When his parents, the king and queen died when he was eighteen, Auguste took the helm
of Vere and began his rule with the excitement of a young man with firm morals and rose-colored ideas. Much like Damianos, he had plans to make Vere a better place for his people.

But, as was the case with stubborn old men faced with the exuberance and rapid change of a young man, many did not agree with King Auguste’s decisions and his unwillingness to be swayed by them.

It was the Councilors doing—or some of them in any case. Those bastards who could not gain the ear of the king and could not push through the laws they desired sought a more impressionable candidate for king, those treasonous fucks. And their eyes had fallen on thirteen year-old Laurent.

He was young and bookish and a little shy so they thought it would be easy to influence him to stake a claim on the throne.

And besides, he was an alpha, just as his brother. He had as good a claim to the throne as his brother, by Veretian law.

The rumors spread quickly amongst dissenters: that Prince Laurent was an intelligent alpha prince, an excellent strategist, and very skillful with his swordplay. Surely by the time he could take the throne at eighteen, he would be a better ruler than his older brother.

Depose the king, they had whispered, place the boy on the throne with a regent and whisper in Prince Laurent's ear. By the time he was of age, he would be firmly in their pockets and their vision of Vere would come to fruition.

And so began the internal conflict that nearly sprouted civil war in Vere.

First the Council had become silently split between those who favored the king and those who favored the prince. Then the citizens of their cities had followed their councilors' alliances until townships and provinces were at odds with their neighbors.

The treachery was even more insidious in Arles.

By the time the king realized what was happening, there was already a divide in the city. By the time young Laurent realized, those councilors loyal to his older brother had already incriminated him in their opponents' machinations—or at least, that was what he argued. There were notes discovered that seemed to be written in the prince's hand, speaking of his intent for the throne; there were poisonings and men found with knives in their chests; suddenly both the royals found themselves as opposing figureheads in a national dispute. And despite Prince Laurent's protests, the evidence seemed overwhelming.

It was a dark day in Arles when the king snapped upon discovering yet another treachery. Lazar had stood rigid and emotionless as ten men were found guilty of treason and executed in the center of Arles.

Those councilors who had sought to depose him now found themselves in fear of their lives and with a prince rapidly approaching eighteen without their influence. King Auguste still ruled Vere, despite their best efforts.

And they had ruined the man.

He was still kind and gentle to his subjects but he had lost his easy confidence and most of his trusting nature. He had lost all faith in any of his councilors and he no longer held his brother close. Until the truth was brought to light, he could not be sure if Prince Laurent was behind this upheaval or not, no matter how Laurent protested that he was not.
The real tragedy in the whole situation was that—up until this treasonous plot— the king adored his younger brother. But he was distrustful now; he knew how intelligent Laurent was.

It became whispered that the king was thinking of exiling his once-beloved younger brother, locking him up in Acquitart or sending him to Patras; a more devastating rumor—though Lazar did not confirm it as truth—was that the king was actually thinking of having Laurent killed. Prince Laurent, always a little quieter and shy, was now utterly alone and did not eat or sleep all that much. It seemed that every moment of the day was just a game waiting to see if Vere would descend into civil war; no one would have expected that another civil war would prevent Vere from the same fate.

Lazar had been in the room with his captain and his king when the messenger came from Prince Damianos requesting aid in his own fight.

Recognition of opportunity and a simple mistranslation was all it took to seal Laurent's fate. The king responded with a mistranslation of the word 'shelter', which in some formal situations could mean marriage, and an alliance was made. It was odd that the alpha prince would choose to marry another alpha but he apparently needed the support and King Auguste had the promise of the Akielon army and a convenient disposal of his brother. The promise of a kingdom was too lucrative for the both of them to pass up.

When told of this arrangement, Prince Laurent had remained silent and unmoved, only whispering, "If it brings you joy, brother," after he had been asked what he thought of his impending marriage. His eyes never left the floor as he was dismissed from sight.

Prince Laurent, now eighteen and sharpened to something near cruelty, had steeled his nerve and signed the marriage contract.

He must have heard that if he stayed in Vere, there was a very real possibility his own brother would have him locked up or killed to prevent civil unrest in the country; it was understandable to many of the councilors: the life of the younger prince was less valuable than keeping the peace in Vere. But there was another truth to it as well, one that only those very close to Prince Laurent would see.

He still loved his older brother.

His future husband, Damianos, could very well have been a cruel man. He could lock Prince Laurent in a tiny room in Ios, exile him to the island of Isthima, beat him, rape him, isolate him, amongst any other number of horrible things and it would no longer be the concern of Vere. Prince Laurent was willing to risk this potentially painful future all for the love of his older brother.

It must have been truly painful, to have King Auguste wave him away without a final tender embrace or word of comfort, with only one man, Lazar, as escort.

Lazar had always been fond of the younger prince, with his whip quick mind and quiet dignity that others might mistake as haughtiness, and his heart was swayed from his king when he saw the prince biting back a broken heart as they rode through the countryside of Vere. Any man who remained so serene in the face of such fear and sorrow was surely someone worth following across the kingdom.

And though Prince Laurent had been living here for some time, though he had heard from his contacts in Vere that his homeland was peaceful yet again, though he bore his brother no ill will…

King Auguste had ignored every invitation to visit Akielos and kept his correspondence cool and
brief. It was clear he did not want to meet with his younger brother.

The perceived betrayal ran too deep.

Erasmus was near to tears by the end of the tale.

“It is good we were kind and gentle to Laurent. Otherwise Lazar was going to kill Damianos,” Nikandros said without realizing and then glared at Lazar. His Veretian was accusatory and Lazar laughed at his fury.

“He hurt my prince if I kill him.” Lazar explained cheerfully and then shook his head a moment later. “No, switch words.” Everyone nodded in understanding and Pallas murmured something that might have been ‘treasonous fucker’ lovingly under his breath.

“You stayed.” Erasmus added smiling at Lazar.

He felt a sort of tender fondness for the scruffy man. He too had been forced to give up his homeland and live in a place where he still could not understand most of what was being said. All for his prince and—in all likelihood—Pallas.

Lazar smiled back and gently cleared the curls from Erasmus’ forehead. “Yes. Akielos is good. I like my Vixen and the king and the…land. I stay.” He had a concerned look as he touched the gold at Erasmus’ neck. “Slavery is not so good. But...we fix it soon. My prince and Damianos fix it soon.”

Erasmus looked to Pallas and Nikandros. “You will break up those brothels soon?”

“Gods willing,” Nikandros sighed, “There are some who still seem unwilling to begin.”

“They do not who they are dealing with.” Erasmus murmured. Now that he knew what Prince Laurent had been forced to live through, he knew that those kyroi stood no chance against such a man. Gold would still glimmer, even if a man tried to crush it underfoot.

He woke up to Damianiskos’ tail thumping gently against his flank and a gentle sort of shushing.

“You are awake.” Prince Laurent sounded delighted to see it so. “I am so glad you are unharmed. And your heat is subdued?”

It was amazing. Though the heat had not gone completely, it was more manageable. It had faded to a dull ache in his hips and he felt comfortable enough sitting up in his small bed. The prince reached out a hand in case Erasmus needed help.

“Yes, I feel very well. I am sure you can still smell it though.”

“You smell,” Prince Laurent cleared his throat and for a moment his expression slipped, “very fine. I am told that the heats will stop once your…condition becomes more pronounced but until then, medicine will help.”

“I had not known these suppressants existed.”

“Something I intend to remedy immediately.” The prince added with a frown. “I would like to see those medicines given freely to any omega who needs them. Not everyone has two beta guards to
“I must thank them,” Erasmus looked around for Pallas and Lazar.  

“They have been relieved of guard duty to eat. Hopefully food... In any case, I hope they were able to take your mind off your discomfort.” He seemed so concerned that Erasmus immediately felt awash with guilt for knowing. For knowing the cruelty of the King of Vere and what he had done to Prince Laurent. 

He bowed his head, knowing the guilt would eat at him until he admitted what he knew. Kallias would have teased him for it, kissed his forehead…  

“W-we spoke of you...and your time before you came to Akielos.” It might have been his imagination but he thought he felt the prince stiffen next to him. “F-Forgive me...I know...it was yours but...”  

There was a long moment of silence that made Erasmus want to crumble to dust.  

"Why did you not simply ask me?” Prince Laurent asked him and Erasmus was somehow more ashamed for the fact that the prince did not sound upset with him in the least. His voice, as always, was gentle if not a little sad.  

"Because...because I do not deserve it of you." Erasmus admitted and all the strange feelings in his body must have rebelled against him because he bowed his head and cried onto his lap. "Because you are as a bright star to me; shining and golden and far beyond what I could ever hope to reach. Your kindness is enough to cripple me. Your attention is beyond all the gold I possess. I fear any more you give willingly is more than I could bear."  

Erasmus felt a weight on the top of his head. "I am a man. Just as you are. I am far from perfect.”  

Gentle hands tilted Erasmus' head up.  

His tears were wiped away under a blue gaze and the prince smiled as Erasmus was set to rights. "Lazar probably ended the tale with us arriving in Akielos. So not all of the story is done. In the safety of those..." he looked like he wanted to call them something far less savory, but he contained the urge, "gardens, you could not have known the mess—no, the chaos in the rest of the country."  

"When my brother and I signed the alliance, we knew he was sending me into a budding civil war. My...I had caused much pain living in Vere. The three gods of my country must have wanted my atonement by preventing more pain in Akielos. When I arrived, Damianos was in Marlas with his loyal men, while those to the southeast found their loyalties with Kastor. Many of the kyroi talked of the glory of battle," Laurent grimaced as if to show exactly how he felt about battles, "of killing men and destroying fields and homes. Of tearing the country apart. And I thought that it could not stand, like this. I would not let it. If I had lost all else, then why not my life as well?"  

Erasmus felt something drop in the pit of his stomach.  

It was almost as if the prince was describing how Erasmus had felt after Kallias resigned himself to certain death. After Erasmus had lost everything in a single moment.  

He almost wanted to reach across the impossible divide and take the prince by the shoulders. Whisper to him, 'Live Laurent. Live.'  

"I left Marlas and rode south. I left a note of apology for my husband of a week. If I were to fail, I apologized for the loss of life I could not prevent. I went to challenge Kastor, the usurper, to a duel.
If he were to lose then their cause would wither away. If he won..." Laurent must not have liked to think about what might have happened had he lost.

"You sit before me." Erasmus added by way of explanation. "He did not win."

"No, he did not." Laurent replied and his eyes were hard with the memory of a man dead by his hands. "I was better than he was."

"And the kyroi loyal to him did not try to harm you?"

"I am sure they considered it." Laurent said with a sharp, bitter laugh. "But no, Akielons are generally honorable even in the face of a foreign enemy. It also helped that Damianos arrived to my aid only a few minutes after the duel. Lazar told him—or showed him my plans and...I suppose he did not want me to die without ever properly having a...bedding."

It was the wrong, 'bedding' but Erasmus did not want to correct him for fear of blushing to death.

"And then?"

"He took me home. He courted me." Laurent murmured as if he still could not believe it himself. "He wrote me poetry. He gifted me fine books and finer horses. And when I wanted to scream for what I had lost...he spoke with me. Not as a king or a lover, but as a man. He took nothing and gave everything." When Laurent looked at him Erasmus wanted to tremble. The look in his blue eyes...it was the same shattered look Erasmus often saw in his own mirror in those hardest nights. But his were somehow...mended. His next words were Veretian, the cadence sounding as though he was reciting poetry, his heart bared by the stanzas. "The shards of you are as gods to me, I kneel to the midnight parts of you. I am but a man; the greatest king would tremble for your jasmine-scented touch." Came the Akielon translation.

Erasmus was not clever, but this he understood.

It had never occurred to him before that a prince of a foreign land and his king, the king of Akielos, could understand his pain. That they could know the feeling of losing everything and still manage to find the strength to greet the next dawn.

"I-I am not..." He could not finish his thought. He did not believe it. "I am not afraid."

Prince Laurent and the king himself stood guard outside the bathing chambers as Erasmus cleaned the orange-scented slickness from between his legs. There was an itch inside of him that had not bothered him so much before, but he ignored it, knowing now that there were suppressants to dull his heat and ointment to soothe his insides. He was not afraid.

When he had finished washing himself, Erasmus did something that he had never really done before.

He looked at himself in the mirror.

His whole body, the body that had been meant for a master but was now his, all his. He could look at it as much as he liked, touch it however he wanted. He ran his hands down his body, over his skin—newly golden and freckled from his hours under the sun—and looked at every inch of himself.

He saved his eyes for last.

With his skin darkening, they looked even more golden than ever before. Like honey or the
shadows glinting off a coin. They still looked a little broken but not as empty or hollow as before.

“Live, Sussie.” He whispered to himself, clutching his stomach as he pressed his forehead to the cool surface of the mirror. “Live.” He could not just survive; he had to live his life properly.

His eyes would mend in time.

Erasmus woke in the dead of night when Damianiskos whined and nudged at his face with a cool wet nose. When he touched the dog's soft, velvety fur, Erasmus was alarmed to find him trembling and stood up immediately to find a flint and a candle. As he did so, he whispered every Veretian word he knew under his breath in hopes that it would soothe his companion. "Doctor, kitten, gold, rain, Mout-Mout, ocean I love you," it made no sense but it sounded calming.

Erasmus lit the candle and nearly fell over as Damianiskos crushed his giant body between the table and Erasmus' legs. He whined as if there was something stalking him in the shadows and Erasmus lifted the candle higher, wondering if he should call for Pallas and Lazar.

He saw nothing in the darkness of his room but he did hear something.

It was the sound like a fingernail tapping on mosaic or marble and Erasmus traced it carefully, listening without breathing until he was standing in front of the nest of duckling eggs.

Learning the complicated postures of submission allowed him to sink to his knees without wavering the flame of the candle and he placed it next to him so he could watch. He picked them up with steady hands, one at a time, until he found one with a hole the size of a sunflower seed and a grayish-pink beak nudging at the opening.

He barely shifted from the spot, he was so transfixed by watching the hole widen until slick feathers were visible and stuck out of the crack. The baby inside stretched with pale effort, obviously exhausted by its' exertions, and the egg split the whole way around. A warm, damp duckling spilled out onto his palm and looked up at Erasmus with eyes half-closed from all its' work.

It was not a particularly cute creature at the moment but Erasmus still felt a rush of fondness for the helpless little thing. He could feel its' fragile bones and fluttering heartbeat through his skin and he touched its' feathers gently with his finger. The duckling gave a weak cheep and Erasmus smiled at it.

“You are so very ugly,” he whispered to it and the duckling curled up tight on his palm, “but I will take good care of you.”

That was how Pallas and Lazar found him when someone in the kitchens alerted them that he had slept through breakfast and might be in peril. He had fallen asleep on the floor, with his head resting against the nest, fragments of eggshells littering the floor. His ducklings were clustered together in the center of the nest, sleeping just as he was, while Damianiskos rested skittish and lonely on the bed.
Eyyyyy!
So I have some good news!
First good bit of news is that I plan to update this story again next week! Usually I alternate between this and my Spartacus fic, but I want to start pushing myself for this one a little faster, as I have so many new fic ideas I want to share ;)
Second, Erasmus has finally, FINALLY grown a backbone in this chapter. He's slowly been getting stronger but now he is full on feeling confident in himself. And the pace is picking up because something BIG is coming up!
I hope you enjoy!

Some people giggled and whispered as he passed, but Erasmus ignored them. Those who did know him simply greeted him as ‘Melichrysos’, honey colored, which had become his unofficial nickname amongst the servants. *Melichrysos and his babies*, they said with gentle smiles as Erasmus passed.

He glanced behind him to see his entourage walking behind him.

Daminiskos was right behind Erasmus and wagged his tail when he saw Erasmus was looking at him. And behind the dog were Erasmus’ eleven black and yellow baby ducklings. He felt a rush of fondness, seeing them run after him.

Even at two weeks old they were small enough that he could fit two in each hand and all eleven could curl up on his lap. But his favorite was walking around the palace and seeing them scurry behind him in single file line, as they did any time he moved. Occasionally he would pause to let them rest their tiny webbed feet and Damianiskos bumped them into a group with his nose. Their trip to the library was slow going.

Still, it was worth it to see the prince’s smile of delight as their little parade marched into the library.

Daminiskos outstripped Erasmus and the ducklings, rushing to greet Prince Laurent and attempt to drink the water the servants had left for the baby ducks to paddle in. The king tried to stop the massive dog and nearly upset the dish, much to Prince Laurent’s delight.

“Gods, dog.” King Damianos chastised, wrestling the dog away from the dish.

“Call him properly,” Prince Laurent offered through his laughter.

“I refuse.”

Erasmus smiled softly at their easy banter and began to scoop up his ducklings to put in the water. They clustered close to his ankles, peeping furiously at the king; they were terrified of him. The prince seemed to be in good humor and Erasmus waited patiently until after their reading lesson to
broach the subject but the prince’s excitement could not be contained.

“Erasmus, I have an offer for you.”

“Anything.” Erasmus offered without hesitation.

The king chuckled at his enthusiasm. “Your mood improves by day. The time approaches when the prince and I take a tour of the kingdom for a month. We plan to introduce new laws that we will press into effect in the coming year, plan the festivals, and look at the taxes and stores to be taken from the harvest.” Erasmus’ expression must have been sweetly blank because the king amended. “We would like for you to accompany us in our party while your…condition still allows travel.”

Erasmus looked to the prince. “You would ask my company?”

Prince Laurent put both hands on the map and traced a path from Ios up the spine of Akielos. “We will travel through these parts and stay with the noble families and the kyroi. You should see the rest of Akielos, your home.”

“And…my ducks?” Erasmus asked, looking to where they were paddling about in their shallow dish of water.

“We can have someone remaining here care for them in your stead.” The prince assured. “We will bring Damianiskos and if you intend to join us we can have you begin practice riding the mules again.”

“What purpose would I serve?”

Prince Laurent smiled in that wicked way of his, his bright blue eyes sparkling, a lock of pale hair falling in his face. It was clear to see from this expression alone how the king—a man who could have his choice of beauties—would choose the prince of Vere above all others. “As before, if you wish you can serve as my eyes and ears in the villas we visit. And…there will be many slaves in the villas. I would have you see that they are not abused.” He twisted his lips in obvious frustration. “They only tell me what they believe I wish to hear.”

“And what do you wish to hear?” The king asked, kissing his husband on the ear before Laurent could dodge him. “I will whisper it to you as much as you wish.”

“I wish to hear a revolution at our gates. Whisper that to me, lover.”

Damen replied with something in Veretian and the prince’s expression took on a look that seemed to war between bafflement and arousal. To keep the smell of alphas at bay, Erasmus made his decision quickly.

“It would be my honor to come with you on your journey.” Erasmus interrupted. “I…and only hope that we may return before…” he tried to think of a diplomatic explanation, “before my condition becomes…pronounced.”

“Never.” Prince Laurent promised, glancing at Erasmus’ stomach. “I will write to my physician in Arles; he is the finest doctor in Vere, the finest in four kingdoms. Surely…” The prince composed himself, “surely my brother can spare him for a few weeks.”

“You need not go so far for me.” Erasmus blushed at the thought of the trouble and expense.

Surprisingly, it was the king who spoke, his voice suffused with fondness. “It is well-deserved. We wish every comfort for you in this.”
Aegina was near the border of Patras and Erasmus was quite fond of the rolling hills and pastoral lakes that dotted the landscape. Pallas explained that many of Akielos’ sheep and goats were raised here and that the province was fat with wealth from trade. One of the most lucrative amongst the trades was that of carefully trained Akielon slaves; betas and omegas who had not been bought would be showcased across the border for Patran nobles.

Erasmus tried to mask his dismay as they entered the villa where their group would be lodging during their time there and he saw the telltale flash of gold cuffs and collars.

He did not even notice that the king personally reminded Melanthios, the kyros of Aegina, to greet Erasmus as he had all the others in their party when the man skipped him. Lazar had gleefully told him of it later. But Erasmus could not recall. He only remembered the slaves, silent and subservient in the shadows of the villa.

He longed to speak with them.

“You go where?” Lazar asked when Erasmus made to seek out the slave quarters. Unlike in Ios, where Lazar would slip away at any opportunity to be with Pallas, since they had arrived in Aegina he had been glued to Erasmus. Pallas had gone off with Nikandros once they had been shown to their quarters.

Erasmus touched the gold at his throat by way of explanation. “Slaves. Talk with slaves.”

Lazar nodded in understanding but he did not lose the look of concern. “Careful. I don’t know men. Don’t trust men. So if I save you when you cry.” He shook his head, continuously mixing up that particular bit of Akielon. “You know, Stinky.”

“I know.” Erasmus smiled at him before leaving the room. “I will be careful.”

The gold at his neck was as if the gods had granted him invisibility. He walked through the hallways of this unfamiliar villa unseen. Servants and soldiers looked through him as if he was not there and not a single person greeted him. No one stopped him as he found the elaborately carved doors of the slave’s chambers and slipped inside.

It was like stepping into his old life, an old shell he had since grown out of, but even so…he stood up a little straighter, bowed his head a little when he saw the fine silk hangings and smelled all the sweetness inside.

He took quick stock when he found them all clustered inside.

From his assumptions, the kyros of Aegina must have either favored young men or his wife allowed no other women but herself in the bed of her husband, because all of the slaves were young men. Most had traditional Akielon coloring, with dark skin and dark curly hair, but there were a few with paler skin from the north. Though they had fine manners and sweet natures, Erasmus did not think they would be thought of as the finest for looks. He wondered if this was the kyros’ taste or if the man was not prudent in dealing with the Gardens.

They brightened when they saw him, entire bodies perking up like Erasmus’ bunnies and ducklings did when they saw him.

“Welcome, welcome,” their delight still contained to whispers as they clustered around him and he was enveloped in the tender, sweet smells of omegas.
Erasmus smiled at them, amazed at how…innocent they seemed. “I am Erasmus. I am here with the king.”

It was as if he had given each of them the greatest praise on earth.

They complimented him easily; his dark, freckled skin, his golden eyes, his curly hair, his beauty, his scent, they gave compliments sweetly and said there was no question as to why the prince and the king had chosen him as their sole slave. He did not bother to correct him, hoping their assumption would esteem him.

Erasmus felt that phantom pain again, the scent of sea salt, the whispers: ‘I like your freckles, Sussie.’

All along Kallias had told him how beautiful he was. How painful it was to only hear and accept his praise now from the mouth of another…

Still, Erasmus adopted his gentlest smile and tried to bring himself back into the fold of slavery. Allowing himself to be led to one of the comfortable benches within, Erasmus answered the barrage of questions about life in Ios.

For slaves already deflowered, it did not take long for them to ask of the intimacies they assumed.

“The king is so…large,” one particularly bold slave offered and the others giggled and flushed prettily at the mention of bad things, “are they quite…gentle with you, Erasmus?” Erasmus also blushed, recalling the king and the prince in the library though he could not stomach the thought of himself intruding on their intimacy.

Instead, he thought of how they taught him to read and to ride mules, how they offered to let him stay and were bringing him the finest doctors.

“They are both…gentle beyond imagining.” He admitted, ignoring their scandalized gasps. “I would do anything for them.”

“I cannot even think of it…”

Erasmus saw his opening. “And what of your master? Is he a good man? Does he also treat you gently?”

The mood changed palpably. Erasmus, as well trained as he was, could sense the shift and it set him on edge as the slaves stiffened and lost their easy good humor. Some glanced to the floor out of habit, others clenched their hands in the cloth of their chitons. A person with less understanding would have missed this moment of tension, but Erasmus saw it all.

“He is our master.” One finally spoke, his tone a little wooden. “We live to serve him.” Answer enough.

Erasmus did not let his distaste for the familiar mantra show.

Instead he pressed further.

“Of course. And does he wish children of you?” More silence. Erasmus watched them carefully. “Or do they not desire children?”

“It…is not welcomed so we take necessary precautions.” It was the diplomatic answer that Erasmus had expected. “And you? The king will foster an heir on you? For the Prince of Vere?”
Erasmus did not expect the visceral reaction that overcame him.

The thought of anyone, even the king, taking Kallias’ baby was abhorrent to him. Unthinkingly, he cradled his stomach. “I…they will find joy no matter my condition.” Their eyes flashed with a brief mix of relief and something close to jealousy and Erasmus felt a little guilty for baiting them. “I only wish you the same measure of joy.”

Their smiles were so sweet, he would torture them no longer.

While they brought him dishes of simple almonds and dried fruits and cups of mint tea, he asked them of life in Aegina and of their lives before being brought into this household. They seemed surprised that someone would be interested in such things and soon they were quite comfortable with each other.

He must have lost track of time; certainly none of them were watching to see if anyone had come to the slave quarters.

“Who are you?” Came an indignant shout and the slaves all became rigid with fear, their eyes flicking to the marble floors, mouths snapping shut. Erasmus also clenched with fear for a moment until he remembered who he was and who he was with. He turned and stared unashamedly at the slave handler. The man was huge and intimidating, with meaty fists and a squarish bald head. He caught sight of Erasmus’ collar and his entire face flushed crimson. “Are you one of the new purchases? How dare you sneak off without permission! Where are your wrist cuffs, you—?”

He was starting to loom over Erasmus and Erasmus felt a jolt of fear. But he refused to look away. He tried to think of what Prince Laurent would do in the situation and he steeled himself.

“How dare you.” He spoke with an iron tone that gave even the enormous handler pause; he was probably unused to slaves questioning his authority. Erasmus remembered how Prince Laurent dealt with the disrespectful kyroi, he called on his anger from when they spoke ill of his prince, and he could feel himself burning. “I am in the party of the king and his husband. I am beloved of them, respected by them. And you speak to me like this? How dare you?”

The handler’s face had gone from the flush of anger to a grayish white.

