Summary

Laurent just desperately wanted to never again be left behind, forgotten.

Notes

A look at how things might have played out if the Regent had decided to cultivate Laurent's dependency on him rather than discarding him. This is some pretty dark stuff with even darker implications for the alternate future that would follow. Please look at the tags and warnings. I can't stress that enough. This is the opposite of a happy fic and is likely to be upsetting to many.

Fill for 'underage', 'voyeurism' and 'genital torture' in the Captive Prince Kink Bingo.

"Who..." Laurent didn't finish the thought aloud. He doubted that he wanted to know the answer anyway.

His uncle was apparently going to provide it nonetheless. "Introduce yourself, my boy," he prompted.
The boy shifted in place slightly, as if nervous. "My name is Corbin."

He was pretty for a boy, his hair an interesting russet shade. It spoke of foreign ancestry, perhaps Vaskian, though his slight plumpness was a far cry from the broad musculature that Laurent had heard even the women in Vask tended to showcase, let alone the boys and men. In fact, though Laurent suspected that he couldn't be more than about two years younger than Laurent, Corbin was quite small all around, standing the better part of a foot shorter than Laurent did, since Laurent had just been going through a growth spurt over the past few months. He looked almost fragile.

Laurent knew it even before Uncle said it. The words felt like a knife to the heart: "Corbin here is my new pet."

The pet stood close by Uncle's side, Uncle's palm cupping his narrow shoulder proprietarily. Laurent, meanwhile, was left alone, hovering awkwardly across the room. He was on the outside looking in, it seemed.

For all that the circumstances were objectively quite different, this still felt horribly similar to the doubts that had been plaguing Laurent a year ago when they’d arrived back at Arles. Uncle had been all Laurent had left then, and he'd been sure that Uncle was going to be taken away from him too. Just like Mother, and Father. Just like Auguste. Then Laurent would be completely alone.

When Laurent had reached out and begged back then, though, Uncle had taken his hand and pulled him close. He'd promised that he would stay with Laurent in direct counter to Laurent's fears. Uncle's hand had slid low over Laurent's back, the rub of his fingers a comforting warmth at first, before it turned into something more than that. Laurent hadn't been sure what was happening at first, when Uncle had drawn Laurent into his room and pushed him down into the sheets. But Uncle had continued whispering a mixture of promises and other things in Laurent's ear until Laurent came to understand that this was what it meant to want to stay with someone forever.

Laurent might have lost everything else, but never Uncle. Uncle loved him, so much that he needed to demonstrate it again and again. They'd been pledged to each other, from that night onwards. That knowledge had been the only thing keeping Laurent standing some days, when otherwise the grief would have weighed too heavily on him.

So Laurent didn't understand why Uncle was suddenly acting like Laurent didn't mean more to him than a perfunctory abandonment by way of introduction to Uncle's new lover; Laurent's replacement. What could Uncle possibly need a pet for, anyway, when they already had each other? There was nothing that some boy who was obviously younger and less experienced than Laurent could do for Uncle that Laurent himself couldn't do far better.

Laurent pointed out that last part. Uncle's answering smile was sharp-edged.

"Don't be so jealous, Laurent. And here I was hoping you would want to help me break him in," Uncle offered. "You already know what I enjoy. I'd like very much to watch you pass that knowledge on to him."

That gave Laurent pause. Uncle still wanted Laurent to be involved?

Did that maybe mean that Uncle had specifically brought in this boy for both he and Laurent to play with? Laurent had seen two or more courtiers sometimes team up to enjoy a single pet in the gardens of an evening in much the same way. A change like that allowed for much-needed variety to keep things fresh, he was fairly sure he'd once heard someone say.

Pets were temporary, Laurent reminded himself. Oh, it was true that this 'Corbin' was probably going
to be around for more than just a week or two. A year was the usual pet contract term. But by then Laurent would have ensured that Uncle had no desire to renew the contract, and then Corbin would be gone. Laurent was the one who was going to be with Uncle forever. He wasn't going to bow out of the picture just because some upstart had wandered into Uncle's field of vision for now. Laurent would have preferred to have Uncle's affection all to himself, of course, but he could wait this out for now. As long as Uncle still wanted Laurent with him, Laurent could adjust to the rest. If that was what it took to keep Uncle by his side, Laurent would do it. And in doing so, Laurent would prove that he was indispensable; that he could be far better for Uncle than some paid whore.

"So are you going to help me show little Corbin what's expected of him?" Uncle asked.

"Yes, Uncle. If it pleases you."

"It pleases me very much."