“Y-You are…”

Erasmus did not avert his eyes and they watered with concentration and fury. “I am Erasmus. You will not order me to do anything.” He cradled his stomach. “Leave me be or suffer the king’s wrath.” The handler backed away, repentant at the very thought of the king’s displeasure.

“A-apologies,” he stammered and backed away.

Ignoring the rush of power he felt at having a slave handler obey him, Erasmus turned back to the slaves who were looking at him in various states of awe. He felt a rush of fondness for them; perhaps Prince Laurent was right and he would be skilled at caring for former slaves who had been housed in terror.

“I will return to you later.” He promised. “I am to the prince.”

He did not bow his head as he left the slave quarters and did not lower his eyes until he reached the fine quarters where the king and the prince were being housed. The king must have still been with the kyros because only Prince Laurent was within, scribbling notes as he pored through a large book.
Prince Laurent brightened when he entered. “Erasmus! Did you find the slaves? Did they appear unhurt? Are they in good health? Any pregnancies?”

Erasmus told him of all he had seen, presenting the facts first as the prince had told him was necessary for a good report. Only afterwards did he offer up his opinions on the conditions of the kyros’ slaves. “While it is true that they had no injuries and none were pregnant, the handler here has a heavy hand. They seemed fearful of him.”

“It is no good to fear a handler?” Prince Laurent urged, perhaps knowing the answer but pushing Erasmus to think for himself why the situation disturbed him.

Erasmus chewed his bottom lip thinking of Aleksis. “No. It is…no good. All the concerns that a master cannot see fall to the handler to solve. If slaves fear their handler then all of their fears and worries will remain within them.” He looked up to see the prince similarly alarmed. “If…if I may be so bold your highness, I believe…I believe that the slaves here are frightened of more than just their handler. I could see it in their eyes and the way they moved.”

“I trust your judgement.”

“What will you do? What must I do?” Erasmus asked.

The prince glanced to his book, his smile somehow soft and vicious. “We wait for Damianos. And for Nikandros and Pallas to return.” Anticipating Erasmus’ question, “It’s a secret, though I am sure Pallas will tell you and Lazar the moment he returns, talkative brat.” It was probably his cue to leave so the prince could continue his studies but Erasmus paused before exiting.

“Young highness.”

“Yes?”

Erasmus called on the focus and fury that had so unnerved the slave handler. His eyes swam as he spoke his heart. “I want to help them. I could not save Kallias but…I will do all I can to help them.”

“I know.” Prince Laurent responded after a long, measured pause. “I have always known.”

As expected, the kyros of Aegina was horrified when the Prince and the King publicly announced their plans to ban the trade of slaves to Patras. Once again underestimating the skill of Prince Laurent and his apparent love for reading through Akielon laws, he had found a convenient loophole in the legalities of trade. Unlike the issues of internal trade, which required a vote from the kyroi, the king could make independent decision on international trade in times of war or if there was reason to believe Akielon citizens were being harmed.

Erasmus had reason to believe—from his conversations with the kyrio’s omega slaves—that anyone with considerable beauty, regardless of age or gender were sent across the border at great profit.

Prince Laurent’s smile was unerringly gentle, not a trace of vindictive satisfaction as he outlined the law in question and explained that now, in the eyes of the Exalted One, any man or woman who sold slaves to Patras were breaking the law and subject to being imprisoned for trafficking.

The kyros of Aegina and all of the following kyroi they visited were to let their subjects know immediately.
Erasmus was glad the Prince had taught him how to write letters because he tried his best to make detailed notes—though often misspelled—throughout their journey through the noble houses of Akielos. He took careful notes of which kyroi were sympathetic to their cause, which were supportive in public but felt differently in private, and which were outright hostile to the king and the prince. He also took notes of any alphas who propositioned him after a few glasses of wine.

He also had notes on whose slaves were well-treated, whose slaves lived in fear, and whose had any omega children sold away. Those hurt him the most and he often curled in on his stomach as if to protect his own tiny bean.

Despite his desperate hopes, he had not recognized any of the fine villas they rested in and had told the prince as much.

It was as if his former master’s villa had been a figment of his imagination.

Their last night was spent on the border of Kesus and Ios and in the morning Erasmus was excited to return home. *Home, the palace was his home.* The thought made him smile and he heard the steady ‘thump thump’ of Damianiskos’ tail against the floor.

“Are you excited to see the ducks?” Erasmus asked, scratching the dog behind his velvety ears. “I would imagine they are no longer small and fuzzy.” The little black pug dog would have given birth as well and Erasmus’ stomach growled at the thought of the Veretian pastries in the palace. He wanted to leave soon so they could be on their way and he could smell the ocean breeze again.

He moved to his small collection of belongings to put on the plain gray chiton he wore for traveling when he caught sight of his nude body in the small looking glass that had been provided. He paused.

He still looked toned and slender, his skin dark and freckled from being on the road, the color making his hair and eyes glow, but there was one small change. Almost imperceptibly, his stomach had begun to swell on their travels. At first he attributed it to the fine foods the kyroi had ordered for their group, but when the bump persisted he could no longer deny what it was. Slender still, except for the curve, Erasmus wondered how much bigger it would get.

He must have stood, naked and silent, in front of the mirror for longer than he realized.

“Erasmus.”

Erasmus jumped and covered himself with his unwrapped chiton as he turned to see Lazar standing in the doorway as Damianiskos leaned against his legs. Immediately he felt as though his quiet mind had been destroyed; even in his own home the prince knocked and asked permission before entering Erasmus’ room.

“Sorry, sorry.” Lazar said quickly, bowing his head in repentance, “I say your name. Three of them.”

“I did not hear.”

Lazar smiled gently and Erasmus could not help but return it. Despite the fine liquors offered, Lazar and Pallas had never once taken more than one glass of wine with their hosts and had kept a special eye on him. He had also volunteered on several occasions to do reconnaissance in the cities they had visited. He was a good man.

“We eat soon. And then Ios.” He brightened again. “You are little fat. Tiny fat.”
From any other man, it might have been an insult, but Lazar was so gentle with his nicknames that Erasmus could not be anything but charmed. Still...he was not fat and this was his secret to share.

“Baby.” Erasmus told him and then repeated it in Veretian. It was one of the words he had requested from Laurent and often whispered it to himself. Lazar’s smile dropped as the meaning sunk in. He looked shocked. “Shhh.” Erasmus pleaded raising one finger to his lips, “Secret.”

Thunderstruck, Lazar nodded. “Secret.”
It's been a while since I uploaded so quickly! But I have things I need to do and I want to try and finish this story in a timely manner ;) Hopefully I can keep up with some faster updates.

First things first, Lazar's nicknames are my favorite to come up with! I love how they kind of sound like insults but manage to be sweet because of his personality. And he loves Erasmus so much, he's so careful with him.

And we finally see more of Erasmus' growth. He's beginning to take care of others as well as himself. He'd be so good at it...

Once again thank you all for joining me on this story, we're getting to the end of the Growth Arc and we're moving into the final one. It has been quick to write so far because the intensity is just...my favorite! ENJOY!!!!

XVIII. Les nausées matinales

The doctor inspected Erasmus carefully, Erasmus trying to contain his discomfort over being stared at. He wanted to cradle his stomach but knew his hands would be swatted away. Though the prince often debased Akielon medicine as subpar to the Veretian standard—inevitably igniting heated debate between him and the king—he still insisted on these regular check ups now that Erasmus was at least halfway through and a daily chiton was becoming hard to fasten.

Lazar’s teasing of him was gentle but endless when it came to his soft curve and waddling gait.

Tiny fat. Waddle duck. Round nut.

“Eat more.” Came the doctor’s final pronouncement. “You are as healthy as any omega but you are still a little scrawny. Eat yogurt and honey every morning. I know eggs make your stomach turn but the eggs will build your strength. Perhaps those Veretian chefs can make you something that does not smell of them.”

Erasmus nodded. “Anything else?”

“You cannot tell him yourself?” Erasmus asked as he draped his chiton carefully over his stomach. He knew it probably did not help.

“That stubborn man,” the doctor snorted, “I doubt the gods above could mold him to their will. But he is gentle with you as he is with his animals. If you beg him with wide eyes, I am sure he would grant you any wish.”

Though Erasmus liked the idea of having such sway over the prince, he did feel a slight rush of indignation. “I am not an animal.”
“A turn of phrase,” he amended immediately, “No offense was meant.”

Erasmus nodded. “My gratitude.”

Damianiskos was the only one pleased to see him as he exited the doctor’s quarters. His tail whipped back and forth at speeds that almost could not be seen. There was a yelp as the whip-like tail collided with a muscular leg.

Erasmus giggled as Pallas and Lazar separated from what had been a very passionate kiss. He was beyond caring at this point; he had seen them in their intimacies too many times. Pallas still had the grace to blush at the sight of him but Lazar grinned.

“Round Nut! You have health?”

“Yes, I am healthy.”

“Good! We go to the gardens now.”

Erasmus was surprised by the offer as the two of them usually used any excuse to disappear from sight to find a dark corner. He turned to Pallas in hopes of a better explanation. Pallas must have been expecting it.

“His Highness and Exalted One have…gone into the city and around the coast. They should be back by evening.”

Erasmus nodded at the revelation, feeling only a slight pinprick of disappointment over the loss of his reading lesson that day. What with the slave trade to Patras ending, he was sure they were very busy with official duties. He could not be so selfish to think his lessons took precedence over the business of Akielos. But they had been away several times since returning to Ios.

And Pallas and Lazar staying by his side while they were gone?

“Is something the matter?” Erasmus asked carefully.

Pallas looked around them as they walked as if making sure they were alone. “You are quite sharp. But it is…a matter of concern. There are some dissenters in the south over the slave trade. Some men refuse to change…” Erasmus nodded in understanding.

The three of them stopped in the kitchens for food and as Lazar was trying to explain to the cooks what he wanted to eat, Erasmus listened to the other servants as they murmured behind their hands.

‘Melichrysos...growing...a child...a royal child. But whose? He is favored by them both. They outlaw slavery only to foster a child on a former slave. Melichrysos. Erasmus. He is sweet, he is lovely but what did he do? What has he done to succeed where all others have failed? A royal child. Perhaps a full-blooded Akielon heir. The gods would truly bring us joy.’

Erasmus tried to ignore them.

It was just as Prince Laurent had expected, that people would talk when they discovered his condition. But still…he did not like them to think he was taking another man’s husband to bed.

“Leave it.” Pallas whispered gently. “And take these.”

He handed Erasmus a dish of candied almonds and laughed as Erasmus ate a small handful before they had even left the kitchens. During their time traveling around Akielos, the small black pug
dog had given birth to a litter of three puppies and Erasmus scooped one up in his free hand as they waded through the sea of dogs to the pond.

At the pond he was greeted by a chorus of frantic quacking.

His ducklings had shed most of their baby down and were now patchy with feathers in white, caramel, black, and green. Erasmus removed his sandals and dipped his feet in the pond as he was surrounded by his feathery babies.

Erasmus scratched their pretty, smooth heads and removed a pouch of dried peas to feed them with. He ignored Pallas and Lazar who had begun feeling each other up under the shade of a cherry tree and allowed the ducks to splash around his feet or doze against his hips.

The candied almonds disappeared as he practiced writing in the air. He could write in full sentences now…

Erasmus heard the wagon coming before he saw it pulling into the area by the stables.

Pallas apparently recognized the dark men at the reins and hailed them with a wave. “Lydos! Aktis! How do you fare?”

Their faces brightened and it was Lydos who called back. “Pallas! Lazar! Melichrysos! Just who I had hoped to see. Erasmus, can you come help me with this?” He motioned to the wagon as Aktis jumped from the seat to see to the horses.

“Me?” Erasmus asked in disbelief.

“Hurry!” Aktis called and Erasmus slipped his sandals back on, his ducks scattering back into the water.

Pallas and Lazar followed him up to the wagon where Lydos was waiting.

He smiled but his dark eyes were serious. “Erasmus. The king and the prince have discovered one of those illegal brothels in the port of Ios. While they dispense justice, I am to see the…slaves inside.” He scratched his head, seeming at a loss. “But they are terrified of me. I thought… perhaps…you would be a more comforting sight to them.”

There was a jolt of panic at the thought of having so much responsibility.

However, there was memory of how much comfort the first kindness of prince had given him. If he could provide the same…

“Of course I will help.”

Lydos led him to the back of the wagon as Pallas attempted to explain the situation to Lazar. “Is… is there any way I could make this easier for them? They are…very frightened.” Judging by his hesitancies and his expression, Erasmus could only assume that the slaves inside were even more traumatized than he had been.

“If you could keep the animals away. And do not let Pallas and Lazar in. If they see you they may think you are like their former masters.”

Lydos nodded in understanding and opened the door to the wagon before stepping back. He was as jumpy as Damianiskos.
Erasmus touched his stomach, trying to calm himself as much as Baby before calling to mind all of his abandoned slave training. He made sure to clear the curls from his neck so that they could see his golden collar.

It took Erasmus' eyes a moment to adjust to the interior of the dark wagon.

His nose took stock first. He could smell the sweetness of napes, much like his own but there was something wrong, something off about it. An undercurrent of sex and sickness that made him want to run from the inside of the wagon. But he remained steady, whispering to himself a soft flow of Veretian words.

When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he felt all breath leave him as if he had been punched in the stomach.

They huddled together in groups, as if to derive some small measure of comfort from one another, and seemed to flinch at the sight of him. Their eyes were enormous with fear and malnutrition, their slender necks ruined with crescent-shaped bite scars. Clothing was non-existent or the barest scrap of rags.

Erasmus wanted to cry at the sight of them, cry at what his life might have been like.

But he composed himself. Crying would not help them or make them feel at ease. Instead he crouched on the ground, slowly, as his teachers had instructed him. At every whimper of fear, he inched slower until he was almost prostrate on the wooden floor of the wagon. He suddenly wished Kallias was with him.

It was a visceral, painful wish. But his dearest Kallias, with that easy confidence and silver tongue of his, would surely know what to do. Erasmus did not know what he could say in this situation to ease their pain. He feared it was an impossible endeavor.

So he spoke without thinking in his gentlest tone. I am an Omega, he whispered to them, see my collar, smell the oranges in the air? I am like you. Please, be easy, be not afraid. I care for you. He said it in Veretian and the word 'Sussie' felt like a plea; he desperately wanted them to believe him. I care for you. I swear it.

He gasped quietly as he felt cool fingertips brush the gold of his collar.

It took him a moment to look up. Erasmus could not tell if the slender wisp of a person was a man or a woman but they shied back as he crouched on his knees.

"Safe? Safe?" They asked, clutching their throat.

Erasmus nodded, his golden curls bobbing in his face. He extended his hands outward as if he meant to catch the former slaves if they pitched forward. "You are safe. No one is going to hurt you."

Judging by the wary looks in their eyes, he wondered if many had heard such a thing before and found it to be a cruel lie. He knew they were weighing the last bit of hope left in their battered bodies and wondered if they could trust Erasmus with something so precious.

He felt as though he waited for hours…

When he hopped down from the wagon, Pallas, Lazar, Lydos, and Aktis were hovering by the stables, unsure if they should come any closer.
"Melichrysos," Aktis greeted him deferentially with the name and Ersmus wondered if the man believed the rumors of Baby's parentage. "Are they—should we assist with bringing them inside?"

Erasmus shook his head, feeling a sense of calm and purpose in the face of the nervous betas; he wondered if Prince Laurent always felt this way when he was running the household in Marlas and Ios. "No, but...I would have you help in other ways. If you could find male and female omega servants, calm ones, and bring them here? And we need clothing and medicine. Something to make them calm so the doctor can look at them without fear." And then, as a forgotten addition, "And if you can find a kithara. Please."

Pallas and Lydos outdid themselves, leaving the clothing to Lazar, while they brought forth the omega stable boy with his gentle, slow hands and soft whispers, several wide-eyed serving maids, and Lydos’ own beta lover who was not very clever but was sweet and unerringly patient.

Erasmus explained his plan to all of them.

With the utmost caution, Erasmus and his calmer companions led the frightened slaves through the halls of the palace to the servant’s bath. They did not run into another soul on their slow journey within and Erasmus was pleased for whatever strategy Lydos, Lazar, and Pallas had used to keep people away.

The baths had been drawn, a stack of clean chitons set on a low table next to pitchers of water, empty cups, and a bowl of liquid medicine. That could come later...

First, to allow them to bathe.

They were even thinner than he realized, their hair long and stringy and the same uniform color of unwashed hair, and they trembled constantly. Dirt and blood seeped from their bodies in reddish-brown clouds as they sank beneath the warm surface of the water. Erasmus wondered if he had appeared in similar disarray when he had first been found in the forest.

"Should we offer to wash them?" Lydos’ lover asked nervously, noting the untouched soaps. “I fear they will shatter if I touch them.”

“Ask.” Erasmus offered moving towards the kithara.

His fingers were a little clumsy from so long without practice but his years of practice came back to him after a while and music filled the warm bathing room. He sang no songs of lovers or slaves or victories in war, wondering if perhaps they would find the lyrics painful. Instead he played the songs he knew of the gods granting peace, of the beauty of the island of Isthima, and the lullabies that had often been sung in hushed tones in his bedroom of the slave gardens.

He felt a great sense of peace and accomplishment when those terrified souls under his watch began to relax to the sound of the music, some allowing the servants to wash and brush their hair.

At the steady sound of the kithara strings, Erasmus felt Baby move.

It was nearly nightfall by the time each former slave had been bathed, given relaxants, inspected by the doctor, and sent to a bed in the quietest part of the palace. Lydos and Aktis had volunteered to stand guard in the hall to make sure no one bothered the delicate creatures.

Erasmus was bone tired and hungry, but he felt a strong sense of purpose as he moved toward the royal chambers to make an official report, Damianiskos padding along behind him.
He smelled pastries in the hallway and very nearly bumped into the man holding them.

“You, you spend much time with the king and the prince.” The man said; Erasmus did not focus on his question thanks to his sudden, intense hunger. “Do you know if they have returned to their quarters?”

The pastries were freshly baked, still steaming with warmth, with honey pouring down the sides. Baby seemed to flip inside of him.

“I can take them.” Erasmus said with a little more intensity than he meant. “The breads. I can take them to Exalted One and the prince.” If they were not in their chambers then…he could eat all of them.

“I-I suppose.”

Erasmus' stomach grumbled as he accepted the nut and seed encrusted pastries, but he forced himself not to give in to temptation. Prince Laurent would have merely laughed at his hunger, allowed him to eat them all, and sent him back for more. With a careful gait, he walked to the prince's quarters, taking extra caution not to breathe through his nose.

Damianiskos nearly broke the door down when Erasmus was allowed to enter.

“Dog!” The king shouted and Prince Laurent laughed.

“Your Highness, Exalted One.” Erasmus greeted them. It appeared the prince had been tying up the king’s long hair while Bulle was peacefully wrapped around his neck. But now the prince was sprawled on the floor having his face licked by Damianiskos while the king chased the furious, escaping snake.

“Hello Erasmus,” Damianos nudged the dog aside so he could help his husband up. “Your day was peaceful?”

“Mostly. I…I saw the slaves Lydos and Aktis brought back.”

Prince Laurent smoothed himself. “Nikandros told us of your kindesses. I knew you would be able to put their minds at ease.”

“What will be done with them?” Erasmus asked, his voice taking on an edge of passion that came about when he asked about taking care of the royal animals or when the prince asked him for help. “I think—” he almost paused in offering his opinion, but the prince and the king both seemed interested in hearing his thoughts on the matter, “I think they require much attention and care. But…it is too crowded in the palace. There are too many alphas and they even fear large betas. I do not think they should stay here much longer…”

The prince nodded carefully, a smile of pride toying at the corners of his lips. “You are right. And I trust you to understand their needs. Damianos has come up with a possible solution.”

“There is a villa available outside the city walls, far from…what they have known.” The king offered. “From what funds have been relieved from their original home, we plan to make purchase and move them there when their wounds have healed.”

“They will be guarded?” Erasmus asked, thinking of those helpless, slender bodies. He felt a strong sense of protectiveness, quite like the feeling he got when men spoke ill of the prince.

“Of course.”
“And we want you to visit them, if you so choose.” Prince Laurent added. “So that they may feel more at ease. As you do.”

“You honor me.” Erasmus whispered, immediately bowing his head in the face of such a tremendous and personal offer.

“I would trust no other with their delicacy minds—.”

“Delicate,” the king corrected.

“Delicate minds. I would have Pallas and Lazar escort you to the home three or four times per week to see if they are healthy and well cared for. Perhaps…in time they will help others whom we save.”

He had cared for Damianiskos and the bunnies and the ducks. He felt confident enough that he could attempt to care for the slaves as well. “I will do all I can,” He replied. His stomach grumbled loudly in agreement and he blushed furiously as the prince and the king laughed.

“You can eat,” The king offered, obviously noticing that Erasmus had been glancing at the untouched plate while they talked. “You must be hungry.” As if to support the king’s thoughts, Erasmus’ stomach growled again.

Erasmus blushed but his ravenous stomach won out in the end.

“If it is delicious you must tell me.” Prince Laurent insisted as he scratched Bulle’s head. “That way I can save one for myself.”

“I’ll not eat them all.” Erasmus insisted as he picked one up.

Erasmus bit into the shell of the pastry, delighting in the mix of the foods he loved. The chef had taken the flaky, buttery breads of Vere and drizzled the top in Akielon nuts, seeds and honey and Erasmus was pleased with the taste. His stomach growled in anticipation. Prince Laurent waited as Erasmus chewed, waiting for a verdict and—

There was a twist of intense bitterness and everything in his body lurched, the hunger gone as swiftly as it had come.

"Erasmus?” The prince stuffed Bulle into the front of his chiton, running over as Erasmus spit out what he had chewed. "Erasmus does it make your stomach ill? Should I fetch the doctor?” The king did not waste a moment; one glance from his husband and he was off and running out of the room.

"I-it's bitter!” Erasmus wailed between retching. He refused to vomit on the fine marble floors.

Prince Laurent pushed a glass of water into his hand and Erasmus focused on Bulle's vague look of snake disgust as he forced the water down. The doctor had warned him that omegas were particularly sensitive to taste and smell but, to the gods above, he could not understand why the pastries were making him ill.

"You would have me starve, Baby?” He whispered, rubbing the curve of his stomach. Chaos reigned on the king's return.

His long, black hair had spiraled out of its' bun and was streaming out behind him in a dark banner as he ran. He was followed by the concerned figures of Nikandros, Pallas, Lazar, and finally the doctor, who was winded after chasing men with such long legs. Lazar and Pallas looked
particularly anguished, Lazar whispering a steady stream of Veretian as Pallas rubbed Erasmus' back.

"He finds the pastries bitter." The prince explained.

The doctor looked at the mashed, spittle-covered pastry on the plate and was clearly about to chalk the entire situation up to a pregnant omega’s sensitive taste buds until he took a look at the uneaten pastry.

“Gods above, who is responsible for creating this? They have put poisonous seeds into the honey!” Damianos assumed an expression of thunderous outrage as the uneaten pastries were inspected and all were found to have at least seven or eight of the poisonous nuts sprinkled on top of the honey. The doctor assured them this was enough to kill a man the prince’s size. “The sickness takes hold in as little as three hours but because it looks to be a simple illness—nausea, vomiting, diarrhea—it is not often treated until it is too late.”

“Who gave you these?” Nikandros asked, his voice eerily calm.

Erasmus struggled to remember the face. He had not even considered as to whether or not he had seen the man in the palace before. Hair covered as most of the cooks’ were, dark skin, dark eyes, a bit of a beard…he looked stereotypically Akielon.

“I shall inform the guards.” Nikandros said. “Though…he may already be long gone from this place.”

Prince Laurent translated for Lazar as Nikandros turned to leave and Lazar also got to his feet, glancing down at Erasmus and gesticulating wildly as he talked.

“Non, non, non!” The prince tried to assuage his loyal guard.

“Hurt? Hurt?” Lazar asked Erasmus, his hands fluttering over Erasmus’ skin as if he was afraid to touch him. Erasmus touched the man’s knuckles gently but he felt a small jolt of fear upon realizing he did not actually know if he was poisoned or not.

“No, no.” The doctor assured him. “You did not ingest the seed. If you had…then we would have had to call a poison master within the city to come treat you.”

Prince Laurent made a noise of disbelief. “You need such people? Are the doctors not trained to handle poisonings?”

“We are trained to prevent and cure illnesses.” The doctor sounded a bit offended at the perceived question of his skills.

Prince Laurent cursed in Veretian, his look halfway between outrage and amusement as he turned to his husband. "Gods above, how can your men have almost no knowledge of poisons and —gods—non-poisons?"

"Antidotes. It is dishonest to kill a man with poison." King Damianos admitted sheepishly. "We do not stoop so low in Akielos as to kill a man without looking in his eyes."

"Obviously." The prince gestured to the pastries, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"What was the manner of the poison?" Nikandros asked.

"That I can answer." The doctor responded in a way that made it clear he did not take kindly to the
prince's questioning of his skills. "It is the seeds, the ones atop the honey. When chewed an ingested they appear as a common sickness but cause a slow death. This is the seed of the Castor plant."

The feeling in the room changed.

Erasmus felt everyone tense, saw fists clench, heard breath stop. It felt so cold and quiet that his nausea returned.

The doctor excused himself to make a tincture to settle Erasmus' stomach and it was the prince who broke the awful, painful silence, his blue eyes wide with dismay. "Rebellion. There can be no other message. Kastor…"

“We had considered that many would find issue with your constant changes to the slave laws, your disruption of the trade with Patras.” Nikandros said in his even, sensible way. “And there were always those who did not believe Prince Kastor was slain.”

“It is as Exalted One says,” Pallas was furious, “it is low to kill a man with poison. A true man would air his grievances in person.”

“They consider me low.” The prince said without cracking.

The king was now in a fury to match Pallas’. “Let anyone say such things in my presence.” His expression and the sight of him making a threat were enough to inspire fear and Erasmus shuddered. Lazar patted the side of his face.

“Let them say it.” The Prince snapped back. “Let them say all they wish. I have said before, Lover: I will bear any insult for you and Akielos. But I will see all support of your brother sent to the grave beside him. There will be no civil war.” It remained unspoken between all the men in the room the reason why the prince was so nervous at the mention of dissent. He shook his head as if to clear the thought from his mind. “Erasmus, you have saved me for being poisoned. I am in debt to you.”

Erasmus was about to protest, as usual, that it was he who was indebted to the king and the prince. But he realized now that even in this beautiful palace there was a touch of danger.

He touched his stomach, thankful for Baby and his sensitive taste buds. “Akielos deserves you, Your Highness.” There was another small jolt in his stomach and he smiled.

A small secret but there was now only one thing on earth he held dearer than the prince.
Hooray we've finally reached the 3rd and final arc of the story which is my favorite, by far to write! There is so much action towards the end and I hope to finish this story before the end of June for vacation reasons. The Patrans are here and we meet a familiar face ;) Hopefully at the end of this chapter, you all can have a guess at the villain. I've kept it kind of under wraps up until this point. But also a mild TW in the last chunk of this chapter for blood/violence. It's in Laurent's POV so hopefully you all can forgive me a bit for it...ENJOY(?)

The villa was very well equipped.

Large enough for fifteen former slaves, any guests they allowed, and the five beta guards assigned to protect them.

Erasmus never felt so content as when he passed through the smooth white gates of the villa carrying a basket of herb plantings, covered plates of Veretian pastries, or two gentle white milking goats that were kept in a recently cleared pen. Despite the inconvenience of his curve and occasional startling kicks from Baby, Erasmus also spent time in the villa learning simple new skills such harvesting garlic, making cheese, and sewing simple designs on the edge of chitons.

It was these small things that kept him sane, he explained. Just to know that he could survive on his own, to care for something, to know that he had more of value than his body.

One of them approached him carefully as he entered, making sure Pallas and Lazar had stayed outside the villa walls in the shade of some orange trees.

“Good morning.” Erasmus greeted her with his softest tone. So shy and terrified of anything loud, large, and alpha, Erasmus took extra care to make himself as quiet and gentle as possible. It was in this way that he had become the one the freed slaves trusted most.

“Hello,” her voice was a whisper nearly lost to the wind, “you are well? Your baby?”

They all cared for his baby, the doctor telling him that many of them had violently lost some of their own, and they often greeted him by way of asking after Baby’s safety.

Erasmus touched his stomach before offering her the jar of sea salt he had brought from the palace. “I am well. Healthy. And you?”

“I do not sleep well.” She admitted.

Erasmus knew.

If he thought he had difficulty with the long, dark nights, it was nothing in comparison to these broken souls. He had only spent one night in the villa and was haunted by the fact that some of the rescued slaves sobbed and screamed in their sleep or that whenever anyone entered the room, they
curled up into the tightest little balls. It was too heartbreaking for him to bear.

Though they always asked him to stay longer and not leave them, Erasmus could not stand the echoes of those cries lingering throughout the day.

“You must protect each other in the nights,” he murmured, “There is no shame in working during the nights to keep your mind at ease and sleeping through the days. So long as your mind is at ease.”

At first they did not trust him, the same as any other, but once he had told them of his past, they realized he too knew the struggles of omega slavery. They began to take his advice.

In the kitchens they encountered one of the young boys dicing peppers and Erasmus announced himself so that the boy did not accidentally start and cut himself with the knife.

He seemed grateful for the new supply of salt and allowed Erasmus to tie his dark hair up while he sprinkled some salt on his vegetables. “How long do you stay with us today?” The boys particularly liked Erasmus to stay as long as possible and took comfort from his calm demeanor.

“Not long.” Erasmus admitted, feeling a twinge of guilt as the boy’s expression fell. “This week a prince is coming from Patras with many important ambassadors and merchants. I must go there to —.”

The guess was immediate and the two former slaves looked at him with terror and concern. “You must serve them?”

“No, no, never.” Erasmus assured them. “The prince would never ask it of me. I just watch.”

The female omega put one gentle hand on his stomach. “You will be safe? You will come back to us?”

“Of course.” Erasmus promised. “I will be a little busy but once this Torveld of Patras and his guests have returned home, I will come back to you.”

“Be safe.”

“Of course,” he assured them. He could not imagine leaving them for any reason. And he had no concerns for Torveld of Patras. The king and the prince, Pallas and Lazar would all keep him safe from anyone who wished him harm.

The night was very warm and muggy when the king and the prince held the banquet for the benefit of the Patran envoy and the wealthy merchants who dealt with them. Erasmus had tried to help as best he could, but every single time he attempted to pick something up and carry it into the large banquet hall it was surreptitiously yanked from his hands and taken in for him.

He had twisted his lips with annoyance and Lazar had ruffled his hair. “They protect Baby. You are too Little Fat.”

He was forced to sit idly by and watch as the room was transformed for the benefit of their Patran guests.

“I dislike feeling useless.” He grumbled to the prince during one of the reading lessons they could snatch in between preparations and Erasmus’ visits to the villa.
“You are not useless.” The king assured him. “We will have many omegas present to see which alphas deserve a hard stance and should not be dealt with. And they will not press anyone in…your condition.”

The hormones inside of him were strong enough that he gave the king a quick glare before he could catch himself. Rather than being upset, the king and the prince burst into laughter.

The king’s Veretian was delighted before he switched back to Akielon for Erasmus’ benefit. Of course it was to praise his husband. “Gods above Laurent, you have made him as sharp as you.”

Prince Laurent also glared as Erasmus blushed. “I would certainly hope so.”

But they both assured him that he and Baby were most welcome. And to lift his spirits from the jest, the king personally ordered a chiton as a gift for Erasmus to wear.

Even with the very pronounced curve of his stomach, the very fine chiton in the palest shade of sky blue managed to tie in such a way that it somewhat obscured Baby. Though the cloth was lovely and soft and brought out the gold of his features and Pallas complimented his good looks, he somewhat missed the simplicity of his gray and white working chitons.

Lazar and Pallas were also dressed in their finest clothes as they escorted him down to the packed banquet hall that evening.

Only the second party he had ever attended in his life, Erasmus was quite overwhelmed by the scale of this one. It was packed with people speaking Akielon, Patran, and even Veretian, the smell of very powerful alphas heavy in the air.

Erasmus wanted to balk and run but Pallas put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He whispered reassurances. “We will not drink. We will watch and make sure no one harms you. Go on Erasmus.”

Erasmus steeled himself, called on the lithe ability to slip into a crowd that he had learned in the Gardens and tried to see which spot would provide him the best vantage to see the entire room. But his attention was quickly taken.

He was too focused on the fantastic spread that was laid out for the benefit of their guests and Baby. Moving slowly enough that he would not appear glutinous, Erasmus’ stomach rejoiced when he reached the long buffet tables. On two small dishes, Erasmus collected breads and sugared fruits, hummus and yogurt, sweetened nuts and Patran delicacies. He was especially fond of the candied orange peel and the tiny buns with raisins, lemon zest, and chips of coconut.

It was hard to concentrate on gossip in a language he could not understand when the food was so delicious. But Erasmus found a well-appointed pillar to lean against and watched while he nibbled.

Patrans were fond of beards and bright flashy clothing, not shy in the least about staring longingly or pulling close those who had caught their interest; Erasmus nearly choked on an almond when one of the cheeky Patrans pulled Lazar close and kissed his cheeks slowly in the Veretian style and Pallas looked as though he could have broken the man’s back with his glare.

Most alphas sniffing around him got no further than greeting him before seeing his stomach was not as slim as the rest of him.

Even so that suited him just fine.
Since he could not understand much Patran, he simply watched the body language of the guests, as he had been trained to do. He saw rare hostility, curiosity, and relaxation once the fine wine began to flow.

And in the center of it all, golden and dark, were the prince and the king.

Both were dressed in their finest chitons—the king in a reddish violet edged in gold and the prince in a gold tinged with rose—and wore delicate golden circlets of laurel leaves to distinguish themselves amongst their illustrious guests. But surely their good humor and easy diplomacy was what truly what set them apart, even more so than their finery.

People orbited them carefully but were obviously enchanted. The prince especially drew the eye, when he smiled or talked animatedly in Patran. Men stared, women stared, everyone was transfixed, including Erasmus.

He was so focused on the prince that he did not notice as a handsome man in a bold red chiton easily took the spot next to him.

The voice was warm and clear, almost without accent. “When I heard there was a boy made of gold under the king’s protection, I thought it an exaggeration. I see it is not.”

The man seemed perhaps five to seven years older than the king and had long, thick brown hair that waved into near ringlets. His form was fine, his features even and friendly, and his demeanor kind and respectful as he smiled at Erasmus. But the crowning glory of his good looks were his dark, warm, and handsome eyes, twinkling with friendliness and interest.

Erasmus found himself smiling back.

“I believe they do not keep me in their employ only for the gold of my looks.” Erasmus replied and his companion seemed not at all surprised by his quick mouth. Instead he grinned wide and several young people nearby took notice.

“So it is not only the king’s protection you enjoy.” His eyes trailed quite naturally to where Prince Laurent was standing at his husband’s hip, smiling in a way that could suck the air from the room. The pause between their conversation was long until the man caught himself and shook his head slightly. “The prince of Vere is a fine figure of a man. Elegant and intelligent. I believe he is changing Akielos for the better.”

There was no quicker way to gain Erasmus’ good favor and he felt himself glowing.

“Yes he is…” There were no words to describe Prince Laurent.

“That is not to say, you are not also elegant and intelligent.” The man amended, perhaps feeling he had caused a slight by not offering the compliment to Erasmus first. It was refreshing in a way. “I am…I can be unskilled when outside the realm of trade.”

“Think nothing of it.” Erasmus assured him and the words came quick to his lips. “You do not need to consider me the type to be swayed so easily by compliments.”

“And what would sway you?”

His tone became hushed under the din of other conversations, almost like the whisper of a lover. Erasmus glanced at him again and touched the curve of his stomach, trying not to be charmed.

“Books. Animals. The sound of Veretian. The scent of the ocean.”
“A man of many interests.” The tone was approving. And then Veretian, not as perfectly accented as Prince Laurent’s, but still smooth and lovely. Erasmus pretended he knew what was being said but remained silent. “Many men could only dream of swaying one such as you.” With his handsome dark eyes wide with gentle invitation, the man reached down to take Erasmus’ hand and gently laid lips to the skin over his knuckle. “Excuse me.”

With a wide, sweet smile and the quick turn of a man in good physical condition, he mingled into the crowd and Erasmus was left with a funny feeling like the man had just attempted to flirt with him and he was only realizing now. He hardly noticed Prince Laurent sidling up next to him.

“Your Highness,” He said, blushing without knowing why.

Prince Laurent’s smile was soft but his eyes glimmered with curiosity and the effects of fine wine. “Your companion just now…he seemed to favor you?”

“I…I do not know.” Erasmus whispered in return as if the man could hear him.

"He is..." The prince seemed to struggle for words, as if he could find no other man than his husband worthy of physical praise, "he has a friendly face."

Erasmus smiled and said, without thinking, "He has nice eyes..." Then feeling embarrassed, "not as nice as yours though, Your Highness."

The prince gave a very undignified snort of laughter before composing himself.

“But he was not untoward to you?” The prince looked relieved as Erasmus shook his head. “Good. Rich men who deal regularly with Patrans can be handsy with omegas. Know that Pallas and Lazar are ever-vigilant to see that you remain untouched.”

“Thank you.”

The king called for Prince Laurent to come join him and Erasmus saw the man who had spoken to him glance their way. The prince brightened at his husband but spoke softly to Erasmus before leaving. “Erasmus, you are a free man. You…if you wish to be courted, you need not feel ashamed. If I overstep—.”


Reinvigorated by the attention lavished on him, Erasmus went back to watching his surroundings and making sure that no one who approached him was looking for an easy omega to bed.

There was only one older Patran man who was deep enough in his cups to make a pass at Erasmus in broken Akielon, a quick hand caressing his bum before he could step away. At least the prince had not been joking about Pallas and Lazar.

With a very curt interruption in Patran, Pallas appeared out of nowhere and pulled Erasmus behind him with one muscular arm while Lazar looped an arm around the interloper’s neck. He looked as though he could have torn the man’s throat out with his teeth. Instead he had to settle with secretly kneeling the man securely between the legs and winking at Erasmus.

Erasmus leaned against Pallas as the night went on, the man warm and comfortable as a slice of sunshine. Baby was still, perhaps calmed by the sheer amount of good food Erasmus had eaten. He had watched the hostile-looking Patrans carefully and asked Pallas for their names so that he could write out a report for the prince the next morning.
He did not realize he was nodding off in the heat of late hour until he felt Pallas literally catching him. Erasmus did not even protest as Pallas lifted him into his arms, cradling him gently so Baby was not crushed.

“Sleep, Little One,” Pallas insisted. “We will get—.” There was the sound of a hand slapping a firm ass, “Ow fuck! Gods, Lazar.” He snarled.

“Vixen said fuck.” Lazar said sounding extremely pleased with himself.

Judging by the swift way Pallas got him back to his bedroom and set him in bed, the two of them were going to engage in very vigorous petting in the hallway outside of Erasmus’ room. Erasmus was beyond caring.

Exhausted, he cradled his stomach in one hand and petted Damianiskos with the other until he was lulled to sleep.

Laurent whimpered a bit as Damen slid in and out of him, slow and torturous when pulling out to the tip but a swift thrust of his entire length back inside.

It truly was a wonder of the gods.

While most men would find their cocks flagging after so much wine, Damen’s was standing stiff as if it had been injected with a Veretian pleasure drug. And all because Laurent had stood in front of the candlelight and—as Damen complained—Prince Torveld of Patras had ‘stared’. As was always the case when he had had more than two glasses of wine, Laurent felt his head go fuzzy from pleasure, his cries sounding foreign to his ears.

This desire was edging on desperation as Damen slid against Laurent’s favorite spot. Over and over and over—

Laurent clenched himself tight as he spilled on the floor and felt a delicious feeling like a mix between smugness, love, and possessiveness as Damen groaned and his cock shuddered. Laurent felt liquid heat pooling inside him. He clenched tight again, wanting to hold on to the feeling as long as possible.

Damen laughed and kissed the back of Laurent’s neck as Laurent whined when the cock was removed.

“We should move to the bed at least,” Damen offered lamely, perhaps feeling embarrassed that they had not made it very far past the door before Laurent had been pushed to the floor and ravished. It was useless to try to explain to Damen that Laurent found this kind of thing…wildly enjoyable.

Laurent clenched his buttocks tight to keep every drop inside of him as Damen helped him to his feet.

The gods were cruel.

They had gotten no more than a few steps towards the bed when there was an insistent knock at the door. Damen groaned in annoyance; these damn Patrans had not given the two of them ample alone time for the past few days.

“Nikandros,” came the introduction, “I have returned.” This was worth the wait.
The man smelled of horse and sweat and sun, and Laurent’s heart leapt when he saw the barely-restrained excitement on his face. “You’ve done it?” Laurent asked, unable to help himself.

Nikandros nodded. “I have found the man and questioned him at length. We are very close and hopefully…hopefully…”

Damen smiled, clapping his dearest friend on the shoulder. “I knew I could trust you with this.” His voice took on the familiar tone of strategy that could command a whole room’s attention. “How quickly can you go to investigate?”

“As early as daybreak.” Nikandros said. “I would rest before setting out. There are many places that still need to be searched and it may take…weeks.” He looked to Laurent next. “I can depend on you to dispense justice in my absence?”

Laurent grinned at him, knowing that Nikandros did this purely for Laurent’s joy. Laurent had been dreaming of the moment for quite some time.

“Gods willing we can bring some j—.”

They were all men who had been in battle, who had heard the sounds of men shouting or clashing steel, and their reaction to the noise in the halls outside was immediate. Nikandros drew his sword and Damen and Laurent leapt for the weapons they kept close at hand since the poisoning; Laurent ignored the semen that trickled down his thighs as he followed his husband out into the hallway.

“Stay inside!” Damen ordered to someone as they raced toward the source of the noise.

The fight was mostly focused near the servant’s quarters and it was as good as over with combined fighting prowess of Nikandros, Damen, and Laurent. The young men and women causing the fight were either cut down or turned tail and ran.

“Foreign cunt!” Someone snarled as they ran, “Kastor Vasilias!”

Laurent felt a drip of dread down his spine at the cry.

He recalled when he had run the gauntlet and challenged Damen’s older brother to a duel that Kastor’s loyal men chanted it over and over in an attempt to cow him. He had steeled himself but… there was always the fear of rebellion…

Damen took hold of Laurent’s shoulders by way of comfort.

Nikandros seemed ready to leap past them. “I will have the soldiers sweep the grounds and the city. They can—.”

A scream of anguish cut through the tense atmosphere, interrupting the conversation. It was such that the three of them ran to help immediately, Nikandros barking orders to the first guard they passed.

The source of the cries was quickly discovered and Laurent felt as though his breath had turned to ice halfway down his throat.

Pallas was kneeling in blood, his pain long past tears as he clutched Lazar to his chest. Lazar’s face was pale as he clutched his side, blood staining his hands. In between gasps for air, he was alternating between cursing with pain and whispering Pallas’ name.

“E-Exalted One!” Pallas cried. “They’ve stabbed him.”
Damen sank next to his man, taking stock of Lazar’s injury. “Nikandros, get the doctor.” And then in Veretian, “Steady on Lazar.”

It looked to be a very grave injury. There was so much blood…

Perhaps realizing that Damen and Laurent had joined him, Lazar lurched up, his eyes wild in his pale face. Pallas caught him as the pain took hold in his side, but Lazar kept his eyes trained on Laurent. His Veretian was hot and desperate, blood trickling out of his mouth.

“—Highness, highness, Laurent!” He gasped, forgetting formalities through his pain, “They are not for you! Erasmus—they go for Erasmus!”

When the words truly sank in, Laurent was sickeningly reminded of the first time he had lost the strategy game of Guerre against Auguste when they were still on good terms. His brother’s expression had been serious but his blue eyes had been shining with good humor as he advised, "My little Laurent, as you plot and play you must not forget: your opponent can plot as well."

It was his weakness, he could admit, that he could become so focused on outmaneuvering others that he sometimes did not notice when people were moving cunningly against him.

Damen's voice was the only thing keeping him grounded in his own mind as he stepped into Erasmus' room. Damianiskos was lying lifeless in a pool of his own blood. Things were overturned in obvious struggle.

Erasmus was not inside.

*Someone would die for this.*
XX. Le diable est beau

Chapter Notes

I have been waiting SO. FUCKING. LONG to reveal this villain and now I finally can! I so enjoyed all your guesses and (as much as I would love to torture some of my fans) the Patran delegation was a...bit of misdirection ;) I thought I had given it away with the ‘nice eyes’ quote haha! I have never seen this guy as the villain in any other Capri stories (or even really mentioned since TAOC) but it seemed a fitting antagonist for a story that focuses highly on slavery and overcoming brainwashing/the effects of a manipulative relationship. And here we'll also see Isander who is perhaps even sweeter and more burdened than Erasmus in this story. This last arc is a little dark in the beginnings so just a heads up for this villain being like very much an aggressive asshole. Enjoy!

XX. Le diable est beau

At first Erasmus cried.

He cried until the piece of cloth wrapped over his eyes was soaked with tears. There was so much fear and pain. He could not get the images out of his mind: Damianiskos snarling and leaping into the air to tear a chunk from a man's arm before a sword pierced his smooth red-brown fur, Lazar likewise cried out in a mixture of fury and pain as a sword found his side. The two of them, man and dog, had both looked helplessly at him as he was carried past them out of the palace. He cried because he did not know if they were alive or dead.

It was all due to someone who wanted to take him away. It was hard not to feel guilt over it. But as his captors carted him down to the port, as he was put on some sort of vessel that rocked under his feet, as he smelled that soothing scent of Kallias' nape that seemed to seep in from the wooden walls around him, he began to calm himself.

He could practically hear the prince speaking in his pragmatic, assured way, "It will do you no good to cry. You are good at listening, Erasmus. You are good at watching people." It was his own voice that replaced the prince's, "Live, Sussie. Live."

He drew on the fondness he felt for Lazar and his dog and slowly his sorrow was replaced by anger. When he heard voices speaking Patran around him, when they eventually dragged him from the boat to what he assumed was the back of a wagon, he refused to cry or shake in fear. He would only let them see his anger.

He had spent probably a half hour in the wagon, at least two hours at sea, before the cloth over his eyes was finally removed and he was able to see who had kidnapped him in the early dawn light.

Despite their Patran, Erasmus could see that the men were Akielon. They also seemed vaguely shocked at the sight of him, or at least the expression of fury on his features. At least he did not smell anything amiss, and assumed that most of his captors were betas. It seemed that they were
also not the ones in charge of spiriting him away.

He was good at watching.

He memorized their appearances before looking around the wagon.

Simple wood with leather bolted hard over the openings so he could not see outside, but thin slices of light were allowed in. It was also clearly a cargo cart for a disguise—perhaps for cloth?—as long shelves were set above the seats and it was a very bumpy and uncomfortable ride in comparison to the litter he was used to. Baby, sensing his tension and discomfort, squirmed nervously in his stomach. He rubbed his stomach with one hand.

It was another half hour, much closer to dawn, before the wagon finally rolled to a halt and Erasmus heard the sound of men approaching the back of the wagon.

Erasmus winced as the pale yellow light of the morning sun streamed into the back of the wagon. At least the men with him were not rough, helping him down from the wagon and into the courtyard of a villa that had obviously been built as a sea fort, perhaps for a kyroi or a general in the past.

The walls were tall and thick so that men could walk along the ramparts and look out to sea, the windows were small and the hallways were narrow in case there was a fight. It would difficult for a seasoned soldier to breach or escape such a place, much less a pregnant former slave.

He was led through the quiet halls, trying to memorize as much as he could in case he was allowed freedom to roam in the future, and was brought to a suite of rooms facing the ocean.

The man who led him to his new prison seemed almost sheepish upon showing him.

“Th-these are your chambers…for the time being. I-If you would like to rest, you may.” He averted his eyes as Erasmus glared, cold and silent. “If…if it makes you more comfortable…please know that everyone has been given express instructions that you are not to be…harmed.” Erasmus narrowed his eyes; so they had been given instructions on the barest minimum of common decency? He was not impressed. “I-I will leave you to rest.”

The door clicked with a lock behind him.

The room was simple but larger than his quarters in Ios. The bed was enormous, there was a small shelf of books and clearly he had his own bathroom with a fine view of the ocean, but he could find the place nothing other than distasteful. He was trapped here and would burn it all if he could.

It would do no good to panic or destroy things in fear.

Instead, he shuffled over to the bed and slowly lay down. Rest would do him some good if he were to plan some way of letting the prince and the king know where he was. He just hoped they wouldn’t hurt Baby…

His tears had dried up but he still was able to cradle his stomach and whimper for fear and pain until sleep overcame him.

He did not wake until…

He felt a tentative touch on his shoulder and jerked awake as surely as if someone had thrown a bucket of icy water on his body.
There was a small and gentle gasp as Erasmus lurched backward in the bed, cradling his stomach protectively. It took him a moment through his exhausted haze to focus on who was trying to rouse him from slumber.

It was an omega slave. He had gold at his throat and wrists.

He was beautiful, young and slender, with dark skin, long curly black hair, and wide innocent dark eyes. He smiled hesitantly at Erasmus with palms open as if to show he was not a threat. Though he looked too innocent to be the mastermind, Erasmus refused to trust anyone in the fort.

“You are indeed Melichrysos.” The young man said appreciatively. “So beautiful.”

“Who are you?” Erasmus asked, perhaps more sharply than he meant to. Like any well-trained slave, the young omega shied away as if someone had struck him. He took care to make his tone calm and even. “What do you want from me?”

“I am Isander.” The slave introduced himself, bowing his head respectfully. “My master is the one who has brought you here.”

Erasmus felt a flush of fury. “I want nothing to do with him.”

Isander was unable to hide his crestfallen disappointment. “B-but he requests your presence. He has ordered me to bring you back to his—.”

“I want nothing to do with that…that—.” Even as angry as he was, Erasmus could not bring himself to curse in front of another slave. “I refuse to see that terrible person.”

Isander cocked his head as a sweet, confused dog might, his eyes wide with disbelief. “No, no. You misunderstand! He is a good and kind master. He cares for everyone here.” His blush and quick defense made Erasmus think that it was simply the mindset of a slave that made Isander’s master so ‘wonderful’. “He will be so happy to see you awake and in good health.”

“If I refuse to go?” Erasmus tried not to let his voice quiver with fear.

Isander was more slender than he was, all long graceful limbs, but Erasmus was sure someone stronger and less sweet could be called to cart him in to see his main captor if he continued to be contrary.

Isander simply looked confused. “Why would you refuse?”

It was useless to attempt to argue with him. He was enslaved, mind and soul, to his master and would not understand Erasmus’ attempts to make him see otherwise. There was also a very real chance that if Isander returned empty-handed, he would be punished for his failure.

He did not want to be responsible for the boy’s pain.

Isander was kind enough to help Erasmus to his feet and gazed appreciatively at his stomach. “The king’s child grows strong in you.” He said by way of compliment. Erasmus froze but kept his expression blank.

This was a bit of information he had not expected but he considered it carefully.

These people thought he was bearing Damianos’ child.

Truly the rumors had gotten out of control, if people so far from the capital believed him to be the
royal broodmare. But…he touched his stomach protectively as Isander took his arm and led him from the room. They couldn’t possibly…

Whoever owned and operated this fort was obviously wealthy to some degree—or had the support of someone wealthy and powerful—as there were guards posted regularly throughout the spartan halls. Most of them were betas but there was the occasional alpha who cast a predatory gaze to Isander. Isander, sweet as he was, seemed not to sense the danger inherent.

“Though it is not so beautiful and open as what you are used to, I am sure you will find it a nice place in time.”

He doubted it.

“Your master bought you from the Gardens?” Erasmus asked, hoping to glean more information on their walk. Perhaps if he got close enough to Isander, he could sway the boy to his side and get a letter to the capital.

Isander’s large dark eyes became starry with memory. “Yes, I am truly blessed by the gods. Though he does not often call me to his side during the day, I am often called to…b-bed,” his dark cheeks stained scarlet at the mention of the bedroom, “I am the only slave he sees fit to have in his household. It is…a tremendous honor.”

He was utterly besotted.

It would take time to break him out of such familiar behaviors and Erasmus did not want to be in the fort so long. He focused instead on things like…how many rooms they passed, how many guards he could count, if he could see an exit…

It took his mind off the fact that his heartbeat was pounding in his chest the longer they walked together.

When Isander stopped, announcing their arrival in delight, Erasmus was hit with a wave of nausea. He felt as though he was in the depths of the fort, far from any hope of escape. The double doors were heavy metal, making a breach difficult if not impossible. He shuddered, not knowing what monster was beyond. At least Isander seemed unperturbed and knocked to announce the two of them.

The room within was obviously meant for the captain of the fort to conduct matters of strategy.

And sitting behind the large oak table in the center of the room was a familiar face.

Erasmus glared at him. He hated the man, hated his shining brown hair and handsome face and warm, dark eyes. Erasmus wanted to shatter an amphora of wine over the man’s head as he smiled gently, as if nothing was amiss at all. Smiled as he had at the banquet when he had flirted delicately. “Erasmus, please sit, make yourself comfortable.”

Erasmus was going to be contrary and insist on standing but Isander had already pulled out a spare chair and was looking at Erasmus with a sweet kind of hopefulness. He sat down.

“You can get out.” The man said coldly to Isander. Though the sweet boy seemed nothing other than delighted to obey, Erasmus saw the brief but deep look of hurt in his dark, doe-like eyes. Do you still think him a good and kind master? Erasmus thought uncharitably as Isander took his leave. “My apologies for not introducing myself when we first met. My name is Makon.”
“Why have you taken me?” Erasmus asked. He did not care about the man’s name.

“You must understand,” his voice was manipulative, all honey and sweetness, which put Erasmus on edge, “I harbor no ill will against you. This is purely a matter of business.”

Erasmus took a moment to think carefully before the reasoning dawned on him.

“You are a slave trader.” This he said with absolute certainty. It made the most sense to him. What other business would justify a kidnapping? What other line of work would have been affected heavily by the recent laws? And he had been in attendance with the group of Patrans…and his merchant’s wagon had had seating under the shelving. It all was just too convenient.

Makon smiled. “You are quick for an omega!” He said appreciatively, “I suppose Laurent of Vere has you trained to his liking.”

“One needs not be in the presence of His Highness to make an educated guess.” Perhaps it was that he hated the man so deeply or that he was offended over the insinuation that omegas could not be quick, but Erasmus’ newfound hate gave him a quick tongue.

“I know you see me as a law-breaking villain,” Makon ignored his quick mouth and continued on leisurely, “but you must know that only two years ago, my business—my family’s business—was legitimate and secure. And then…the royal consort begins making draconian changes? My trade, passed down for generations, gone,” he snapped his fingers together for dramatics, “just like that.”

“I do not see how it concerns me.” Erasmus said, unmoved by his plight.

“Do you not?” Makon was obviously intelligent and baiting Erasmus as he smiled beatifically.

“You sell people.” Erasmus shot back, unable to keep heat from his voice. “People like me.”

“Such is the way of our culture. The way it has been for thousands of years. Why are we to change for a foreign paramour?” Erasmus remained silent and glaring as Makon continued, impassioned. “Why must entire groups lose their livelihoods to the whims of a lovely boy who wishes to be a savior? Merchants, gardens, slaves…what will we all do to survive if we lose trade with Patras. Once you bear the royal child, what will you do, Erasmus?”

Erasmus forgot to breathe for a moment.

So Makon also believed him to be holding Damianos’ child. The king, large and dark, so different from slender, pale Kallias…He knew now why this man had taken him and was holding him in the fort.

“Will you sing in the streets? Try to take a hand at hard or petty labor? Or will you turn to what you have always known? The thing you are best at,” his tone became almost mocking, “lying on your back?”

Erasmus was so horrified, he could not even find it in himself to be offended that the man accused him of prostitution as his only real skill. No…he could only think of why he had been taken.

“You want Baby.” He said in horror.

“I want Prince Laurent to consider things in all fairness.” Makon insisted, without denying Erasmus’ accusation. “Allow some to continue trade with Patras so that there will be no illegal trade. Be not so rigid. There are benefits to having omega slaves, as he and the king have obviously taken advantage of. Sign less stringent trade laws within Akielos and with the Patrans and he will
see his child returned. As well as his desired ability to vote on Akielon laws. It seems a fair trade no?"

“They can simply change the laws back when—.” Erasmus began, his argument sounding weak to his own ears.

Makon laughed at him. “Erasmus, there are very simple ways to create trade laws so that bitch of Veretian cannot possibly hope to repeal them. Do you think him to be the only one able to manipulate laws?”

“He is not a bitch.” Erasmus whispered and he was shocked by the cold hostility in his tone.

Even Makon paused and Erasmus was surprised to see hunger in his expression before he could smooth himself. “He is…he is a cancer to our culture. I know it may be hard for you to see it but…”

It was clear that they would not be able to find common ground on the matter.

“And…do you expect anything from me in captivity? Am I to…write ransom notes? To—.” The thought of having to call upon his slave training to service any of the men within the fort had him in a panic.

“I have had all my guards within the palace swear not to lay a hand on you.” Makon said, almost bored by Erasmus’ fear.

“And how am I to believe a b—a bastard with no honor?”

Makon looked surprised for a moment that a former slave could speak so crudely but he began to laugh a moment after. “It is rare I hear the sentiments of rival merchants from the mouth of one who looks so sweet. You may be right that I lack honor but I have enough gold to buy the honor of fifty men. Surely you should know that the lure of gold is powerful.”

Erasmus thought of the price of his life: five hundred and sixty pieces of gold for a little boy.

“I know.”

“This fort I purchased for convenience. If I were to see anyone coming by land, it would take only one hour by ship to get into Patran waters. If that were to happen…” His smile was enough to let Erasmus know that he would never see Akielos ever again. “Men there would pay a premium for royally trained Akielon slaves. Even one impregnated as you have. Perhaps…”

His dark eyes took on the quality of appraisal so common in merchants, but usually only applied to cloth or jewelry or…things. Erasmus did not like to see the look applied to him and he bristled. Makon was deciding how much he was worth.

“Stop it.” He hissed, trying not to sound frightened.

It seemed to jerk Makon out of his stupor and he smiled again. Much to Erasmus’ horror, his captor stood.

He tried not to jolt as Makon leisurely strolled around the table, behind Erasmus’ chair, and put one heavy hand on Erasmus’ bare, dark shoulder. When Makon spoke it was almost as if the man’s lips were right beside Erasmus’ ear and Erasmus wanted to shudder as he felt the fingers lightly massage his skin. “You have been cherished; it is understandable as you are beautiful and that Laurent has done all he can to make you appear intelligent. It is rare to see your nerve in an omega,
and a former slave at that. I have no doubt they will do all they can to get you back.”

Erasmus blinked back tears of fury and revulsion as he felt a softer touch on the back of his neck, fingers on his curls and tracing soft lines above the gold of his collar. He was vaguely aware that Makon had promised his men would not put hands on Erasmus but he had made no such oaths for himself. If he were to remove the collar...

Truly his cruelty would be measured if he removed the gold collar and find Erasmus’ neck unmarked.

He desperately hoped his voice was not shaking with terror. “My safety is not worth all the slaves to be sent to Patras.” He looked back at Makon and saw a brief flash of disappointment pass across the man’s features when he saw Erasmus’ expression. “And they do not deal like men. You attempt to barter with lions.” He thought of Lazar’s friendly smile and comforting hands, perhaps lost forever, and he could not stop one renegade tear from falling.

Makon smiled again.

“We shall see.” In a smooth motion, the hands were gone from Erasmus’ body and he felt as though he could breathe again. Makon settled back in his seat and shifted some of the papers on his table. “In any case there are some things you should know for your stay here. The first being that escape is futile. I have guards posted at every exit and the area around this fort is flatter than Isander’s stomach. We would see a lone figure attempting escape and follow on horseback. The only other way out is by sea but,” his grin had a feral quality as he and Erasmus both thought of that deadly drop to the rocks and foam below, “In any case, you’ll find all the men in this fort unflinchingly loyal to me. And I am not a man of infinite patience.” Makon placed his elbows on the table so he could lean forward and pin Erasmus under his gaze, uncaring that his weight also crushed the papers underneath. “If you try to cross me, you will find me...less than gentle with my punishment. As lovely as you are, as quick as you are with what Laurent of Vere has taught you, you are right. Your perfect safety is not worth all the slaves that would be sent to Patras. But the king’s baby’s safety is.”

The cold pragmatism of his tone, the cruelty of him was enough that Erasmus felt as though he had been kicked in the stomach.

He gripped his belly and felt Baby move against him, feeling the terror permeating through his skin.

He hardly noticed as the guards were bid to open the doors and Isander loped in to take his arm and lead him away.

“Rest, Erasmus.”

Makon’s handsome dark eyes burned into Erasmus like a hot poker, like the unwelcome burn of his heat as he was gently pulled away into the dark halls of the fort.

Erasmus felt distinctly ill as he collapsed on the bed.

Isander rushed to fetch him a glass of water, but it was air Erasmus needed. As soon as Isander had gone from the room, Erasmus stumbled over to the largest window and gulped in deep breaths of salted sea air.

The drop from his window was astonishing. Below him was a rocky sea cliff, at least a hundred meters to the sea, and the thought of falling made him dizzy. He pulled back when his head was
clear.

He still felt ill though.

There was only about a month and a half left.

A month and a half before Baby would come and they would all see. They would not see the king’s dark skin and curly black hair nor the prince’s golden locks and wide eyes. They would see Kallias’ slender eyes and his wavy hair and know that the baby was no royal. That their bargaining chip was a farce and they held no sway over the royalty.

And then? *Then*?

He could only hope that Prince Laurent and the King found him before his time was up.
XXI. La violence qui semblait être l'amour

Chapter Notes

Maybe it was 'Touch You' that got me started on it but villains who are quietly abusive are much more engaging to write than ones who just attack straightforwardly. And I'm trying to make Makon like that. He has a super weird vibe around Erasmus and he is 100% manipulating Isander.

And Isander! Poor, sweet Isander... I had a lot of thought as to what kind of scent he should have and I finally decided on a very light peppermint smell (mostly because peppermint essential oils are supposed to aid in sleep). He's a little idealistic and naive but god, is he sweet!

Only a few more chapters left to go!

Enjoy!

XXI. La violence qui semblait être l'amour

Erasmus tested Makon’s resolve within his first week in captivity.

He remained true to his word and did not have any of his men bother Erasmus, save to bring him his meals, change his linens, and fulfill any of his requests within reason; when he wandered out of his chambers, they did not bother him, save to steer him away from the rooms that were off limits. They did not seemed at all concerned by his presence or potential escape, as round and small as he was. Isander was the only constant in his daily routine, flitting about the halls like a sweet, lovely butterfly.

He seemed astonished that Erasmus was able to read and write, obviously not able to do so himself. Erasmus offered to teach him at some point as he wrote on the blank pages within his books. It was better that Isander could not read what he was jotting down.

During the day, when he was free to roam the fort, Erasmus took careful note of everything.

He wrote down the names of all the men, drew crude maps of the fort, listed the numbers and resources Makon had under his control, and explained in the easiest way where he was and what was going on. Everything and anything he could spell was written on the page, filling the front and the back, before he ripped them from the book and rolled them into tiny scrolls. These he shoved in empty bottles he had found around his time in the fort and sealed the tops with candle wax when Isander had left him alone.

These he gripped in his hands and whispered quiet prayers to the Akielon god of the sea and to the Veretian god Prince Laurent had told him of, the One Who Journeys. He did not pray for them to reach the palace via sea.

Instead, he just begged that they not be shattered on the rocks, that they might be carried to a fisherman or a young beach wanderer who would bring them to Ios.

Then he tossed the bottles out of his window, watching the sun gleam off the glass until they disappeared beneath the churning surf.
Perhaps he had hoped that in the frothing violence of sea beneath him—so different from the gentle tide of his childhood—would carry the bottles far from shore. But the gods had other plans for him.

He was in his room with Isander, practicing reading until his eyes swam when they were rudely interrupted.

Makon came into the room with four alpha guards in tow; his face, though light and pleasant as usual, had a certain tension to the jaw and there were sparks of emotion in his dark eyes. Isander smiled and moved so he was angled towards his master, as a sunflower at noon.

“Close the door.” Makon ordered to no one in particular.

A guard did as he was asked and Erasmus glared.

“It is rude not to knock.” He said by way of greeting. It was one of the small niceties he had become accustomed to in Ios.

“It is ruder to disobey the orders of your host.” Makon did not break eye contact as he held the bottle aloft, the wax seal broken. Erasmus held his breath. “Would you care to explain this? One of my men found this bobbing near our harbor and fished it out. He was quite concerned when he opened it and found a ruined note inside.”

Erasmus thanked the gods for his luck as Makon unraveled the paper to show that his wax seal had not held. His writing was unreadable, as the salt water had caused the ink to run into a massive black blob.

He breathed.

“I have never seen it before. I am a slave. I was never taught to read or write.”

Makon narrowed his eyes though his smile did not wane. “You are a most unconvincing liar. And besides, Isander has told me of your skills, no doubt learned from the prince. I will ask you again: what do you know of these messages? What have you been writing and throwing into the sea?”

“I know nothing.” Erasmus said, squaring his shoulders in stubborn refusal to give in. He would see how Makon dealt with his suspected insubordination and adjust his actions accordingly.

Makon beamed at him.

“Isander come here.” Came the order.

The boy trotted over, as open and trusting as always, always delighted to serve. There was a part of Erasmus that wanted to pull the young omega back. But it was too late: Isander had ducked to Makon’s side and bowed his head sweetly.

With elegant fingers, Makon tilted Isander’s chin up so that the young slave was looking at him. He pressed a soft kiss to the corner of Isander’s full lips before—

Erasmus yelped, unable to keep the shock inside him as Makon coiled back his arm and slapped Isander hard in the face. Isander was too shocked to even cry out in pain, and as he looked up, hurt and confused, Makon struck him hard across the other cheek. A bit of blood trickled down the omega’s chin.

The brutality of it was so swift and unhesitating.
As Isander recovered, he began to cry silently and held his throbbing cheeks as Makon glared down at him, almost in disgust.

“What have you done?” Erasmus gasped, horrified.

Makon’s expression became gentle again as he looked at Erasmus. “You are my most precious hostage. I cannot very well beat the slave favored by my king. That is what purpose Isander serves. He is your…whipping boy so to speak.”

The idea was unspeakably cruel to Isander, who loved Makon so.

Isander looked to Erasmus, his wide brown eyes swimming with tears of pain and betrayal. He realized at the same time that any mistakes of Erasmus’ would bring him abuse from a beloved hand.

“Tell me about these letters you have been throwing from the window.”

Makon’s tone was pleasant but Erasmus did not trust him. He mulled over his options carefully.

Makon sighed as he took too long to respond. He gripped Isander by the gold of his collar, ignoring the young man’s whimper of fear. “I suppose there is no helping it.” He looked over to his alpha guards. “One hour with him. Don’t touch Erasmus…but make him watch.”

Erasmus did not understand immediately but Isander seemed to, his expression moving from pain to horror.

His screams rattled Erasmus because Erasmus had heard them before. He had heard them coming from his own mouth as his former master had tried to engulf him during his first heat. And that same primal terror raced through his entire body as three of the alpha guards literally pounced on Isander and began methodically tearing the chiton off of him.

And though Isander screamed, tears steaming down his swollen cheeks, his training was ingrained and he did not fight the order. Makon stared impassively at Erasmus, as if his own slave was not begging him for mercy only a few steps away.

Though he had known the boy only a little more than a week, Erasmus did not want him raped.

“Stop.” He said and, when the assault did not cease, louder, “STOP.”

Makon held up one hand and the guards paused in their cruelties. Makon smiled at Erasmus, vicious for how kind he looked. “Go on then,” Isander whimpered on the floor, attempting to cover his body with his hands, “tell me of the letters you have been throwing from the windows.”

“I use the empty bottles of oil and perfume and seal them with wax from the candles. And then I throw them out the window.”

“And the contents of these messages?”

“Everything I see. The number of rooms, where my room is located, the number of guards, your actions…when I see them.” He left it unsaid that his language in writing was often childishly simple, but enough to be understood by any reader. “Who you are…”

Makon took a moment to consider.

“Clever thing. He did try his best to make you just as quick. Erasmus…The king and the prince
know who I am. They know I have taken you. They may even have a general idea of where we are. There is nothing you can tell them that will hasten your rescue. Only their creation of those laws that will legitimize my trade.”

Erasmus hid his bitter disappointment by flinging another accusation. “Was it you who tried to poison the prince? With the castor seeds?”


Prince Laurent was right to be worried about civil war, it seemed. If men like Makon were stoking the fires of rebellion for their own selfish reasons. He had no honor and, worse, he seemed proud of it.

He held up the bottle victoriously and looked at Erasmus in a way that might have been loving on another man. “Your honesty is appreciated. I’m sure I can rely on you to cease this activity. Each bottle I find in the future will be an hour of punishment. Take the books out of here.” He tossed the bottle on the ground so it split open and made as though he was about to leave the room.

“Isander.” Erasmus reminded, clenching his fist. All of his secrets in exchange for more violence was more than he could bear. But the taste of his resolve crumbling in the face of Makon’s cruelties was still bitter as poison.

“Oh,” Makon seemed surprised by the name, “Yes, let him up then.”

As the alpha guards reluctantly released Isander and he pushed himself up to a kneeling position, wilting like a dying flower so that his expression was obscured by his hair. His motions were slow as he reached for his discarded chiton and covered himself with it.

Erasmus waited until everyone had left before he hastened to Isander’s side and hugged him gently. He was not crying anymore; it was somehow worse that he had begun to shake and whimper instead. Almost like when Damianiskos was first brought to the palace…

Unbidden, the image of the dog whimpering in a pool of blood shot red hot through Erasmus’ mind and he squeezed back tears.

“You’re safe, you’re safe.” He whispered, and then every word he knew of Veretian.

When he had soothed Isander enough to get him to his feet, he took the young slave to his bathroom and wetted a towel with cool water. Erasmus held the towel to the ruined line of Isander’s swelling cheeks and traced gentle designs on his palm. “I will not send out any more letters.” He promised. “I will not let them touch you again. I will not send out any more.”

He had thought he was brave and strong enough to rebel against Makon and take any punishment. But the man seemed to have inadvertently discovered his weakness.

In Isander he saw what his life might have been. Erasmus would not see him tortured. He could not lose his humanity…

After seeing what kind of monstrosities Makon would allow, Erasmus did not want to interact with him ever again and had even sworn never to speak to the man again when he was summoned to a part of the fort he had not been allowed in before. It was right after dinner and the halls were beginning to darken.
Erasmus balked as his escort opened the door to what he first thought was a library, but soon realized were Makon’s personal quarters as he saw the man inside.

“Erasmus, come in please.”

“I do not want to.” Erasmus said quickly. “I want to return to Isander so I can care for him properly.” As his master should. Those words remained unspoken but Makon’s eyes narrowed in implicit knowledge.

A quick move of his hand and Erasmus was shoved inside, the door shutting behind him. He steeled himself for being trapped in a room with the foul man.

Normally he would be delighted.

This was obviously the library of the fort, with shelves carved into the stone walls and windows covered in glass so that the sea air did not damage any of the delicate pages. There was also an arch leading into a fine set of side rooms, which Erasmus could only assume were Makon’s quarters. He associated the look and smell of the paper with prince and it was disconcerting—nauseating, even—to see Makon standing leisurely inside with his most careful, gentle smile.

He motioned around him, showing off. “I have been neglecting you, Erasmus. I was so pleased to find that this fort fulfilled two of the things that bring you joy: books and the smell of the ocean.” He was attempting to court Erasmus again, perhaps hoping he would be quick to forgive and forget the brutalities visited on Isander. “Come in.”

Erasmus held his stomach as he shuffled into the room, refusing to break Makon’s gaze.

“Surely the prince would scold you if you neglected your studies while you are here.” He knew. He knew Erasmus’ weaknesses for innocent slaves and any mention of the prince. More manipulation and yet he wanted more, he wanted to know every thing he could to control Erasmus.

“Am I to come here regularly?”

Makon measured him carefully.

“I thought three to four times a week. To supplement what you had in your rooms.” It remained unspoken that this way Makon could keep an eye on him.

“If I refuse?”

“You are in no position to.” When Erasmus did not respond, Makon selected a book at random and pretended to look through it. “If you have further questions for me, you need not let them roil inside of you.”

“Are you in the habit of keeping your stock at hand?” Erasmus asked. The guards seemed to be impenetrable to him but Isander was a sweeter, more pliable potential ally.

“My father said it was a sign of weakness to be swayed by an omega’s nape and unseemly if a trader becomes addicted to his wares. But it is one thing I allow myself. And I don’t intend to keep them past a season anyways.” He smiled as if knowing how much his words hurt Erasmus.

So Isander would be sold again, either to another wealthy merchant or…someone so much worse. It would be a step down in any case…especially since the young thing was so in love with him.

“You need not look so stricken.” Makon set the book down on a low table and took a few steps
toward, his body held with casual, predatory assurance. “Such is the nature of this trade. Though…some slaves are extraordinary enough not to be subject to this…”

Judging by the possessive smell that settled heavily around him, Erasmus assumed he was the exception to the rule.

It deeply unsettled him.

He suddenly felt as though Makon was flirting with him again, like he had in the palace of Ios, but now…now Erasmus did not have Pallas and Lazar to protect him or the freedom to walk away. He felt it was less of a flirtation and more of an advance.

Baby flipped in his stomach, feeling his terror.

He would not give into Makon’s desires willingly, but he was robbed of choice in his current position.

He could do nothing more than to watch Makon and pray he did not come closer.

“No more questions?” Makon asked, feigning surprise. Erasmus could not even find breath to shake his head, much less respond. “Your stubbornness, so unbecoming for a slave, is rather fun to behold. A bad habit from the prince, I’m sure.”

Erasmus was too terrified to be insulted.

A rabbit watching a nesting eagle, Erasmus never tore his eyes from Makon as he blindly reached for a book on the shelf. *He could not show fear.* Even as he pretended to read, his entire body was finely attuned to Makon’s movements. He gripped so hard that he wrinkled the pages whenever the man circled too close. Makon never stared when Erasmus looked up but he could feel the gaze burning on his body.

It seemed a lifetime before Makon finally circled around to place a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Time grows short. Enough studies. You can leave now.”

Erasmus felt as though he could breathe the moment he left Makon’s quarters, his skin trembling with joy over not being touched. But it took him a long while to calm Baby and the dinner laid out in his room certainly helped.

He was finally feeling himself by nightfall though the fear and fury of the day had left him sapped of strength. He had just blown out his candles and was climbing into bed when the door opened—again without a courtesy knock.

A single slim form was pushed inside and Erasmus’ fear dimmed as Isander ducked his head by way of greeting.

“You will stay with me?” Erasmus asked as Isander stood awkwardly by the side of his bed.

“M-My master…if he does not wish me to join him, I am to find somewhere else to sleep. I believe…my face displeases him tonight.” Isander had been hiding since the spectacle of the morning but Erasmus could see that the outlines of his cheeks were puffy.

“You are welcome to stay with me.”

“Thank you.”
It had been so long since Erasmus had shared his bed with another person and Isander’s warmth and the scent of the sea from the window affected him viscerally. Baby flipped in his stomach.

Erasmus tried to relax in the darkness, but his mind and stomach roiled.

He nearly jerked with surprise as he heard a soft knock at the door.

He sat up slowly at the noise so as not to wake Erasmus.

“Isander. Come here.” Came Makon’s soft, but unflinching command.

Isander, unable to do anything but obey, paused to see if Erasmus would move, to see if he had been woken by the sound of the knocking at the door or Makon’s voice. Erasmus stayed very still and tried to keep his breathing steady until he heard Isander’s soft footsteps.

As soon as he heard the door shut, he leapt from the bed and hurried to the door so he could listen in on their conversation. He pressed his ear to the cool crack between the door and the frame.

Erasmus heard Makon’s velvety, soothing voice outside the door, shushing Isander as he sniffled.

“Darling, Isander, you know it had to be done. I had to show him how serious I am with this. If we are caught, I would be put to death and you given to the king’s soldiers for sport. You love me do you not?”

“Of course I do, Master.” Isander whispered.

“Then surely you do not want to see me dead.” There was a sound much like a tender kiss placed on a lover’s forehead.

“N-no.”

“You are dear to me. My only slave. But you must take responsibility for your errors. You cannot let Erasmus sway you or break the rules. I have entrusted you with this and you must know all who fail me in the fort are to be punished equally. Do you understand?”

“Y-Yes…master.”

“Good. Do not fail me again. And heal yourself before you return to my bed. Any slave of mine should not bear unsightly bruises.”

“…Yes, Master…”

Erasmus ran on his tiptoes and dove back into bed before Isander returned to the room, and tried to keep his heartbeat slow as Isander rejoined him.

He gave the boy a moment before breaking the silence. “Your master…was he still very angry?” Erasmus asked softly. Isander rubbed his eyes before answering.

His response surprised Erasmus. “Do—is the king very gentle with you?”

Erasmus understood. “The king is kind beyond measure. He would never think to strike me.” He did not have a way of explaining but he knew Makon was manipulating Isander’s love for him: delivering sweetness and abuse in turns.

He had seen people in love.
He could not possibly explain to Isander how Pallas and Lazar regularly pulled each other into dark corners to sneak kisses, how each moment separated was a waiting game until they could touch each other again; they would never spurn each other from bed from a simple injury. How Damianos looked at Laurent as though he was the only man to ever exist; there was no doubt in Erasmus’ mind that any man who put hands on the prince as men had touched Isander earlier would soon find themselves without hands.

He didn’t know how to speak of how tenderly, reverently Kallias had touched him. Kallias had killed a man to keep Erasmus safe.

Instead he could only manage, “He is not good to you…”

“What did you say?” Isander asked, finally composing himself enough to turn to Erasmus in the darkness. His eyes were wide and shiny in the faint light and Erasmus could not bring himself to crush Isander so.

Instead, he pulled Isander up against him and stroked his hair. Touch-starved, Isander sniffled and nuzzled up closer to Erasmus, as one of the prince’s rabbits might. He smelled softly of peppermint.

“I worry about you.”
XXII. Le prédateur écarlate

Chapter Notes

Haha you thought Makon couldn't get any more hateful well...I'm taking it as somewhat of a personal challenge. However, while writing this I promised myself that nowhere in this story would Erasmus ever be raped. People might try to assault him but nobody succeeds; it's such a common trope in omegaverse but not for my Suss ;) And Isander is getting just the tiniest bit bolder too. At least he realizes now that Erasmus loves him and is kind without being mean. And Laurent is straight up fucking savage. There is a phrase in Japanese like that, which I love. Basically saying, keep your throat pretty and clean. Soon you get to show it off to the executioner ;) Enjoy!

XXII. Le prédateur écarlate

Though Erasmus had hoped that Makon would let him be and not attempt any further gestures of 'goodwill' he was sorely disappointed within the very same week. Makon circled like a shark and Erasmus was not able to escape. Makon, if he so chose, could visit any number of horrors on Erasmus.

He could force Erasmus to sleep next to him or come into Erasmus’ room whenever he liked. There was one horrible afternoon where Makon had entered Erasmus’ rooms unannounced while Erasmus and Isander were in the bath.

Erasmus had never wanted to get out of the bath so quickly before, but he also did not want to pass Makon wet and wrapped in a slip of a towel. He sank low in the water instead.

Makon had tried to make light easy conversation, first with Erasmus and then, more successfully with Isander. But Erasmus could not help but feel the burn of eyes, like the burn of a brand, hovering over his coppery skin. He remembered the praise people had heaped on him for his beauty: his ‘golden’ eyes, his soft curls, his pretty face…he did not want Makon to drink them in like a man starved of good liquor.

Too often when he felt eyes or the brush of a touch, Erasmus had to catch his breath afterwards. As if Makon’s presence alone could crush Erasmus’ lungs.

At least he hoped his status as prisoner and the very clear state of his stomach would deter any interested alpha. But he could not shake his feeling of unease whenever the man was around him.

He hated the visits to the library.

On the morning where the stones of the fort truly felt a little cold and dismal from the early winter sea, Makon called him down yet again to sit and pretend to read. Erasmus spent most of the time there thinking of elaborate and improbable escapes, rescues from the sea, or simply taking a sharp object and stabbing Makon hard in the upper thigh.

And Makon seemed a little too intense that afternoon, his eyes unwavering from Erasmus’ face and the bounce of his curls. Though he did not spare the man even a word or motion by way of
greeting, the staring put him on edge.

Unable to escape, he simply had to sit and wait until Makon broke the silence…

“How old were you when you got your first heat?”

Erasmus nearly choked at the question. It seemed innocently asked but it was far too personal for a man who watched him intently.

“I-I…”

“I have smelled omegas in heat and I find it…appalling and scintillating all at once. That alphas can be so…swayed by something as simple as a smell…” Makon looked at him with a calm expression but his eyes were very dark. “Isander has yet to succumb but I have a fascination with the heat. Tell me,” He put his book down and moved a little closer, “were you a child when fate touched you? Or…”

There was something predatory about his eyes, his tone that made Erasmus not want to answer. He did not like to think of Makon imagining him when he was panting and helpless and melting on the sheets.

“I…”

“Answer me.” Makon demanded lightly. “I am curious and…I wonder what kind of desperate smell would come from your skin.”

“You will not know,” nor would he know when Erasmus had gotten his heat, “I will not have heats when I am like this.” He motioned to his stomach, hoping it would act as a deterrent.

Erasmus tried to go back to his book, tried to make it clear he had no interest in continuing the current topic of conversation, but he couldn’t help but notice that Makon edged closer and closer to where Erasmus was standing.

“There are tinctures…to bring on the heat.” Erasmus remembered with a cold drip of fear the dark, unnatural heat. “I wonder what you would blossom into. What the prince has tasted…”

Such thoughts were dangerous and highly inappropriate.

Erasmus was going to turn and use every filthy word he knew to let Makon know what he felt of such idle thoughts. But when he looked up, all words fled. He could smell—it was so heavy he could almost taste it—the scent of alpha, heavy with desire. Danger.

Makon’s eyes blazed with something deep and dark; desire but more feral. Like a rabbit cornered by a wolf, Erasmus’s first instinct was to flee.

He tried to turn tail and run for the door, but he had never been much of a runner, even without the small curve of his stomach. He had gotten no more than two paces when a long, muscular arm wrapped around his chest and hauled him backwards.

The smell of an alpha was overpowering and Erasmus kicked and pushed at the firm body that attempted to engulf him.

He screamed in fury and dismay as hot, dry hands curled in his hair, ran down his spine, along the muscles of his thighs and chest, over his stomach. Makon yanked Erasmus’ curls so the gold at his neck was completely exposed and buried his nose in the skin of Erasmus’ nape, inhaling deeply.
The thought of Makon basking in his scent was more abhorrent to him than if Makon had stuck fingers inside of him. Erasmus screamed louder, kicking his legs and hoping to the gods that one of the guards would find their humanity.

A most unwelcome tongue suckled at the skin below his collar and Erasmus tried with all his strength to push Makon’s head away.

Makon responded by taking advantage of Erasmus’ open mouth and kissing him deep.

“STOP!” Erasmus screamed, when he could finally wrest his head free of the foul kiss.

Makon seemed not to notice or care about Erasmus’ distress, his dark eyes still burning with want as he clenched harder to hold Erasmus still. “Your smell is very fine—like orange blossoms and ripe peel—but nothing akin to heavenly…you are far too disobedient to be worth anything to anyone of note, and yet…” He breathed in deep either to compose himself or to get another mouthful of Erasmus’ scent. “Yet you manage to seduce the king of Akielos himself. Become beloved of that…that…Laurent. How? What is it about you that is so alluring?”

Erasmus glared by way of response. He was so furious it burned away any fear.

Makon studied him as if he were a puzzle with secrets yet untold. “I cannot understand this. And yet…I am overcome with curiosity. Though I never sample merchandise, though you pale in comparison to your master, I want to know what it is about you, you simple thing, that is so…enticing.”

His body language had taken on a whole new tone.

While before he had only sought to cage Erasmus in, preventing escape, now he was pressing closer, his hips pressing insistently against Erasmus’. The scent in the air had grown heavy with the smell of alpha arousal and panic began to replace the anger.

“You will not touch me.” Erasmus said with confidence he did not feel.

Makon smiled, breath hot against Erasmus’ skin. “I know omega slaves well enough, always so starved for touch. And I know…I saw during the banquet that you have some desire for me. Do they disregard your pleasure in this…state? The prince is a fool if so.” One of his fingers trailed over Erasmus’s stomach, slower, more deliberate.

Erasmus took a wild guess. His heart was pounding and he felt disgust and fear roiling in his stomach, making Baby wriggle in discomfort. He needed anything to stop Makon from touching him again…

“You will not touch me.” He said with false confidence. “You won’t touch me because…I’m not the one you want.”

His guess was right.

Lust and shock flashed in Makon’s eyes before he could hide it. He had control over himself, but not at the same level as a slave…or a Veretian prince who had been born into a court of asps. Erasmus could not help but smile.

He could see it now.

He remembered how Makon had not been able to tear his eyes from Prince Laurent at the palace banquet. How he had been quick to compliment or insult the prince with a manner that seemed a
little too nonchalant. Makon had given Erasmus compliments and insults as well, but he always
related them back to Laurent. A man obsessed with what frustrated and aroused him.

He could feel that his smile was more like a cruel clench of teeth. “You are obsessed with what
you cannot have.” He continued, refusing to spare the man, even after Makon tensed with fear and
fury. “I’m sure this far south, slaves with blond hair and blue eyes are difficult to come by…or too
valuable to remain unsold. You would make an overture over the color of my hair?”

Perhaps when he had kept his skin pale he could be mistaken for the prince at a distance but now?

Makon’s fine eyes were dark and deep with barely restrained fury. But Erasmus gave one last push.
“The prince has made me quick.”

He made a noise unlike any he had ever made before as Makon reached out and snatched him by
the collar yanking him close. Erasmus was up on his toes to keep from strangling on the gold. Even
through his pain, Erasmus was feeling a little elated. He had found a weakness; the prince would
be so proud of him.

“I have been too lenient with you, it seems.”

“Y-Your…miscalculation.” Erasmus gasped defiantly.

Makon threw him to the ground, forgetting for a moment that he needed Erasmus’ body safe.
Erasmus curled in protectively on Baby as he gasped for air. Makon called the guards.

“Take him back to his room.” Makon sounded less than controlled and Erasmus smiled as he was
hauling to his feet. “Lock him in. And no food for three days.” He intended to starve Erasmus to
obedience then. “Have Isander bring him water. Be glad you are carrying the king’s child.
Otherwise…you would have thought twice about opening your fucking mouth.”

Erasmus was still catching his breath as the beta guards attempted to hoist him away, and one
finally just hoisted him up a few inches off the ground and carried him away from Makon’s rooms.

Isander startled to his feet when the guards tossed Erasmus into his room and locked the door
behind him.

“Melichrysos! Are you all right?”

Erasmus gasped for air on his bedsheets, wondering if his stubbornness was worth the punishment.
No…he was not all right.

The first day without food was not unbearable though Baby was growing restless by the end of the
night. On the second day someone in the kitchen was frying up some garlic in butter and Erasmus
woke up to a desperately growling stomach. He paced in his room and tried to occupy his mind to
keep it off of his gnawing hunger but by nightfall after only having cold water all day, he only
wanted to curl up on his bed and whimper. He tried to touch his stomach and hum to Baby to settle
it but to no avail.

Two days without food had him feeling like he had been stabbed in the stomach.

Just as he had comforted and cared for Isander when the young slave had been distraught from
punishment, Isander tried his best to soothe Erasmus. He hummed and rubbed the knots from
Erasmus’ shoulders and brushed his curls, but his sweet brow furrowed when Erasmus moaned
with hunger.

“I…I am sorry I cannot do more…” He murmured as he brought Erasmus another cup of chilled water.

Erasmus smiled at him. “It is not your fault.” He touched Isander’s lovely, glossy hair to comfort him. “You are the only one who offers me comfort here.” Though Isander was simple and altogether too trusting, he was familiar and sweet.

Baby rolled with hunger and Erasmus cried out a little with hunger.

“Is it…is it truly terrible?”

“It is so much worse.” Erasmus admitted. “I feel as though I have never been so hungry in my life.”

He never would have thought but in the middle of the night he felt someone shaking him gently on the shoulder. It was Isander, holding a large pitcher in his hands as he glanced furtively to the closed door. He shushed Erasmus before Erasmus could sob over being awoken to an empty stomach.

“Shhh! Shhh, Melichryso! I have something for you.”

Erasmus could have kissed him as he poured out the pitcher onto the bedsheets. Isander had apparently raided the kitchen for whatever would not be missed. There were a few small and hastily carved chunks of cheese, a small cluster of grapes, several handfuls of nuts, and a chunk of firm bread.

It was a struggle not to eat them all immediately and his stomach gurgled loudly with desperation.

“Why? Why Isander? I-If Makon—if your master finds out what you have done….” He hated the idea that such simple fare could potentially cause Isander such pain. Surely Makon would beat him severely for going against his direct orders.

Isander’s eyes were wide with innocent sweetness and concern. “I know that…it is painful to be so hungry…”

Lightning quick, Erasmus saw Isander’s life: he saw the sweet young boy starving on the streets who had taken his beauty and scent as a way to fill his belly. He knew this ache all too well and would not wish it on any other person. Erasmus leaned forward to kiss Isander’s cheeks in the Veretian style.

“Thank you… but do not risk this if they will notice the difference in the stores. I would not see you hurt again.”

“They will not see.” Isander assured. “Eat… please.”

Isander watched the door with care as Erasmus devoured his paltry dinner with an aching stomach. He was sure Makon and the guards would not even find a single crumb leftover from the bread and Isander threw the grape stem out the window into the sea. When he had finished he still felt a little hungry but it was not nearly so painful as before.

When Isander joined him in bed, Erasmus was much gentler with him than ever before, kissing his smooth forehead and singing softly under his breath. Though it was hard to trust anyone in the fort, he doubted Isander had a deceptive bone in his slender body. It was comforting to know he had an ally in these unforgiving walls.
“Melichrysos... if something bad... were to happen,” His voice was a pale whisper in the dark, “-it is... perhaps selfish to ask but please, -if the king seeks vengeance...” Erasmus understood.

“Isander, no matter what Makon may say to you, no man under the king’s orders would ever put hands on you in the way he threatens. They are men of honor.”

Isander sighed in relief and allowed Erasmus to continue singing until he was lulled to sleep.

Makon was so displeased with Erasmus’ firm rebuff that he did not call him to his side for another five days after the end of his three-day starvation.

Isander was with him this time, walking quiet but blissfully unaware as the guards escorted them deep into the bowels of the fort to the windowless strategy chamber. Though Erasmus was glad for the sweet aura of him, he was also concerned that the whipping boy was being brought along.

His fears were not assuaged when he saw Makon’s expression.

The man was pacing behind his desk as they entered, a single sheaf of paper in his hand. He did not invite any of them to sit and they waited for his leisure; never once had the prince been so rude as to not offer him a chair.

“The prince and the king have responded to my terms of your child’s ransom.” His tone was barely restrained fury, his smile was broken glass.

“And?”

Makon seemed to be waiting for this exact question and walked quickly so that he was looming over Erasmus. He offered the paper and Erasmus slowly savored Laurent and Damianos’ one sentence response:

‘Wash your neck and wait.’

“I don’t know what this means.” Erasmus said, though he could tell it was not the response Makon was hoping for.

“It is an ancient saying.” Makon explained, his dark eyes all pupil. “They are telling me to wash my neck in preparation for the executioner. Either they are bluffing or they do not value you as much as they would have everyone believe.”

“Or they intend to come and personally bring me back.”

It seemed to be the wrong thing to say. Makon’s smile turned to a sneer. “They cannot hope to breach this fort. I would have you dangling over the edge before they could come close.”

“And when you’ve killed me?” Erasmus asked, deadpan. “How will you bargain with them then?” Makon looked pointedly at Erasmus’ stomach and Erasmus sighed at the familiar threat knowing that once Baby was in Makon’s hands there would be no survival. “You are fool to think they would let you breathe easily after what you have done. All those trade agreements, those foul pieces of paper would hardly defend you from the sting of a blade.”

Makon, now utterly furious at being shamed in front of his guards, held aloft Prince Laurent’s response. “I could say the same for you.”
“And with no heir to reap the benefits of your ‘work’.” Erasmus said with utter surety, though it was a guess.

The only noise in the room was Isander’s shaky intake of breath, all the other guards daring not to breathe as Makon and Erasmus stared each other down. If he had not been such a valuable prisoner, Erasmus was reasonably sure Makon would have beaten him to death.

Erasmus would have taken it over having the man’s tongue in mouth again.

It was Makon who broke eye contact first, his face somehow more terrifying for the apparent peace that had replaced his fury.

“We will have to prepare a response to make them change their minds.” His voice was light and pleasant, as if he was trying to make Erasmus love him again.

“How would you accomplish that?”

“Disquiet.” Makon replied. The question was on the tip of Erasmus’ tongue when Makon moved. He was so fast, gripping the back of Erasmus’ neck and hoisting him near off the ground. His whisper was soft in Erasmus’ ear. “Would that I could bottle your screams.”

Erasmus recoiled, not knowing what Makon was planning to do to make him scream. But a quick flash of the hand and Erasmus was grabbed by the guards and hauled out of the room.

“When I next bring you in here, prepare yourself to write to them both.” Makon said, his voice dripping with venom, “And you,” Isander jolted as his master pointed at him, halting him before he could slip out undetected, “You stay here.”

It was a hard thing to do. To see Isander’s hopeful, soft smile before the door was closed and to walk away.

Erasmus had thought he would rather be beaten than have Makon’s tongue in his mouth. He thought he would prefer starvation to giving into Makon’s perversities. But he would have taken them both to spare Isander what he must have endured. Instead, he could only take his silently sobbing bedmate into the baths after Makon turned him out, clean him up, and sing to him softly until he fell asleep.
XXIII. Trente-sept cris dans des bouteilles

Chapter Notes

You all might have noticed that I added 1 extra chapter and it's because...things have rapidly gotten out of hand haha! Chapter 24 is going to be over 20 pages long and 25 was looking to be just as long. So one extra, I swear! We're still in the home stretch. And my god Makon is an unbearable asshole.
You guys might recognize his stuff from TAOC, but now he's using it to fuck with Sussie. The last bit of this chapter gets a little intense but I have no intention of getting graphic. Mostly because I have been very vague about omegas. Make of it what you will ;) But it does mean a new face for next time!
Enjoy!

XXIII. Trente-sept cris dans des bouteilles

As the days progressed, nearing Erasmus's first month in captivity, he found life oppressive. It was like a hive of wasps, frothing and desperate and angry in the heat of late summer, and it came from all sides. The guards were nervous, antsy with waiting and lack of things to do other than to watch the horizon. Erasmus heard them whisper that the king and the prince were working hard to tender legislation with Patras but that the three men who usually were by their sides in these matters--Nikandros, Pallas, and Lazar, Erasmus realized with grief that manifested as nausea--had not been seen since the kidnapping the night of the banquet.

At the center of all of this tension was Makon.

Where he had been so self-assured in Erasmus' first weeks of captivity, he was now antsy and irritable with little word from the capital. He had not expected that Prince Laurent's nerve would run to steel and was now reevaluating his options. Even so, he made sure his displeasure was felt, as if it was seeping from the stones of the fort.

It made Erasmus jittery. He had been losing his appetite from the stress and, when he did eat, he often vomited up his food. Baby sensed his fear and moved relentlessly so he caught sleep in snatches whenever the sea breeze was particularly strong. He felt weak from everything and there were days when the sea below was as inviting as Kallias' embrace and he entertained the thought about cutting his collar into the approximation of six gold coins before jumping to that familiar touch. But then Baby would settle and he could not bring himself to do it. Besides, there was another who would surely die without him and no coins to follow.

The sole buffer between Erasmus and the full force of Makon's irritation was Isander and the stress of his situation showed.

Makon rarely left bruises on the body. His true cruelty was beating Isander's gentle spirit, kissing him and then slapping him and convincing him it was his own fault. Erasmus could not help but to be reminded of Damianiskos after his rescue from the dog fighting pits: a sweet soul starved of gentle touch, ever-trembling from violence. Erasmus often felt as though the withering boy who came to his bed in the dead of night to petted and consoled was more a captive than he was. Isander and Baby, helpless and tender as they both were, were the only things that made facing the dawn
bearable.

Erasmus tried to convince himself he would never break for their sakes but… Makon tested him.

One morning he interrupted Isander and Erasmus as they were eating breakfast and Erasmus lost all semblance of an appetite. Makon watched him put food in his mouth and Erasmus could not help but remember the feeling of Makon’s tongue in his mouth.

Makon grinned at his glare, insidious for how handsome he looked. “Has anyone ever told you that you have the most unsettling gaze? It is like having a pool of gold glare at you.”

“Yes.”

When he offered nothing else by way of reply, Makon’s eyes caught fire and he immediately sought a new topic of conversation. “You did not finish your breakfast.” Isander looked between the two of them, silent and terrified over the obvious tension in the room.

“I am not hungry.”

“Good. Then you can follow me. I have something to show you.”

Erasmus had him wait for some time as Isander located cloaks warm enough to keep out the sea salt chill of the morning. The moment they were bundled up, Makon watched them leave the room and fell into step behind them. Erasmus did not like the man at his back. He did not like Makon to gaze at his leisure.

He herded them in a way: keeping Erasmus to the wall and guiding Isander away from halls he did not wish them to enter.

Erasmus felt a drip of fear as they reached daylight and Makon turned to Isander with his cold, disinterested voice. “You wait here.” Isander stopped immediately, his head drooping at the brusque tone. Erasmus tried not to shudder as he felt Makon grip him by the collar on his neck.

He was led down into the courtyard where a garish orange wagon was parked. Makon’s hand was heavy and oppressive on the back of his neck, guiding him toward the back of the wagon.

For a moment, Erasmus was stricken with fear that he was going to be shoved into the back of the wagon and taken away to Patras where he would really and truly have no hope. He dug his heels into the dirt of the courtyard and prayed in desperation.

At the last possible moment, Makon relinquished him and Erasmus nearly stumbled and fell to the dirt. When Makon turned his back to walk to the wagon, Erasmus instinctively shuffled a few steps back, as if he could avoid his fate by just a few paces.

As the weak gray sunlight filtered into the interior of the wagon, Erasmus felt distinctly ill.

At first he thought corpses had been placed inside but, after a brief moment of relief on seeing chests rise and limbs move, he realized the inside of the wagon was packed with slaves. They had been drugged; their heads lolled, their eyes were glazed, and their elegant limbs were held to the wood of the wagon by delicate silver chains. Like a painting or a statue of gods in repose, they were so beautiful.

But Erasmus could find it nothing but horrible.

Makon seemed almost proud. ’The finest Akielos’ gardens can offer. But now that the prince has
closed the port brothels and the trade routes to Patras, I must...utilize different methods to carry stock across the border. Markets there will pay twice or three times the purchase price here in Akielos Irritating as these new laws may be...I stand to make a fortune from them. Beautiful..." His voice was thick with emotion and Erasmus tasted bile in the back of his throat.

The gods had spared him such a fate but he was constantly reminded.

*Branded with hot irons in the center of the marketplace. Impregnated by a distant master. Beaten to a shell of a man in a brothel by the sea. Drugged and carted away forever to a foreign land.*

These fates, by the graces of the gods, had missed him but the guilt over the others—his brothers and sisters with fragrant napes and sweet temperaments—was almost too much for him to bear. His stomach hurt from it.

Makon must have noticed that he was not listening or was dazed by the sight, because he took hold of Erasmus’ chin and dragged him closer. When they were close enough that Erasmus could see the flutter of the slave’s eyelashes and hear their shallow breaths Makon began to torture him.

“Twenty four of them.” Makon said with twisted pride. “They stand to make me a fortune.”

“No…” Erasmus’ voice was a strangled whisper. “Do not send them…please.”

Makon looked at him with a kind of baffled amazement. “Now and only now you come to me polite and sweet?” His thumb on Erasmus’ chin became gentle as it moved across Erasmus’ lower lip. “But no. Your sweetness is not worth this bounty. If the king and the prince are as stubborn as you say then I must find ways to bring my stock through to Patras. This will be a test run.”

Erasmus felt another hand sifting through his hair but he could not focus on it. “Do not do this to them…”

Makon ignored him and turned to the young man on the seat of the wagon. “Everything should be set in place for you and all necessary people have been paid. As soon as you have dropped them off across the border, I want you to return. Immediately.”

The young man nodded in assent and gave an apologetic glance to Erasmus before giving the orders.

Anguish overcame Erasmus as the guards in the courtyard began to close up the wagon again, preparing to set off for the border of Patras. He keened without tears, without being able to help himself, as he saw those omegas hidden away like bundles of fine cloth and carted to where the gold would flow.

That was always the way with omega slaves.

Alphas paid gold and lots of it to have them locked away in gardens and slave quarters and brothels and wagons. Used them like objects and threw them away when they rebelled in the slightest or bore their masters. The lifetime of cruelty he had faced and these twenty-four slaves would face crushed down on him. Makon knew his weakness and would not spare him.

He was barely aware that Makon had him around the chest, pulling him close against his body to keep him still.

“Watch it, watch it go.” Makon ordered in the gentlest whisper. As if Erasmus could do anything but watch. His eyes watered from not blinking as he watched the guards and the wagon disappear into a small orange dot on the horizon. There was a smile in Makon’ voice, “I painted the wagon...
orange. To match your nape.”

His evil cemented, the last thorn driven deep into Erasmus’ heart, and Makon finally released him.

Erasmus ignored the burning spot where Makon had touched him and did not notice as the dreadful man left him alone in the courtyard. He did not notice as the guards watched him with a careful measure of pity—the poor omega with his weak constitution and foolish innocent view of the world and Akielon business. He noticed nothing until he smelled the soft odor of peppermint.

Gentle hands took his and Isander’s wide brown eyes filled his vision, the picture of sweetness. “Come Melichrysos.” He sounded remarkably calm despite the scene that had just gone on in the courtyard. “Come out of the cold, Erasmus.”

Erasmus allowed himself to be led back to his quarters.

Isander held him in his smooth, thin arms and whispered sweetness. Though he was thankful for the comfort offered, but he could not help but wish that the arms around him were Kallias’…

His feeling of disquiet persisted for some days and he woke up one morning to a gray, foggy sea. Normally he was rising as the sun did, but recently he could not find a reason to get out of bed. As far south as Ios, it never became too cold even in the dead of winter, save for one or two rare nights where the sea wind was particularly harsh. But as close to Patras as the fort was, the winter winds were coming in cold more often than not. And his bed was warm.

Isander rustled under the covers beside him and Erasmus heard him get up as silently as he could. He nestled deeper under the blankets in response, his tiredness making him somewhat grumpy over losing his warm bedmate.

He nodded off again for a short while, waking up to the smell of breakfast.

“Good morning, Erasmus.” Isander said, placing the breakfast tray carefully on the bed.

He remembered that Erasmus did not care for eggs and patiently brushed Erasmus’ bronze curls as Erasmus worked at peeling an early winter orange. “If it pleases you Erasmus, I will rub the knots from your shoulders and back after your bath.” Isander offered.

Erasmus was only too pleased to accept his generous offer. The stress of being around Makon and the heavy weight of Baby in his stomach was enough to make him restless at night. A soothing massage was nothing he would refuse.

As Isander cleared away the breakfast tray, Erasmus stretched his limbs and padded over the warm, humid embrace of his private bathroom.

He stripped off his chiton and sank gratefully into the hot bath.

Baby usually liked the warm water, falling nearly motionless in response, but today it would not be settled, wriggling about like a little fish. No amount of touching and whispering and warm water could seem to calm Baby.

After about a half hour later, Erasmus finally decided to get out and hope that Isander’s expert hands could soothe Baby. Isander had left him some towels by the side of the bath and Erasmus could hear him getting things prepared in the bedroom.
As he stepped out to dry himself off and apply oil, he stopped the towel halfway up his legs with hands that shook.

There was blood on the floors, a steady drip that matched the stuttering pulse of his heart.

He could not feel the pain, could not hear anything beyond the ringing in his ears. The stress was too much…too much for Baby. Erasmus put a shaking hand on his stomach, praying that it was not what he thought it was.

Who to call for?

Kallias, his dearest, was dead. Lazar might also have followed. Pallas, Prince Laurent, and the king were far away in Akielos. All the people whom he loved and trusted were far away from him.

“I-I-Isander.” And then louder, liquid heat rolling down his cheeks. “Isander!”

The young man came in, all smiles until he saw the blood. “Erasmus.” His eyes became mostly white with shock, the color draining from his face. It was probably the first time in his life he had seen so much blood. “Oh…oh gods. Gods above. What should I do? Are you badly hurt?” His hands trembled, unable to offer any comfort for his obvious fear.

“No, no, I’m not hurt.” Erasmus couldn’t help but laugh a little to himself that he was the one in distress but was still attempting to soothe Isander. Without thinking, he touched his stomach and gave the situation away.

“Baby? Baby?” Isander asked, his eyes wider than coins, his hands outstretched as if hoping to heal Erasmus by touch. “It’s too early. It’s almost a month early.”

“T...I think so.” Erasmus crouched to his knees so he could place his head against the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. There was no pain yet, but he could feel it coming. Like the first small, teal laps of the tide, soft but insistent, soon he would be drowning in waves of pain.

“W-what must I do?”

Erasmus looked up at that. There was a note of determination in Isander's voice that Erasmus had never heard before and though the young man was still white in the face, his eyes and mouth were set with a sort of steel. Surely he must have known that if a doctor was called then Baby would be taken from them immediately and Erasmus would be next to useless. Even if his motives were selfishly wanting to keep the only person who showed him true kindness close, Erasmus would take it. There were no alphas, no betas, no masters...just two young omegas, constantly beleaguered by fate. There was something reassuring about having someone who knew his struggles by his side.

"Water. Hot water and clean towels. Medicine for pain, if you have it." Erasmus had to pause for a moment as a brief but sharp ripple of pain rattled through his spine and hips. "And something to bite on."

Isander had enough sense not to go sprinting out of the room; only the most attentive of alphas would sense his haste, though any well-trained omega would see that his silent, smooth steps were nearly a run by slave’s standards.

Erasmus listened to him go and began to breathe along with the distant sound of the tide. Occasionally he would feel the pain and his breath would stutter before he could catch himself.

It felt as though Isander had been gone for hours.
But clever thing, he returned and the smell of his sweat—the soft scent of peppermint—filled the room as he lugged a cast iron pot filled with thin logs and clean towels. Erasmus did not know how Isander had managed to come up with an excuse for his strange cargo or how his slim, delicate arms had carted it to his quarters, but he could always ask later.

Isander murmured sweet things, told Erasmus to lie still as he stoked a fire in the pit that had been built into the ground and began to heat water over it. He brought cool water and a slightly bitter medicine to dull some of the pain and Erasmus thought when the prince and the king came to rescue him, Isander would make an excellent assistant for the doctors who came to check on the slaves rescued from the brothel.

He did not realize he was whimpering until Isander came to him with eyes full of concern.

“Melichrysos…Erasmus, is it very painful?” He glanced down, “Your hips are so…thin.”

He too must have heard the soft voices of concern for male omegas. That their hips were narrow. That this was dangerous, deadly business. That honor was theirs to carry the child of their master and possibly die in giving it to them.

Death…

Erasmus smiled through the first truly excruciating wave of pain.

No man, no alpha was worth the ‘glory’ of it. But Kallias, he was worth it. He was worth the pain.

The thought of death did not terrify Erasmus. He could smell the sea breeze and thought of what unspeakable joy was waiting for him on the banks of the afterlife. He must have looked like a madman, smiling on the tiles in watery blood.

“Kallias, Kallias, Kallias…”

He whispered the name until Isander placed a strip of leather between his teeth. If those were the last words to pass his lips…it would be no great loss. He would step on the sandy shores screaming the name in joy. His first breath through his nose became a stifled scream borne of sea salt.
XXIV. Tempête et acier

Chapter Notes

You all are gonna hate meeeeee ;)
exhausted, stressed, and omega as it was—for omegas had notorious difficulties producing milk—was not up to the task. "And Isander...when you have put everything back, I want you to move in to one of the extra rooms in the fort. They cannot know when I have had her and if you have been sleeping in other rooms, you can claim ignorance." He could bear the brunt of the blame. "If Makon discovers Baby and questions you, you can plead ignorance," Isander's eyes became enormous at the implication. "Yes you must lie to Makon if this is discovered. Otherwise I would fear for you. Pretend you know nothing of this, please." Their lives could very well be forfeit.

It was a lot to ask of a well-bred slave; they had been told never to lie to their masters and he saw Isander's bottom lip quiver. "B-But..."

Erasmus could not find time for excuses. "You must lie. You must. If you do not lie, then I fear Makon will beat you severely and sell you across the border." He was not the type to suffer disloyalty amongst his 'purchases'.

"He would not—." Isander began and then caught himself in what he knew was a lie. He warred with himself and Erasmus watched him do it with all the patience he could muster. "He loves me."

"You know he does not." Erasmus said. It was cruel and blunt, even by his standards, but he was too tired and desperate. "You know it. I love you. I would never beat you or rape you. I do not try to frighten you. For your own safety...please. Lie."

Isander's doe-like brown eyes were huge and watery with truths he was forced to face. But he finally nodded and kissed Erasmus on the forehead. "Rest Melichrysos. I will check on you when I can."

Erasmus curled around Baby as soon as the door was closed and drifted in a haze as he tried to think of a plan. He must hide her whenever he heard footsteps, but where? Maybe in the bathroom where the warm water would keep her safe and mellow against the ocean wind. If his stomach flattened out before the king and the prince could save him, he could stuff a pillow under his chiton. If they caught him in a woozy spell he could...If they found Baby, he could...There was so much uncertainty and he was so, so tired.

He looked at Baby, his breath mussing her soft hair. She nestled closer to him, perhaps drawn in by the orange blossom smell of his neck intermingling with the salt brine. He adored her with all of his heart, Kallias' tiny baby. For the briefest, rarest moment no one could take her from him.

His sweet haven lasted only three days.

Isander must have complained loudly to himself that Erasmus had turned him out due to feeling sick and Makon visited him the second day to check his condition. Erasmus lied with glittering, desperate eyes, saying he had a cold and prayed that Makon would not go look in the bathroom where Baby was sleeping in the basket where he normally kept used linens.

It was not difficult to play at being sick. The bleeding from inside had not stopped, leaving Erasmus weak and white in the face. Something was probably wrong but he could not dwell on it. He could only hold his breath until Makon left.

At least Baby was quiet and content. She never cried, but only scrunched up her little nose and wiggled when she was hungry. When Erasmus whispered to her she twisted her tiny head towards the sound of his voice and made a small noise of pleasure as she gnawed on the rag soaked in goat milk.

He could watch her forever: her little fingernails, no bigger than seashell fragments, her soft little
feet that kicked the air, the fluttering beat of her heart through her tiny barrel chest.

His Baby. Kallias’ Baby. The world was cruel that he would never see her in his moon white arms.

On the morning of the third day, Erasmus heard from Isander as the boy brought him breakfast, that the orange slave wagon had been seen on the horizon and his master was alive with delight. Erasmus listened to him quietly, his head spinning. He must have looked alarming because Isander trembled as he looked, his eyes darting around Erasmus’ face with the speed of a snake striking.

Erasmus ignored his concern and wanted nothing more than to go back to bed…

But he heard the sound of men walking in the halls and adrenaline coursed through his body in a jolt of pain.

“He choked out as he scooped up Baby and thrust her into Isander’s arms. “Put her…in the basket with the old linens! Hurry!” He slumped over immediately after, his strength gone and hips stabbing with pain. He had been forced to stuff sheets between his legs to staunch the flow of blood.

Isander returned and his hands shook on the breakfast tray as Makon very nearly broke down the door. Dishes crashed to the floor as Isander was pushed out of the way and guards began to tear at the bedsheets. Makon veritably snarled as blooms of red began to appear on the white linens. Erasmus did not even bother to try and hide it. He was too tired.

There was only a brief twinge of fear and regret as one of the guards pushed past Isander into the bathroom and began upending things inside. It was only a matter of time before he returned with Baby in his arms.

“Here it is, sir.”

Makon looked at him in bafflement. “You little bitch. How long have you been hiding this from me?”

“Two days.” Erasmus lied with a smile. “I sent Isander away when I felt the pain. How did you find out?”

“A bloodied sheet in the ocean.” Makon snarled with a smile, perhaps feeling that the ocean gods favored his interests. “You truly thought you could hide this from me?”

“I am clever.” Erasmus laughed deliriously.

“Give it to me.” Makon demanded, ignoring Erasmus. Despite his weakness Erasmus felt a deep and vicious rush of fury as Makon took his Baby and looked greedily down at her sweet, chubby face. Erasmus steadied himself as Makon saw a baby he did not expect. She did not have the king’s dark skin or his black hair. “This is the prince’s child?”

Erasmus did not care for the expression on Makon’s face as he was obviously imagining the prince fucking him.

But he looked again and saw the slender cut of her eyes, her lack of blonde hair and must have realized. His expression was beyond anything Erasmus had ever seen; for moment Erasmus had a shudder of fear that Makon might kill Baby in his fury. The guards were ordered from the room before Makon could turn on him.

“Whose child is this?”
“She is mine.” Erasmus said.

“Who fathered this little bastard?” Makon screamed, his face white. He was frightened, more so than he was angry.

“Kallias.” Erasmus answered honestly. He did not pause to let Makon wonder who Kallias was. He could not imagine Kallias; he would not appreciate Kallias’ quick wit and easy beauty and overprotective nature. Makon would only appraise him as something to be sold. “He was a slave.”

Makon’s handsome face underwent an alarming change in color, going from white to red to white-tinged with green as he realized his bargaining chip was utterly useless. He had been destroyed by a pair of his stock; his plans crumbled from the love of two slaves.

Erasmus cried out as Makon tensed his arms and flung Baby from them. Isander yelped and ran and Erasmus did not hear Baby cry, so he assumed she had been caught before encountering the marble floors.

Makon was too drunk with fear and fury to notice or care. He had straddled Erasmus, pushing his body down on the bed with his hips, but had his head pulled up by the collar. His dark, lovely eyes were flat as black pits—the eyes of a man who had been swiftly defeated and was now more dangerous for it.

“I’m going to kill you.”

“Please don’t!” Isander’s voice was tinny with fear.

“I know…” Erasmus sighed. He was so weak, so tired that he did not really care. He thought of death for a moment and remembered what would be waiting for him on the sandy shores.

He waited for Makon to kill him.

Instead he felt a feather light touch on the inside of his thigh.

There was a knock at the door and the fingers fellt away, sparing Erasmus any further indignities. Surely the man would make him suffer before he died, all pretending Erasmus was Laurent of Vere. But for now he was released back on the bed as Makon went to consult with his guard.

“Sir, the slave wagon has returned from the border. The driver wants to speak with you about it.”

Erasmus was released and he heard Makon say before the door was shut. “And send for a doctor. I want that omega stitched up before—.”

The bed dipped under Isander’s weight and his warm tears fell on Erasmus’ face. He showed Erasmus that Baby was safe; he had caught her and she wriggled peaceably in her blankets. Erasmus loved her so.

“I wish Kallias could see you.” He whispered.

“Why did you lie?” Isander sobbed.

Erasmus adored the boy, envied his innocent sweetness. He hoped it would last forever. “Your master would have killed me if he knew, I had hoped…Baby would at least see my face before…” He could not finish his sentence. He could only reach out his arms and hold her close. Baby made a pleased noise as she nestled into the base of his neck, smelling the orangey scent of him.
The three of them waited silently like that: Erasmus holding Baby while Isander stroked his hair. They waited for the world to crash down around them.

It started with screaming from somewhere within the fort.

Isander perked up—a tiny dark bird or a rabbit with ears alert—and he coiled tight in preparation to run.

“Erasmus—.”

“Take her.” Erasmus said, feeling his heart break a little as Isander took Baby from him. There could be nothing good for omega slaves at the end of this. Within moments it was clear that the situation in the fort was dire indeed.

There was a fight outside his rooms. He had never heard a true fight before but it sounded exactly how he imagined it. Isander ran to cower in the corner, holding Baby close to his thin, dark chest but Erasmus felt nothing but calm determination as he stood from the bed.

The world had taken on an almost dreamlike quality to him.

The lines of the room were fuzzy and sounds seemed very distant to him. It almost felt like he was floating outside of his own body, moving on instinct.

Erasmus picked up the small fruit knife Isander had used for his breakfast and went to stand defensively by the door making sure that Isander and Baby were still a safe distance away. Predictably, Isander looked frightened out of his wits, but Baby was quiet in his arms.

“Erasmus, get away from the door!” Isander begged. “They may kill you!”

As before, Erasmus knew he did not fear death. He merely prayed that whoever buried him would leave him with his gold collar. Then he could pay for his and Kallias’ fare to the afterlife but if not…perhaps the prince would bring extra coins with him on his passing. And if that failed…then he and Kallias would sit together on the banks of the river forever; wandering souls together again. His only regret was that he could not hold Baby again...

Blood ran down his legs and he struggled to stay upright. Whoever it was causing mayhem was right outside his door. He keened loudly in approximation of a war scream as the door was nearly blasted off its’ hinges.

“Erasmus!”

His knife slipped to the floor and Erasmus’ knees buckled. He knew he would not hit the ground.

His cry of rage turned into instant tears of relief as he felt the lean arms of Prince Laurent keeping him aloft. Beautiful Laurent of Vere in a soldier’s chiton and a sky blue cape, slender sword drawn like those statues of godlings and angels. Erasmus’ head lolled and the prince hoisted him up higher, his words a garbled, angry mix of Akielon and Veretian as he shouted down the hall. Erasmus knew what he was saying.

It is Erasmus. I have him. I have him. He is safe with me.

There was the sound of running through the halls and Erasmus felt the prince shift him so that he could be better defended. There was never a doubt in Erasmus’ mind that Prince Laurent could fight and hold him at the same time.
More Veretian and Erasmus sobbed with utter joy and relief.

He whimpered in pain but his joy was immense as Lazar skidded into view and ran to Erasmus, scooping him up into his arms. His stubble scratched Erasmus’ cheek, but Erasmus did not care; they both babbled to incoherence, “You’re alive, you’re alive, praise the gods.”

Prince Laurent, not one for shuffling about in the hallways while a battle was raging, shouted a command to Lazar and waved him past. "Go, go!"

As Lazar started running with him away from the room, Erasmus felt like his heart was cracking. "Baby!" it was meant to come out as a scream but it croaked out of him instead, tears spilling down his cheeks. Isander still had Baby and he could not leave her here. Lazar slowed to a halt and looked down at him in confusion. There was the sound of soft padding feet behind them and Erasmus saw Isander's sweet, terrified face peeking out from behind Lazar's shoulder, Baby tucked safely in the top part of his chiton.

Erasmus smiled weakly at the sight of her soft brown hair. "Baby..."

Lazar must have caught on, must have seen the tiny precious bundle and recognized Erasmus' condition. His eyes were huge. "Baby? Baby?" He asked in Veretian and Akielon, his fingers trembling around Erasmus' shoulders and legs. "Baby?"

Erasmus could not answer.

The moment he had seen that Baby was safe and with him, Erasmus fainted.

When he came to, he was inundated with the smell of the sea and the rocking around him was enough to tell him that he was once again on a boat of some sort. His head was resting on something warm and firm, quickly discovered to be Pallas' muscular thighs.

Pallas smiled sadly at him and brushed the hair from his forehead.

"Pallas..." His tongue felt like lead in his mouth.

"Hello Little One."

"Lazar is alive."

"I know. I know, the gods truly love me for saving him from death."

"I am so cold."

"I know, Little One. We are so close to Ios, so close. Just hang on a little longer." Pallas' voice sounded strained. His hand was warm on Erasmus' forehead and Erasmus leaned into it, hoping the warmth from him would soak through to his core.

"I am safe." He spoke with utter surety. If he was not safe in life, then surely this was a gentle and peaceful afterlife. "Isander is safe. Baby..." He remembered Baby through his haze and the fact that he could not see her set him to a panic. He tried to sit up but Pallas must have anticipated his panic, as his heavy hand pressed down on Erasmus' chest, keeping him from bolting to his feet. His expression was pained as Erasmus tried to pry his hand away and find Baby.

"Please, please Pallas." He begged.
"Settle yourself, Erasmus." No other accent could soothe Erasmus like the prince's clear, cultured Veretian. He stepped gracefully into view with Baby in his arms. He had released her from her blankets; her legs were kicking the air and she was squealing with delight as the prince turned his attention back to her, beaming. Obviously she took after Erasmus in this respect.

Erasmus calmed down immediately.

“She’s beautiful and healthy.” Prince Laurent assured him. “Put yourself at ease.”

Erasmus heard something in his tone. It was light but it had the same consternation as Pallas. A number of horrible things jumped to his mind: where was Lazar? Where was the king? And Nikandros? And Isander? Were they dead? Did Makon escape?

He did not realize he was babbling all of these horrible thoughts aloud until Pallas was pressing him down again and the prince was cradling his head with his free hand. Despite his calming gestures, Erasmus could see the set of his mouth; something was wrong.

“Everyone…everyone is alive. We just need to get you home so the doctor can make sure you are all right.”

Erasmus felt as though he was losing his mind. Words spilled out before he could stop them or pause to think. *We’ll go to Vere and I can be a docteur. I am not all right. I am so cold. Am I dying? Am I dying?*

Pallas and the prince had fallen silent.

So that was it. He was bleeding out. He must have looked like a maniac as he grinned wide. “I’ll smell the sea salt. And bring the four coins. My dearest.” He touched Baby’s soft hair and smiled again as Laurent placed her in his arms. She was so warm and she snuggled into the crook of his neck. What agony to choose between them…

Prince Laurent was clever. Perhaps he could help make such a decision. “Should I go? Should I go?”

Pain flashed over Laurent’s beautiful face and he had to turn away. “Pallas, stay with him. I will see to the captain and find out how quickly we can make...can get to the port.”

Lazar replaced the prince moments later and began to stroke Erasmus’ hair as he sang soft Veretian melodies that seemed to rock along with the boat. ‘Sea thief songs’ he called them and Pallas translated fondly to ‘pirate’.

Erasmus wanted to ask him how he was alive and how he knew such songs but he was too exhausted to begin. There were so many questions he still had…

It was Damianos, taking the steps below deck two at a time, who announced that they were at most ten minutes from port and that they should make all haste. Even though his clothes were still bloodied from the fight and he was obviously on edge, he still gave Erasmus a gentle smile as he helped Pallas and Lazar wrap Erasmus in a tattered cape. Baby, lulled to sleep by Lazar’s singing, was taken above decks first.

The king himself carried Erasmus up to the deck where Laurent was waiting, staring hard at the port of Ios as if his glare would make the ship move faster.

Erasmus was warmed to movement against the king, now realizing why the prince was so warm and gentle. Surely every day being held by the king would liquefy a lesser man. He looked to the
softly rocking sea and had a sudden urge to jump in. It had been so long since he he had gone swimming. It was…

“It’s beautiful.” He whispered.

“A little longer.” Damianos replied, holding him closer.

The palace at Ios, sprawling as it was, had it's own personal set of docks so that the royals could circumvent the public merchant docks. Hidden in a series of caves beneath the cliffs of the palace, they were mainly used for emergencies that allowed for easy escape or a decent-sized group of soldiers to set sail to defend the city. But now the guards stationed there were using all of their manpower to drag the small schooner close and tie it off. Erasmus felt as though he was flying as the king became too impatient and simply leapt from the side of the boat, landing steadily on the dock.

Damianos' laugh was edging on hysteria as the soldiers cheered for his prowess and his husband yelled at him.

Laurent cursed in Veretian at first but then, seeing Damianos had landed safely, he too could not contain a whoop of enthusiasm. "Run, lover, run! Put your legs to good use!"

It had been a theory of Erasmus' but now the thought was cemented in his mind that Damianos must have been descended of the gods. His strides must have been the length of a horse's, his heartbeat steady and slow even as he carried Erasmus at a full sprint. People that flashed by them yelped and instinctively leapt from his path, as he did not slow for even one moment.

There was a sharp scream and a splintering wood, followed quickly by the sound of shattering pottery.

"Exalted One!" Gasped the doctor, leaning hard into one of his low tables. "The—the door!"

"This is my palace, this was my door; I am well within my rights to break it down. Look alive doctor!" He barked with all the commanding presence of a king who was also a military commander. "This is an emergency!"

Torches were lit and Damianos gently laid Erasmus down on one of the long wooden tables that the doctor used for surgeries. His blanket was removed and Erasmus was too exhausted and cold to care as the doctor began examining his hips with the king still in the room.

Certain prodding had him wailing with pain and the king held him down with one warm hand, whispering to him as if he was one of the royal horses. At least the embarrassing inspection was done by the time Pallas, Lazar, and Laurent joined them from the docks.

The doctor was rushing around, selecting ingredients and grinding them into a pestle while Damianos stood idly by, chewing on his thumbnail.

The doctor blanched at the sight of the prince. He rushed to explain before Laurent could begin to make demands. “Your Highness, he has lost a lot of blood. I must have him sleep and stitch him up on the inside—.”

“Do what you must.” Laurent hissed in response.

All of this action was making Erasmus’ head spin and Erasmus closed his eyes for respite. It was short-lived.
Cool hands patted his cheeks until his eyes fluttered open and Laurent’s lovely, concerned face filled his vision. Erasmus smiled up at him. “You are so lovely.”

“You cannot sleep, sweet thing.” Prince Laurent. “Promise me you will not sleep until the doctor says so?”

“I promise.” Erasmus said immediately.

He focused on anything he could to keep himself awake. He watched the flutter of Laurent’s long eyelashes. He thought of Baby’s soft squishy legs. He remembered the taste of small winter oranges and suddenly he wanted orange juice so badly that he could scream. He listened for anything to take his mind off the silence in the room so he heard it first.

“Someone is coming.” He whispered and Laurent turned his attention to the hall.

Someone was running on the marble floors, sandals slapping the stone in obvious haste…

Nikandros, notably absent from Erasmus’ rescue, burst into the doctor’s room with a bundle of blankets in his muscular arms. In Erasmus’ near-death haze, Nikandros looked like a god of fire with his flushed cheeks and windswept hair and blazing dark eyes.

“Exalted One! Damen, Laurent! I-I have found him! I have found him and I need the doctor now!”

He seemed shocked to see everyone crowded inside and Erasmus already lying out on the table. Erasmus was going to greet him weakly but he stopped short as he opened his mouth. He knew.

Even though he could not see anything through the thick blankets in Nikandros’ arms, he knew. He never tore his eyes from the bundle as it was placed on the table next to his. Surely he was close to death and the gods were playing tricks on him. He began to keen without realizing it as the edges of the blanket fell away.

White skin, white as the moon, but newly marred by scars and bruises. Ink black hair that shimmered and waved when it was long had been hacked off so it was short and choppy. And those eyes, those slender dark blue eyes now ringed with dark circles of sleepless nights or strikes to the face. But it was all precious to him, no matter the state he was in.

A thin, beloved hand—shaking slightly and covered in angry red marks—lifted and stroked Erasmus’ knuckles. His smile cracked his lips to blood.

“Sussie…”

It was Kallias. Kallias. Kallias.

He was alive. Beaten, bruised, with eyes that were unfocused and exhausted, and a body obviously ravaged by starvation and violence but he was alive. Erasmus did not realize that he was sobbing Kallias name.

His dearest Kallias. He grabbed on to Kallias’ bony fingers. He intended to never let them go again.

“I thought you were dead.” Erasmus choked on the words. He felt overwhelming love but it warred intensely with the most intense guilt. He had not looked for Kallias. Through the haze of his sorrow he had not once taken time to see if Kallias was truly dead. He had heard the scream and simply assumed… The guilt was so crushing that Erasmus could not even shed tears. “I could have… I should have… done something. Anything.”
“I did not want you to look for me. It was better if I was dead.”

“Never!” Erasmus cried, nearly lurching from his table over to Kallias; the sight of him had given Erasmus adrenaline that pierced through the confusion of his blood loss. “Had I known…I would have done all I could. I would have—I cannot…I can live but…I am shattered without you…” His cold wish of death was more than Erasmus could bear and he sobbed. “Did you truly not want to see me again?” He had borne many cruelties but this was beyond him. If Kallias was broken enough to push him away then he would spend the rest of his days atoning for what he had not done.

Kallias gripped Erasmus’ fingers tighter. “The idea of you living was all that brought me joy in…that place…”

So overcome with joy and relief, Erasmus did not even think to ask where Kallias had been. He ignored the pain in his lower stomach so he could lean down and pepper Kallias’ hand and wrist with soft kisses. It was all he could do not to slide off the table and kiss Kallias’ face.

“Dearest Kallias…” There was so much to say and he could not even begin. But he was here. That was all that mattered.

“My Sussie.”

He had never so wished to hear his childhood nickname again. Even though Kallias’ beautiful, full lips were bleeding, even though his thin dark eyes were shattered, he was still the most beloved to Erasmus.

So focused was he on Kallias, that Erasmus had tuned out the madness swirling around them.

“You are the finest doctor in Ios!” The prince snarled, his hands clenched to fists. “And you cannot even—.” His fury was such that he could not even seem to find the words in Akielon.

“I am only one man!” The doctor insisted, despite Prince Laurent scowling at him like he was considering having one of his snakes strangle the man. “I must dedicate myself to one of them or they might both perish! It is your decision but please heed my warning on this. Their wounds are both too grievous for split attentions and every moment we waste in argument could be…” He did not finish his sentence but the implication was clear.

“Thereir wounds are both so serious?” Pallas was so white he looked ill. The doctor’s look was enough to confirm whatever they were concerned about.

Nikandros was already running out the door, practical as always. “I will go to the city and see if I can rouse another doctor. Even one for the soldiers might be—.”

Damianos nodded. “Go, quickly. Take Kapnos.”

Precious minutes slipping away.

It took Erasmus a moment to realize what was being said. But Kallias—even in mortal pain—understood immediately.

The doctor could not save them both, such were their injuries. One of them would die in this room.

He was too quick, as always. “Save Erasmus.” Kallias said, his voice strong but raspy. He spoke swiftly in Veretian, much to the surprise of the Veretians in the room. “Save Erasmus.”
Erasmus immediately began to panic, seeing the cold resolve in Kallias’ dark eyes. He had seen that look when Teacher Adrastus had beaten him and when his first master had tried to pin him down. It was the look Kallias had before he had thrown Erasmus into the river. The look of a man who would destroy anything, including himself, to see Erasmus to safety.

“N-No! It…it should be…Kallias!”

It was madness; surely anyone could see it. Erasmus looked desperately to each face surrounding him and saw the same grim look mirrored.

The king, the doctor, Pallas, Lazar, Nikandros…they all knew and loved him. They cared for him and they did not know Kallias. The choice was clear in their expressions. He was overruled.

His last hope was Prince Laurent. He turned to the beautiful young prince, the man he admired most, with pleading in his eyes.

Laurent looked down at him, obviously distraught. His flawless skin was paper white, his cat-like eyes wide, beautiful mouth set in an expression of pain. He closed his eyes for a long moment as Erasmus begged him, “Please, Laurent, please.” Everyone would obey his command.

When Laurent opened his eyes they were shattered. “Save Erasmus.”

Erasmus screamed, blood staining the wood beneath him as he tried to escape fate again. He screamed until the herbs meant to send him to dreamless sleep took hold. He could not have known that, even in unconsciousness, he did not let go of dying Kallias’ fingers.
XXV. Vivre, mon amour, vivre

Chapter Notes

HOOOOOLY SHIT. Only one chapter left after this! Thank you all for being patient with me as I wrote this story, I'm so happy that soon it will be completed and I'll have another 100k word story under my belt ;) So this chapter was resolved from a tiny mention I made in chapters long past; I wonder if you all spotted/remembered it? If not...well it's fine haha! I'm sure you'll be pleased no matter the circumstances. What can I say? I like happy endings ;) Enjoy!

XXV. Vivre, mon amour, vivre

It was sunny.

Erasmus could feel it through his eyelids; in the muddled medicinal haze of his mind post-surgery, all he could think was, ‘yellow. Very yellow’. It took him a long moment to open his eyes and it seemed as though he could hear his heartbeat in a steady ‘thump, thump, thump’.

His first glimpse nearly blinded him.

He was resting on a very luxurious feather bed, the warm ocean breeze rustling the hangings around him. These were much finer than anything he had ever been allowed before so he was reasonably sure he was either dead or in the finest guest suite in the palace. The thumping, inexplicably, got faster.

Erasmus’s eyes slowly traced the sound to the foot of his bed and saw a red-brown tail whipping quickly against the bedspread. A familiar doggy form was attached to the tail.

“Damianiskos…” It came out slurred but delighted.

Damianiskos crawled low on the sheets, inching forward with his head down as if he was embarrassed but his tail became a whirlwind of joy. As Erasmus scratched him lethargically behind the ear, Damianiskos licked his hand and then crawled up even faster so that he could lick Erasmus’ face.

Even his tears came slowly as he embraced Damianiskos’ thick, fuzzy neck.

He did not even realize that sleeping Pallas was ‘keeping watch’ by his bedside until Damianiskos’ exuberant tail caught him on the knuckle. He swore and sat up looking as though he was going to give the dog a piece of his mind until he saw that Erasmus was awake. He smiled in delight.

“Little One. You’re awake.”

“Am…I alive?” Was all Erasmus could think to ask.

A large, warm palm brushed the curls from his face. “Yes, thank the gods. We have been taking turns keeping vigil by your bedside for the past two days. The dog has not left your side.” Erasmus
did not even need to ask. “Yes, we were able to save both the dog and Lazar after you were taken from us.”

“L-Lazar…” Erasmus’ memory was coming back to him slowly: people, places, things that had happened before he had fallen into such a deep sleep. There was something important, something so important that was on the very fringes of his consciousness.

Pallas called Lazar into the room and he was followed closely by a quiet, smiling group. Lazar at the forefront, kissing Pallas on the mouth before practically running over to kiss Erasmus’ cheeks. “Safe, safe,” he whispered in between kisses.

Erasmus clutched him, overwhelmed for a second time that his foolish, loving protector was alive and well. Nikandros came next, looking a bit bashful at his own displays of emotion. Erasmus recalled him blazing with intensity but the memory was still hazy.

“You lived. Perhaps I should train you as a guard.”

“Golden armor, to match his eyes.” Damianos laughed at the suggestion. “How do you feel, Erasmus?”

“I feel like my head has been stuffed with cotton.” Erasmus admitted, hoping it was not a problem. “I am remembering things very slowly. Like how Lazar was hurt…” Lazar tilted his chiton unhelpfully to the side and showcased the healed pink scar on his flank.

Laurent, who had something stuffed into the front of his chiton, sat on the edge of the bed. “The doctor said the medicine he gave you would make you fuzzy for a while. But take your time. Perhaps she can help you…”

Moving carefully, Laurent pulled a tiny bundle from the front sash of his chiton and presented it to Erasmus.

Erasmus saw her, the tiny baby with her stubby fingers and tufts of brown hair, her face screwed up in dismay as the warm, steady beat of the prince’s heart disappeared. One eye opened and Erasmus saw the filmy dark blue of her iris and he remembered.

“Baby!” He gasped, holding out his arms.

Damianos laughed as Laurent almost seemed unwilling to part with her. But she settled against Erasmus’ chest and made a small noise of delight when pressed to Erasmus’ collar. “She is…she is healthy? And good?”

“She is the sweetest child.” Laurent responded with overt fondness in his tone. “She never cries, just nestles and suckles and sleeps. She is early but healthy and everyone adores her.” It might have been Erasmus’ imagination but he sounded almost jealous. Erasmus shook the thought from his mind; it was impossible that Laurent would feel jealous toward anyone.

“You sell yourself short, My Laurent.” Damianos retorted. “As I recall you tried to reopen Lazar’s wound when he first asked for a turn.” Laurent’s blue eyes flashed at the betrayal and the king kissed his ivory temple.

Erasmus kissed Baby, glad that she was happy and healthy.

He could not believe he had forgotten her even for the slightest moment. He tried hard to recall what had gone on immediately after Lazar and Damianiskos had been stabbed. It was like wading through mud or thick fog as he tried to remember…
Erasmus sat up suddenly, ignoring the pain in his stomach, as some of his memories returned to him.

*Makon.* Makon had run from the room leaving Isander, Erasmus, and Baby to fend for themselves. He gripped the hem of Prince Laurent’s chiton and tried to think of what was most urgent to tell him.

“Oh—oh gods! *Makon!***” He did not notice immediately that expressions darkened at the mention of the man. “H-He had slaves that he sent across t-to Patras! In an orange merchant wagon! Oh gods, there were so many drugged and—Isander, is Isander all right?” He vaguely recalled Isander running after Lazar in the halls of the fort. “H-How did you—?”

“Makon is dead.”

It was Damianos who interrupted his hysterics with a tone devoid of mercy.

“It’s true.” Laurent assured him. “He is dead, I swear to you.” Erasmus knew the prince and the king were clever, but had never seen their superior intellect used to such swift and brutal ends. They explained in great detail how they had realized quickly that Makon was behind the kidnapping and riots at the palace.

The fort had been discovered, its formidable defenses discussed until an opportunity presented itself.

It was the orange wagon, sent to the border of Patras, they intercepted. The driver had been bribed to allow them to stow away in the wagon while the drugged slaves had been taken to safety; from their description, seeing both Pallas and the king’s impressive forms crushed into the back of the merchant wagon was a hilarity to behold.

“If we were caught, you might have pretended to be a pleasure slave yourself.” The prince said to Damianos when his cheeks went scarlet at the memory.

“When the wagon returned…” Erasmus said on realization.

“We were inside.” Pallas replied. “We might never have surprised them otherwise.”

Their first goal had been to find Erasmus and Baby; Makon could be dealt with once they were safe. And when Lazar had gotten them safely to the dock, Damianos and Laurent had gone to find Makon.

The prince’s smile was sweet poison. “He tried to bargain with us. I told him I wanted his head and nothing else. Did he…do anything to you?”

“No.” Erasmus furrowed his brow. “He wanted you, Your Highness.”

“What?” Damianos’ eyes flashed black fire and Laurent blushed.

“You are lovely, Your Highness.” Erasmus offered by way of explanation. “And you frustrated him with your laws. He wanted to…control you, I think. He did not want me.” He had to stop his thoughts because the king looked ready to ride back to the fort and kill Makon again.

“He is dead—in any case.” Laurent interrupted smoothly.

“And Isander?”
He recalled the sweet boy running after him in the hallways of the fort, protecting Baby in his chiton.

“He is safe.”

Erasmus sighed, his head falling back against his pillow. All of his prayers in the fort had been answered and he was back in his home. He thought even harder, trying to remember what happened after Lazar had cradled him.

He had been on a boat and then the king had carried him to the doctor. And then…and then?

Like an arrow, those shattered dark eyes cut through the medicinal fog of his memory and it must have shown on his face. Before he could even think of sprinting from the bed, Lazar and Pallas put their arms across him to hold him down. He could not bear to look at their expressions so he squeezed his eyes shut and held Baby a little tighter.

“Bring me to him. Please, please.” He wanted to hold Kallias again, even if his beloved eyes were closed forever. “Bring me to him.”

There was a cool gentle hand on his forehead and he knew it was Laurent’s.

He called out in Veretian and the sound of it broke Erasmus’ heart. “Open your eyes, Little One, Melichryso, Sussie. There is someone I want you to meet.”

The sound of his nickname from Laurent’s mouth, gave him enough strength to open his eyes.

A middle-aged man he had never seen before entered the room. He was Veretian, if not from his pale skin, then from the unique cut of his clothes. He had the haggard, wiry, scholarly look of a man who preferred books to human company but there was a gentle, reassuring twist to his mouth.

“I should not like to use medicine to subdue you again, young man.” He said in careful, accented Akielon. “Please calm yourself and I will explain everything.”

“W-Who are you?” Erasmus sniffed.

“My name is Paschal. I am the royal doctor of Vere.”

Laurent had brightened at the appearance of a familiar face. “He is the best doctor in four kingdoms. I wrote my brother ages ago to ask if he could be spared for a month or so. Nikandros found him waiting at the gates immediately after—.”

Two doctors. There had been two doctors in the palace and they were the best in Vere and Akielos. There had been two doctors.

If Paschal had been any closer, Erasmus would have gripped him by his elaborate Veretian clothes and promised him everything short of his Baby if he would only tell him what happened to Kallias. Instead he could only beg, “Please, docteur. My Kallias, my—please…”

Paschal surveyed him, looking for the hysteria that was bubbling just under the surface. “I can see why everyone is weak to you. If you swear to keep calm, I will continue.”

“I swear.” Erasmus said.

Paschal smiled as if he expected such an answer and turned back to the hallway where he had come from. When he returned, he was pushing what looked to be a chair, the legs having been replaced
with large wheels. Despite his promise, Erasmus’ veneer slipped.

It was Kallias. Thin and wan and trembling slightly, but he was alive. Erasmus could see the high cut of his cheekbones and the individual grooves of his ribs from underneath his chiton; as he got closer he saw the crescent bite scars, littered like slivers of pearl around Kallias’ neck. Erasmus had seen these wounds somewhere before but he was too elated to dwell on it. It was Kallias, living and breathing only a few feet from his arms.

“Do you lie, Dearest?” Erasmus asked, his voice choked. “Docteur, is this the medicine?”

“Your eyes do not deceive you.” Paschal promised. “Nikandros found me just in time. If he had ridden into the city, Kallias might not have lived. It is a good thing omegas often have tricky births. I came with about a month to spare for you, just in case.”

Erasmus could not even find words.

His eyes blurred, unwavering and unblinking. If he blinked, it all might disappear. His fingers trembled as he stretched out his arms. He remembered what Kallias’ body felt like and his skin trembled with the want of it.

The strange rolling chair came closer and closer and Erasmus shifted Baby so he could reach even further for Kallias.

“Can he come to me?” Erasmus asked, uncaring that he might look mad to everyone in the room; he was concerned Paschal would keep them at an arms’ length. “Can he, please docteur?”

Paschal smiled in a way that was not mocking and spoke in Veretian to Laurent before he had the good manners to translate. “If you were to learn more Veretian no one could deny you.” Lazar smiled as if he had already known such a thing. “I can see that you will fall to pieces if you remain separated and I will allow it if Kallias feels comfortable.”

Kallias nodded at Paschal, his body thrumming as he put his hands on the bed.

So used to his love being lithe and vulpine quick, Erasmus was surprised that Kallias moved with the slow, shuddering motions of an invalid, even groaning with pain as he lifted one leg onto the bed. His ankle was red-purple as if he had shackled.

“Please!” His voice was a little sharp before he could catch himself as Pallas moved to help him. “Please, I…I want to try on my own.”

Pallas stepped back and no one was cruel enough to point out that Kallias was shaking and he had defensively dug his fingernails into the flesh of his arms. Damianiskos watched Kallias with a distrustful look as he slowly attempted to get into the bed and even growled a little as Kallias was halfway up.

Kallias’ reaction was instantaneous as he closed his eyes and braced himself for attack.

Erasmus was outraged and flicked Damianiskos’ ear. “No. Be nice.” He ordered and Damianiskos drooped. It was the first time Erasmus had scolded him and he obviously did not care for it. He glanced balefully at Kallias before moving to the foot of the bed.

All was right with the world as Kallias slid under the covers next to him. He looked half destroyed and smelled more of medicinal herbs than sea salt but he was alive.

Erasmus could feel his weight dip the bed, his vision taken up by blue, white and black. He saw
the scars and cuts and bruises but he did not care; he wanted to run his hands over Kallias and was deciding where to put them first.

He hesitated as Kallias flinched from him, waiting until his breathing was soft and even again before pressing his fingertips against flesh. He had decided on the bottom half of the jaw so his ring and pinkie finger could feel the pulse through the skin of Kallias’ scarred neck.

“I thought it was a dream.” Erasmus whispered.

“Then we are alike in that thought.” Kallias smiled and Erasmus was pleased to see that his lips were no longer chapped and bleeding. “I thought of many beautiful futures for you after I was taken but…I never thought…the prince himself would take you in. I had…it is much better than some of the alternatives.” He could not hide the look of pain that indicated he too had often thought Erasmus is dead. Erasmus stroked his cheek and though Kallias shuddered at the touch in the beginning, he leaned into Erasmus’ palm.

“The gods answer both our pleas. They usually kill slaves who murder their masters.” Erasmus said in disbelief, almost as if he was trying to dispel a hopeful, untrue dream.

“Your master was not murdered.” The king added smoothly, as if reminding the two of them that other people were present. “Laurent and I looked and listened for news of wealthy men who had met a sudden death and we heard nothing. But of men who had suffered a severe head injury…that was more,” his smile became almost a snarl, “fortuitous. Nikandros found him near the border of Delpha.”

“Delfeur.” Laurent corrected unthinkingly and laughed as Nikandros leveled a chagrined glare at him.

“And then?”

“He talked. With a little coercion.” Nikandros said with the lightest shrug of his shoulders. Erasmus could only imagine what coercion someone as strong and brutally pragmatic as Nikandros employed. “He took the gold offered for his slaves and I brought them to the villa outside Akielos.”

Erasmus felt a small rush of guilt as he had not often thought of his charges in the villa outside the city. “H-how are they?”

Nikandros smiled. “They miss you desperately. They ask after you whenever we go to them. I took Isander there to recover.”

Erasmus made a mental note to visit them when he and Kallias were feeling well, as he intended not to let go of Kallias’ hand for the foreseeable future. “A-and then?” His heart froze a little as everyone glanced furtively to Kallias and Nikandros. Kallias’ body shook next to his and Nikandros had an expression that seemed torn between sickness and fury.

It was Paschal who spoke in Veretian and then Akielon. “A man’s past is his own to share.”

There was a moment of silence before Kallias spoke. “I cannot…at the moment I cannot bear to say everything but…” He turned to Erasmus and Erasmus had to look into his dark eyes, the same way they had when they had stayed up late into the nights talking. Only this time it was Erasmus who had the steady gaze and quiet calm while Kallias shook with fear and whispered as if afraid of being caught. “After…I received punishment for taking you away and attacking him, I…I…” Kallias had to close his eyes for a moment and Erasmus was worried that he would cry. “H-he sold me, Sussie.”
“No…” They both knew where unruly, disobedient slaves were sent.

Kallias could not meet his eye and it was no small wonder. With what horrors he had been forced to endure in those illegal brothels it was astonishing that he had not lost hope. Remembering the state he had been in when they had been reunited, Erasmus realized that Kallias had nearly been fucked to death.

Erasmus looked to Nikandros and knew he must have looked truly murderous. He hoped Nikandros had burnt the place to the ground.

Nikandros smiled at him but it was in no way mocking. “Don’t look so poisonous, Erasmus. You know that I would not let those villains escape unharmed. They will never see a slave again.”

Erasmus nodded. He had no remorse.

“I heard him calling to me,” Kallias said, “But I was—we were too terrified. No one wants to respond when their name is called. But…he shouted for me and said Erasmus sent him and I—.”

Erasmus could imagine it as he told the tale.

That last golden bit of hope, the only thing keeping Kallias alive, allowed him to stagger to his feet and throw himself to Nikandros’ mercy. And Nikandros had seen his thin, dark blue eyes and the desperation in his features and swept Kallias into his arms.

“I knew I was going to live when I smelled the sea.” Kallias said. “In that…building, it smells terrible—I cannot even describe it. Like blood and hate. I almost asked Nikandros to throw me in the water.”

“Only my king deserves such an honor from me.” Nikandros replied, deadpan, and Laurent and Pallas hiccupped with laughter.

The moment of humor dulled as Erasmus remembered what had happened next. It hung unspoken in the room.

Kallias had seen Erasmus alive, not only alive but protected by the very king of Akielos, and he could wish for no more. He could die at peace knowing his lover’s fate was not death in the woods or sold to some bastard in Patras.

Kallias who would kill for him, Kallias who would die for him.

Erasmus looked at his love again—the moon god to his sun spirit, silver to his gold—and was suddenly struck with something white-hot.

It did not matter that he had sleeping Baby against his flank or that they had both recently come out of surgery; never mind the fact that they had an audience, Erasmus wanted to kiss the line of Kallias’ throat, suck the feeling of strange hands out of his skin.

The room must have begun to smell very deeply of orange blossom, because the color rose in the king and the prince’s cheeks and the betas subtly put hands over their noses. Only Nikandros, with his subdued sense of smell, seemed unaffected by Erasmus’ scent.

“We should leave you to reconnect.” Paschal offered diplomatically. “And I have much to dicuss with you, Your Highness.” Damianos looked almost disappointed when Laurent accepted the offer with rose flushed cheeks.
Lazar and Pallas both ignored Damianiskos’ growling and Kallias’ suspicious glare as they kissed Erasmus’ cheeks and forehead. Damianos, Nikandros, and Paschal were equally warm but less touchy with their farewells. Laurent only needed to smile at him and Erasmus felt the same amount of love as he had with all the others.

The prince was the last to leave the room, dragging an unwilling Damianiskos along with him, and Erasmus pulled the covers up over their heads. He and Kallias could whisper under the sheets as they had when they were children in the gardens. Only now…

Erasmus shifted Baby in his arms and leaned forward so that he could kiss Kallias’ cheeks, his forehead, his neck, his eyelids.

“Can I? Can I?” He asked, not wanting to cause Kallias any pain, as his lips found skin. “Tell me no if you hate it.”

Kallias began to cry, his protests feeble. “Sussie, Suss…please…I can’t, I can’t.” He tried to twist his head away and Erasmus cupped his chin gently until he turned his tearful gaze back. “I’m…It’s dirty.”

“You’re not.” Erasmus argued, kissing the crescent moon scars on his neck. They were bites from alphas who tried to lay claim on him; hundreds of them overlapping and Erasmus intended to kiss them all. “They are a part of you so I love them.”

“I-If you knew!” Kallias rested his head on Erasmus’ collarbone and Erasmus stroked his newly short hair. “If you knew w-what they…did to me, I…I don’t think I could f-face you. They h-hurt me. They broke me—I thought I could be stronger than them but…” His breaths became raspy with sorrow.

Erasmus did not know what to tell him to ease his suffering. “I too am so different from the Sussie you loved.” He was no longer so sweet and innocent. He was the watchful Melichrysos, vengeful and contrary at times, and he wondered if Kallias would love those parts of him.

“Sometimes…sometimes I wish I had died…” Kallias cried softly.

“And…I am glad you did not. I also thought about…” He tasted bitterness in his mouth, refusing to think of those dark times when he had thought of staying curled up and withering in Marlas or throwing himself into the sea. He shook his head, “It was you, telling me to live that always held me back.” He leaned down so he could kiss the corner of Kallias’ lips, “Live, dearest, live.”

Kallias looked up at him before moving forward shakily to kiss Erasmus on the lips.

They might have to wait years to heal, perhaps some wounds would never go away, but Erasmus would take such a daunting endeavor over not having Kallias with him. “I love you.”

Baby made a little noise of contentment over Erasmus’ calm mood and the warmth from underneath all of the blankets. Kallias broke the kiss, astonished at the very sight of Baby as if he had not realized the little bundle of blankets in Erasmus’ arms was a tiny human child.

Of course no one had told Kallias of Baby’s existence.

It was probably under Prince Laurent’s command that this was something to be shared alone between the three of them. Erasmus shifted her again so Kallias could see her pudgy face. She peeped open one thin blue eye to look at Kallias and closed her eye as if unimpressed.

“Little baby.” At first his voice was dreamy and delighted at the sight of her but then he must have
remembered his experience in the brothels and his face blanched. “No, Sussie, no! Is this—is it—oh gods, is it…?” His breath came in short bursts and Erasmus stroked his cheeks and hair, whispering all the words he knew in Veretian. After ‘kiss’ Erasmus kissed him and Kallias breathed smoothly, and then laughed a little, “Did you say ‘potato’ in Veretian?”

Erasmus laughed. “The prince has a pet snake named ‘potato’.”

“Clever Suss…” His eyes were wide as he touched Erasmus’ cheek. “No one…hurt you?”

“Only one man ever touched me,” Erasmus promised, pushing Baby up into the orange crook of his neck, “Only one.”

Erasmus wished he could see it forever: the realization and tearful joy that overcame Kallias’ face as he realized. His hands shook as Erasmus offered him the tiny body of Baby to rest against his scarred, bitten neck. Baby, always so well behaved, took to him immediately and he gripped Erasmus’ hand to pain as she nestled against his skin. “Mine? Sh-she’s mine? Ours?”

Erasmus nodded, stroking Baby’s hair.

Perhaps she would have hair that was more black than brown and waved gently like Kallias’ or maybe it would be curly brown that occasionally was bronze when it caught the light, like Erasmus’.

“Yes.”

Baby squeaked a little as Kallias squeezed her and pressed his face against her tiny head. It was all Erasmus could have ever dreamed of.

“I am so happy. I feel like I could float, I am so happy, so happy.” He whispered and then looked up at Erasmus. “A baby, Suss. What will we do? Where shall we go? I am…still so weak…” Erasmus knew; he could see that Kallias was terrified of the outside world, of alphas, of touch. “What must we do, Sussie?”

Erasmus thought of everything the king and prince would offer them.

They could stay in Ios to rest and recover and possibly help other slaves who had been rescued. They could burn their previous master’s villa to the ground. They could live on the island of Isthima and have a small house on the beach. They could have a farm in the outskirts of the city where they could raise goats and rabbits and ducks. They could stay and be caretakers in the palace of Marlas. The world was theirs.

Erasmus touched his throat and realized for the first time that someone had removed his collar while he was asleep. He knew he would find the remnants of it in the stockpile of gold he had earned from working in the palace, tending the prince’s animals.

“We could go to Vere. We could live together in a small cottage. You could be a docteur. And we can raise Baby together.”

They moved closer together, the three of them warm and golden under the sheets.
Épilogue : Et ainsi je m’élève

Chapter Notes

Another story done and I am overwhelmed.
Thank you all for being patient with me during this story! I know it wasn't a typical Capri Lamen story but I had so much fun falling in love with Erasmus and Kallias. And now we finally have a lovely epilogue for their future ;)
As far as my next story, I have already started writing it but I am also going on vacation for 2 weeks without my computer, so I'll have to update when I get back.
Please wait for me until then!
Big thanks to all the people who helped me and commented and told me how much they liked the story. I hope you enjoy this final bit!

Épilogue : Et ainsi je m’élève

It was a warm autumn day as Erasmus sealed his letter, tucked it into the waistband of his chiton and then tiptoed through his pen of rabbits. There was a large sheet laid out in the corner and he hurried as he saw Baby shakily lifting her head as she attempted to crawl toward a white and tan rabbit with lop ears and a puffy tail. She squealed in irritation as the rabbit moved a half inch, easily dodging her plump fist. Erasmus scooped her up and she squealed again, this time burying her face into his neck.

"You are not quick enough," he teased her, kissing her until she giggled in that delightful way babies did.

Her hair had curled and was now long enough to be tied up, she had tanned as dark as Erasmus after living so long at the coast, and the dark tone of her skin made her eyes look black, but Erasmus knew they were blue. Like Kallias’ eyes.

She screeched when she saw the rabbits again, but Erasmus was too focused on picking up the sheet and the empty basket that had been filled with greens for the rabbits. They could not linger, because they were expecting guests later in the day. Even though Baby could not understand, Erasmus still liked to explain this all to her as they exited the pen.

"Melichrysos do you need help?" Someone called out to him from across the pens.

He looked up and smiled.

It was one of the slaves who had also been liberated from Kallias’ brothel who had shown an aptitude for growing fruit and was now in charge of the villa arbor and lemon, orange, and apple trees. They had expanded so much…

“Could you take this basket for me? I have to go get my dearest.”

The girl smiled at Baby as she came to accept the basket and sheet. “I forget that time has moved so quickly. Please give them all of my regards when you see them this evening.” Erasmus nodded.

He paused on the top step of his home, as he always did when coming back inside, just enjoying
the view and savoring what was his.

It was a small villa of clay-covered brick, painted a pale coral color, large enough to house fifteen comfortably, only a five minute walk from the beach and a twenty minute mule ride from the city of Marlas. Currently ten rescued slaves were staying with them, helping to clean and cook and tend the animals and vegetable gardens. The wind smelled of sea and orange and lemon.

It was so peaceful, Erasmus often stood for long minutes, basking in the radiant peace.

Baby would not allow it. She was only content for a few moments before she began to rock back and forth in his arms. Her tiny toes kicked at his flank and Erasmus couldn’t help but laugh.

In they went to the cool interior of their home.

Bedrooms and the large communal bath were in the buildings closest to the sea path, while the kitchens and room for eating were closest to the gardens and animals pens. The building Erasmus walked to was even smaller: a small rectangle of a cottage, cut in half down the middle. One half was used for laundry while the other was their sickroom.

He could smell it before he saw it. It smelled of clean linens and dried lilac and medicinal herbs; even Baby’s tiny nose quivered as they got close.

The foreign, soothing smells matched the foreign, soothing tone of rapid Veretian from inside and Baby squealed when she heard it. They both peeped around the corner so as not to disturb anyone, but it was clear they were expected.

“Sussie.”

The nickname still gave him shivers.

Kallias’ hair had grown longer until it was nearly brushing his cheeks, though some of the strands were still uneven and he had to keep them pulled back from his eyes. He had more meat on his bones and a steadier look in his eyes but Erasmus knew he still muffled screams in the middle of the night and sometimes clenched to rigidity during lovemaking. However, his body smelled of sea salt again. He was beautiful…

“Melichrysos.”

Isander also looked up, beaming from where he had been grinding herbs into the mortar and pestle and listening carefully as Kallias translated the Veretian doctor’s instructions into Akielon. They were both in training to be doctors, the finest in Akielos, and teaching themselves to some of the rescued omegas. Isander had especially taken to the care of babies…

The Veretian doctor questioned Kallias and, after Kallias explained, he brightened immediately. He was one of Paschal’s students and he clearly had the highest opinion of the doctor and the second prince of Vere. He would surely consent to a short class for the afternoon.

Kallias stood from the table as soon as he had gotten permission and went to kiss Erasmus before taking Baby.

He liked to hold her and whisper to her in Veretian and often Erasmus was a little jealous of the attention Kallias lavished on her. Isander practically bounced in their peripheral, already delighted by their plans for the day.

He too had his days of melancholy—they all did—but the slaves in the villa often called Isander
‘Sunshine’ for his pleasant disposition. From out of Makon’s oppressive control, he had flourished.

His hair was long to his ribs now and with adequate food and movement he had taken on the lean, leggy look of racers. And he was as good as Erasmus with new, frightened houseguests. His soothing peppermint smell and large, guileless eyes could put any terrorized soul at ease. He was ravenous for knowledge, attempting to learn Veretian from Kallias so he could better understand their teacher and Erasmus had promised to teach him to read and write over the winter.

When Isander’s peppermint heat had finally come, the entire house had wanted to care for him. It was the way all heats were handled; the way they should have been handled.

“We should prepare to go.” Erasmus said, barely containing his own excitement. “They’ll be waiting for us.”

Isander loped past him, eager to put on the nicest chiton he owned, and Erasmus found himself pushed into the shadow of one of their wisteria trees as soon as Isander was out of sight. Even when he was hungry for it, Kallias’ kisses were unerringly gentle.

Baby had been deftly tucked into the front of his chiton so that he could better grope at Erasmus.

“You…are ridiculous!” Erasmus laughed as Kallias mouthed the ridge of his collarbone. “You act as though you have not touched me in weeks.”

“IT feels like weeks.” Kallias replied.

Erasmus smoothed the dark hair from his eyes. It had taken time for Kallias to relax at all during intimacy and Erasmus treasured every stolen moment and every long night when Kallias did not shudder at a lover’s touch. “It has only been hours.” Erasmus was still a little sore from their morning in bed.

“When we come home—?” Kallias asked, his eyes wide with hope.

Baby kicked at them, squealing with impatience and Erasmus ruffled her soft hair before kissing Kallias under the earlobe. “When we come home.” He promised. “But now we should go.”

Nothing could get their quiet, lazy home in a frenzy quite like the visits.

The other liberated omegas who lived in the villa had already hitched up their two placid mules to a traveling wagon in preparation, with fresh water and traveling cloaks loaded up inside. They tried to keep provisions to a minimum, knowing that the prince and the king would load up the wagon with luxuries to take back.

It had taken them nearly three months to decide to live in Marlas, as Ios was simply too crowded, the villa they would need too far from the sea.

It was clear to see that Pallas and Lazar especially would miss their presence in the palace. Laurent nearly refused to let anyone else hold Baby during their last week living there but Kallias and Erasmus had taken their Baby and sweet Isander and traveled north with Paschal, who was returning to Arles, and Nikandros, who was to help broker the sale of a home, as far as the border of Vere.

Kallias had actually stepped across the border, following one step behind Paschal and breathing in the Veretian air in their shady forests.

“We can go, you know.” Erasmus said, holding Baby against his chest. “We can go to Vere if
that’s how far you want to go.” He did not truly wish to be so far from the people he had come to love, but he would follow Kallias any distance.

Paschal watched him from up on his horse and Nikandros put a hand on Erasmus’ shoulder as if willing him to stay.

Kallias inclined his head to Paschal and spoke in Veretian, then Akielon: “I will never forget what you have taught me.” Paschal smiled at him.

“Kallias?”

Kallias had turned back to him and he was grinning wide. He had returned to Erasmus and waved to his teacher as he continued on the road to home. “I just wanted to feel it, Suss. I’d never feel free until I had you and put my feet in Vere. I feel better now; like my childhood dreams are fulfilled.”

“Now you can make adult dreams.” Nikandros said to break the discomfort he must have felt over witnessing their intimacy. “Gods, I sound like Lazar. Forget I said anything.”

Erasmus and Kallias had laughed at that and then kissed each other the moment Nikandros had turned his back.

The distance did not seem insurmountable in any case. Aside from the letters Erasmus wrote to keep practicing his letters, the king and the prince were prolific travelers.

In the months that they had been living in Marlas, Erasmus and Kallias had made three trips to Ios either to collect a cluster of unfortunate souls who needed to be as far from Ios as possible or to share their cold observations to the recalcitrant kyroi and merchants. But that was nothing in comparison to Laurent and Damianos.

Officially they had come to Marlas twice since Erasmus and Kallias had found their home but they had come four other times unofficially, sometimes laughing like children, once smelling of burnt wood, covered in blood and leading a terrified group of children into the villa. Kallias had had a panic attack on that particular evening so it was Isander and Erasmus who ushered them all inside.

But this most recent visit was to be a month-long official visit for the beginning of the harvest.

In any case, Erasmus, Kallias, Isander and Baby had received an official invitation from the palace to come and visit immediately.

As Erasmus left the gates, he felt a warm bump against his leg and looked down to see Damianiskos wagging his tail in anticipation of a very long walk that afternoon. Though he spent as much time dozing in the sun as he did patrolling the perimeter of the villa, Erasmus felt much safer in their home knowing the dog was ever watchful for unwanted guests.

He scratched Damianiskos’ velvety ears as Isander hoisted himself into the bed of the wagon and accepted Baby from Kallias. Kallias and Erasmus would take turns driving on the hard packed road while Damianiskos trotted along beside them, occasionally taking breaks in the wagon with Isander.

“Is there anything we could bring back?” Erasmus asked the group who had come to see them away. He could almost predict their answer.

“Something sweet.” They all begged with shining eyes. Though they were still too afraid of alphas to brave the city, they begged for sweets every time. Of course the prince would indulge them.
It was close to midday by the time their group reached the city walls and it took the combined effort of Isander, Kallias, and Erasmus to force Damianiskos up into the wagon against his will as Baby shrieked and gnawed on her fist. Still, it was better to be sweat soaked and exhausted, Damianiskos drooping with sadness, rather than to lose him inside the city walls.

As always, Marlas was pleasantly bustling, more Veretian for its’ wide main streets and tiny labyrinthine side streets. Fresh produce and livestock from local farms were always available and it took everything in Erasmus’ power not to leap from the wagon and barter over a particularly large bundle of leeks or a prime cut of lamb. Baby bounced on his lap, delighted by the sensory overload.

“I hope they will serve some pastries with cream…” Isander said himself, unable to tear his eyes away from a Veretian woman who was selling flaky biscuits with clotted cream and fruit. If he spoke such sentiments aloud within earshot of anyone in the palace, the chefs would send him away with a plate all to himself.

It seemed to take a lifetime to ride past the shops and street vendors and food stalls that enticed them at every turn but Erasmus finally recognized the fine, wide avenue that led to the wealthiest villas in Marlas.

It seemed a lifetime ago that Erasmus had ridden double with Prince Laurent through the stone streets.

He was pleased to see that the golden lions and laurels of the Akielon royal family adorning the gates had been joined by golden starbursts and snakes for the Prince. It had been lacking without Laurent’s presence.

Outside the gates of the palace, Erasmus saw a man in elaborate Veretian clothes looking a little lost and pointed him out to Kallias. “Dearest, you should ask him his purpose here.”

Kallias balked at first.

He was still quietly terrified of strange men, alphas in particular, for what they had done to him. However, he and Erasmus had had long painful talks of their time apart and how they might repair what had been shattered against the stones of Akielos. And Kallias, always quietly defiant, surprised Erasmus.

Erasmus had been soothing Kallias with lips and tongue when Kallias pulled his head up, staring at him with deep, profound love.

“If you ask me, Suss, I will talk to them. I will try it. Anything you ask me, I will try to do.”

Erasmus had not wanted to push him but Kallias continued his request every time they returned from the bustling city and Erasmus had handled all the negotiations. The greenish tint of sickness would fade from Kallias’s face and he would say again, “Ask me to talk to them Suss.”

So Erasmus asked him. Asked him mostly with the Veretian merchants who usually played pantomime with Erasmus, and stroked his fingers gently as he spoke through a look of sickness.

He was getting better at it. Especially when he could not smell them.

After a smile from Erasmus and a gurgle of encouragement from Baby, Kallias approached the young man and began speaking in smooth, rapid Veretian. The man looked immediately relieved and gesticulated wildly to the gates and to his breast pocket. Kallias said something and the man looked even more delighted, handing Kallias a thick envelope not a moment later.
“What was that all about?” Erasmus asked as Kallias returned, looking over the curly font carefully. “Is that for you?” It seemed unlikely. Paschal, his idol, knew the detailed instructions to give to the messengers so they could reach Erasmus and Kallias’ home.

“No,” Kallias said, “It is for Prince Laurent. Apparently the Veretian speaking gate guards are on their midday meal and he was looking for a servant or guard to take it in to him. He seemed to be in a bit of a hurry.”

“We are not servants though.” Isander said in confusion.

“You lie, you wicked thing.” Erasmus accused him and Kallias beamed his fox-like grin, for a moment reverting back to the way he was before they had tried to break him. “Don’t you dare open it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Kallias promised, though he did look at the envelope intently. The message was tucked into the front of his chiton and they continued in through the gates of the palace of Marlas. Damianiskos could smell familiar friends under the gate and was bouncing in place as Erasmus announced himself and the gates were thrown open for them.

The palace was frothing with activity over the arrival of the royals and Damianiskos did not help. He sprinted in a straight line through the crowd and tripped several people before Erasmus heard the delighted yelp.

Only Damianos’ quick reflexes had saved his husband from being knocked backwards into the lily pool, and Nikandros was bent double laughing as Damianiskos enthusiastically lapped at Laurent’s face. Pallas and Lazar did not concern themselves with the dog and Erasmus was glad Isander was holding Baby as the two of them crushed him in an embrace.

“Little One!”

“Stinky!”

Kallias glared at them, still unused to the fact that Pallas and Lazar were just very exuberant with their affections. Sandwiched between them, it felt like much longer than a month since they had last met.

Lazar loped away to Isander, always ready to fluster him with quick—and Erasmus suspected, dirty—Veretian and take a delighted Baby from his arms.

“How is your little home?” Pallas asked. “And your ducklings?” Pallas had seen so many poor slaves to Erasmus’ doorstep and to the two villas now outside Ios that he had mostly given up on names and was now just referring to them all as ducklings. In comparison to him, they were probably just as small as actual ducklings.

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“Very well. We make excellent yogurt these days; we mix it with lemon zest and blackberries.” Erasmus replied sounding like the farmer’s wives he talked with regularly in the market. “We are trying to find other ways to help the slaves find work.”

Many of them who had become more comfortable around alphas had taken on work at the three palaces owned by the Akielon royal family while others preferred the quiet work in their own small plots of land. Kallias and Isander had begun taking lessons from the Veretian doctors in hopes of training slaves to be doctors and midwives and Veretian translators but it would take some time.
And Kallias had had another idea recently that he had shyly shared with Erasmus one afternoon that they were both excited to share with the prince and the king.

Pallas listened to his simple domestic stories with apparent delight until he noticed something from over Erasmus’ shoulder. “Melichrysos, allow me to interrupt you for the moment so I may save my lover’s fool head.”

Kallias was watching warily as Laurent and Lazar were having an icy glaring contest while Baby watched them both from Lazar’s arms. She was gurgling peaceably, apparently oblivious that two of the most powerful Veretians in Akielos were fighting over her attentions.

“Give her to me.” Laurent said in Akielon, his tone silky and dangerous.

Lazar looked horrified, clutching Baby to his chest and responding in Veretian that made Kallias, Damianos, and Nikandros choke with poorly stifled laughter. He translated again in Akielon as Laurent’s eyes narrow. “Non! You are not my mother.”

Damianos must have smelled the bloodlust in the air because he nearly tripped over Damianiskos in his haste to get to his lover and prevent an honor killing.

“Let us get in out of the sun.” He offered. “We are all tired from our long journey and we do not want the baby to suffer from the heat.” Erasmus smiled behind his hand partly because Laurent shot Lazar a glance of pure murder and partly because Baby could last longer under the sunny sky than her Kallias.

Their group walked to one of the sunnier rooms near the gardens and Baby’s attention was immediately taken by one of the cats lounging in a slice of sunshine. She shrieked until Lazar got her close enough to touch its’ soft fur.

“When are you name her?” Lazar asked.

“Your Akielon is so good.” Erasmus complimented and Lazar brightened at the compliment. “When she is one.”

It was a quiet Akielon tradition since many children did not live to their first birthdays, but Erasmus and Kallias had grown fond of calling her chubby little Baby. Still…

“Names you prefer?” Nikandros asked, though there was a glittering in his eyes that indicated he might know the answer already.

“Secret,” Kallias whispered, blushing slightly. Aside from Paschal, whom he had come to see as a mentor, Kallias held the highest opinion in the world of Nikandros for rescuing him. To combat the twinge of jealousy, Erasmus told himself it was simply the same way he felt about Laurent.

Mint tea and flaky butter pastries were produced from the kitchens and the topic of conversation changed from Baby to the slave rehabilitation program that was being enacted across Akielos. Laurent was understanding but still frustrated that the slaves were skittish around him. Erasmus was proud to hear that some of the first slaves that had been rescued wanted to open a villa on the midwestern coast. Damianos mentioned that his next step was to begin shutting down the gardens and perhaps repurposing them into such safe places.

It seemed like a natural segue into Kallias’ idea.

“There is the wonder what these idealistic slaves will do.” Erasmus said, glancing at Kallias from under his lashes. “My Dearest had an ingenious idea…”
All eyes were on Kallias and though Erasmus could see he was discomfited, he shrugged his shoulders as if it did not concern him.

“I only thought…slaves have always been the center of art and music.” Kallias said with a self-effacing shrug. “Sussie was taught to sing and play the kithara, and most were taught to dance. Should they not be the ones teaching others what we have learned?”

Damianos looked to Laurent who was seriously mulling it over.

“Can you imagine?” Laurent smiled at Damianos in that way that could make anyone fall in love with him and Kallias flushed red. “Can you imagine the stuffy old alphas in the university having to defer to the former slaves? I would go to class every day.” Nikandros looked pained already.

“I think it is a fine idea.” Damianos said. “I would be willing to confer with you about this. If Sussie would be willing to sing for us this evening.”

Laurent brightened and Lazar smiled so wide that Baby also giggled and pulled at his mustache. “You call Stink ‘Sussie’.”

Kallias replied in Veretian and then translated. “I care for him…”

The topic of conversation moved on to surrogacy and how omegas might have wealthy couples or same sex couples with difficulties conceiving pay for the privilege of using their bodies for children. Isander, who loved children and babies for their clear and unconditional adoration of him, was especially passionate about the subject. Pallas and Lazar—who was having bits of the conversation translated by Kallias and Laurent—were looking particularly interested in this and Erasmus had the imagery of what they were also imagining.

The conversation was so engaging that it stretched on nearly until dinnertime, with Laurent and Damianos taking Baby on a walk through the gardens before eating. Erasmus turned to Kallias the moment they had gone and asked him about the letter.

“Not yet Suss.” Kallias murmured to him. “It might be important.”

Dinner was a lavish affair, of course, with the finest and freshest Akielon fare and then the fussy, complicated Veretian dishes that seemed to confuse Isander. He had said that Makon rarely let him eat more than one meal a day and so everyone in Ios had plied him with food.

Lazar, Laurent, and Paschal, those sweet-loving Veretians, had gotten to him first and now he was weak to buttery baked breads and chocolate drizzled confections. Pallas and Lazar were arguing over his head in broken language about the benefits of pistachio iced cream versus chocolate mousse while Isander quietly nibbled on them both.

Nikandros held Baby in his massive arms and was spooning mashed strawberries and cream into her waiting mouth; her arms and legs were pinwheeling with impatience.

“Lover, must you eat all the olives?” Damianos asked.

Laurent had recently found a new love of olives and Damianos complained that he even ate them raw off the trees. Laurent easily ignored him and kept popping them into his mouth, even drizzling some with more olive oil.

Kallias watched him carefully and waited until the fifth round of wine had been served and no one was paying attention to much else other than the person next to him, Kallias stood with the silent gait of a former slave and went to the prince’s side.
Erasmus saw him slip Laurent the letter and explained in what was probably brief, respectful Veretian how he had come by it.

Laurent had to wipe his oiled fingers clean on a linen to avoid staining the parchment and looked at the front of the envelope.

In one smooth move of his fingers, Laurent broke the seal on the letter and pulled out a single piece of parchment. It took him only a moment to read the contents and he seemed to have forgotten to breathe. He read again, faster, and then stood with the same silent fluidity that Kallias had employed.

Damianos watched him with slight concern.

Erasmus could not help himself; though he knew it was none of his business, he followed Laurent and Damianos as they ducked out of the dining hall and into the cool outer hall. He knew Kallias was behind him.

He did not appear to be in any form of distress but his body rippled with tremors of unseen emotion.

Damianos was quick to hold his husband and the letter fluttered to the ground out of Laurent’s shaking hand. Damianos’ whisper of Veretian was even more concerned and questioning as he obviously asked what was wrong but Laurent seemed too overcome to respond. Kallias picked it up with steady hands.

“What does it say?” Damianos asked. His voice was steady but Erasmus knew him well enough to see in his eyes that if the person who wrote the letter caused Laurent any modicum of despair then there would be hell to pay. Erasmus would help him with a steady writing hand to reply ‘wash your neck and wait’. “Please tell me Kallias.”

It was not a very long letter in any case.

“Exalted One,” Kallias had translated it in a matter of moments, “It says, ‘Laurent, half a decade is time enough. I will come to Marlas. A.’ Forgive me, but there is no other information as to the sender.”

Damianos seemed to understand though as he turned back to his husband with delight. He radiated it, like he was the sun personified, realizing that his beloved trembled from overwhelming happiness, “It must be. Sweetheart, it has to be him. Your eyes do not deceive; I can confirm it immediately if—.”

Kallias turned to Erasmus with questions in his dark blue eyes.

Erasmus smiled enigmatically, promising Kallias answers if he waited until they got home.

He had been practicing writing Veretian, having Kallias dictate to him, writing letters weekly to send to Paschal in the royal palace of Arles in the small hope that the king of Vere might listen to the most stubborn omega in all of Akielos. His most recent letter he had just finished that morning…

It seemed a small show of gratitude for the man who had saved his life.

Prince Laurent’s eyes were shining with joy. It felt wonderful, seeing the man he loved second best in the entire world so happy by his hand.
Baby was asleep not long after they started for home and Isander was not long in following, his chin and braid bumping against his chest with the mule’s steady gait. Laurent had graciously offered them all a room to stay in, but Erasmus refused with thanks. He knew Kallias could not sleep well if he could not hear or smell the sea. It reminded him of his childhood, he had said, when all things were sweet and simple and lovely.

He didn’t need to explain all of this. Laurent understood. He always seemed to see those things that soothed people around him.

Besides the prince and the king would be visiting tomorrow with Pallas and Lazar and Nikandros. They could have fresh goat cheese and oranges and Kallias could speak with the Veretians in their mother tongue. Baby could sit on Damianos’ shoulders and they could plan for the day when Auguste of Vere made his way down south to visit his brother.

They arrived home to a silent, sleeping villa and Kallias offered to take Isander to his room while Erasmus put Baby down in her wicker crib. In a few months she would have a proper name but for now she was still just Baby, snuggling sweetly with the plush red-brown Mout-Mout snake toy that Prince Laurent had given to her.

He watched her breathe steadily and resisted the impulse to poke her chubby cheeks. Kallias should be here to see her sweet face. He would revel in it. Where was he? Erasmus wanted to have Kallias’ face buried in his nape immediately.

There was only one reason he would be taking so long…

Erasmus stroked Baby’s hair and made sure not to trip over Damianiskos on his way outside, the dog having stretched out to sleep across the threshold of their door.

Normally Kallias would rock Baby until Erasmus physically hauled him back to bed, but tonight he had disappeared after taking the half-conscious Isander back to his room. Erasmus did not panic; Kallias was his love and his dearest childhood companion.

He knew where Kallias would be.

Erasmus stripped off his chiton in the courtyard and felt not the slightest bit of embarrassment as he left his villa in the nude. It was his villa bought with his money—the amount he had earned, the amount from the gold at his neck and wrists, the amount he and Kallias had been sold for—and it was his body. He could do whatever he wanted with it and he wanted to walk naked to the beach.

No one else was awake so late at night and no one dared come close to a villa under the protection of the king.

There was still an illicit sense of delight in his body as he dug his toes into the cool sand. The feeling of the sea was all around him.

Not the dark secretive tides of his childhood or the distant utilitarian ports of Ios. He would never again see the rough frothing waves of that hellish fort. This place was warm and clear and gentle as Prince Laurent’s eyes. Erasmus began to run through the sand.

He could see the lone, pale figure standing in the surf. A person with scarred moonlit skin and ink black hair and mending eyes the color of the night sea. Erasmus’ legs encountered water and he stumbled a bit. He was not the least bit graceful as he sloshed through the sea with a foolish smile on his face.
Kallias turned to open his arms and Erasmus leapt the last few feet into them. The two of them giggled like their Baby as they fell into the ocean on top of each other.

“Hello Sussie.” Kallias said.

Erasmus kissed him, kissed him full on his pretty, clever mouth. Kissed him until they laughed, until they forgot their own names, until they were both drunk on the smell of orange peel and sea salt.

It was a very good thing.

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