Uncle instructed Corbin to start stripping. The boy made no production of it, hurrying out of his clothing like rushing that would make the rest pass quicker as well. He wouldn't satisfy Uncle acting like such an amateur. Eventually his stubby limbs, ramrod straight back and narrow hips were all uncovered. Pretty hair colour or not, he was nothing too special, Laurent decided. Laurent did specifically notice that he was smooth everywhere, where Laurent now had smatterings of pale hair dusted around his cock and belly. Though Laurent was pleased to see that his own cock was considerably more impressive-looking than Corbin's, which looked tiny, with balls that wouldn't even be a decent handful to match. The boy probably couldn't even come properly yet, Laurent silently derided. Uncle would surely be disappointed in him if he couldn't even properly take him apart with pleasure. Good.

"Prepare him," Uncle ordered. It took Laurent a second to realise that that was directed at him.

It seemed Corbin wasn't the only one whom Uncle was going to order about tonight. Laurent was actually glad for that. He'd had enough experience on the other side of things that he could have worked out what he was supposed to be doing, but it was easier to just let Uncle guide him. It always felt better to give up control to him like that, anyway. To just let Uncle make all the decisions so that Laurent didn't have to think.

Laurent had prepared himself many times before, so he knew exactly what to do when Corbin was told to part his thighs and hold his chubby cheeks apart for Laurent. Laurent slid just one oil-covered finger in at first. He wasn't sure initially that he was ever going to be able to manage to get a second one inside with it, for there seemed to be no additional room in that tight channel. Had Laurent really been that tight many months ago, the first time? That memory was one of the few from those first few weeks after Auguste had been taken from him that wasn't almost entirely lost in a haze, so Laurent knew that it had certainly hurt, but he couldn't imagine a cock the size of Uncle's fitting in here as it had inside Laurent even back then.

Even considering that Laurent had a smaller cock than Uncle's that would probably fit with greater ease, Laurent had prepared himself for it to take a while to get the pet ready. Yet Laurent had just barely started contemplating the prospect of whether he could try to slip in the first knuckle of a third digit when Uncle said, "Come now, don't work him open too much or you won't even really feel it."

"Really?" Laurent asked, looking to Uncle for both confirmation and reassurance. He could feel the frown he was wearing, but hoped that it wasn't so obvious that Uncle could see it. Laurent didn't want Uncle to think that Laurent was actually doubting him. He was just... surprised.

Corbin looked taken aback too, though he didn't speak up.
Uncle said, "I don't need a spoiled pet who thinks he needs an hour of preparation every day, do I? He's as ready as he needs to be."

Laurent didn't think it probably mattered to Uncle in any practical way, since Uncle didn't even involve himself in such preparations anyway. At the moment he had Laurent himself or Uncle's household overseer do it, or occasionally the physician when Laurent needed a salve there rather than just lubricant. Uncle didn't like to be bothered with such things. But then, maybe he didn't intend to do that with this boy. Maybe Laurent had received special treatment, because Uncle actually cared about him and wanted to make sure he both wasn't hurt and enjoyed himself as much as possible. The thought warmed him.

If Uncle thought Corbin was ready, then who was Laurent to question it anyway? Uncle knew best.

The noise Corbin made when Laurent pressed the tip of his cock in suggested the intrusion probably burned. Laurent was more than familiar with that sensation. The boy could just learn to take it. After all, Laurent always had. For Laurent's part, the snugness felt like a vice-grip, gripping Laurent overwhelmingly when he pushed a little further inside. The boy was just so tiny and tight. It was perfect. Laurent's hips shifted in half-aborted thrusts, control temporarily slipping through his fingers. His cock had never felt like this. He didn't know how to handle it.

"If you can't show some restraint, I'll have to take over," Uncle warned.

A cold feeling washed through Laurent's chest. Those words were sobering enough to distract Laurent from how good it felt. Take over? As in, push Laurent aside and fuck Corbin himself? Laurent shook his head in denial.

"Then fuck him properly," Uncle said. "You know how. Do it just like I do to you."

Yes. He could follow Uncle's example. It was so far proving more difficult in practice than it sounded because it was difficult to keep a figurative grip on himself, but Laurent wouldn't let Uncle down.

There were a few false starts, and an embarrassing moment when Laurent's cock slipped free of Corbin entirely because he'd misjudged his movements. He could feel Uncle's judging eyes on him all along. But he eventually stumbled into a rhythm that felt so desperately good that Laurent knew he was finally doing it right. No wonder Uncle wanted to do this several times a day when there was the opportunity to do so, and seemed annoyed that he couldn't do it in public as the other courtiers did. Laurent would want to do this all the time as well, given the choice.

Corbin was making little whimpering noises under him. Uncle told him to beg Laurent to fuck him harder like a good boy, and Corbin repeated the words in snivelling little gasps. It probably wasn't quite fair of Laurent to feel a strange and distant smugness that the boy was crying. But Laurent himself had never once cried in bed unless Uncle had specifically wanted him to. Even that first time, when everything had been far too much, he'd kept his tears contained. This boy wasn't as good or as strong as Laurent and never would be. Laurent was sure of it now: he and Uncle would have their fun with him and then it would be back to just the two of them, the way it should be.

Laurent knew better after all this time than to come without Uncle's permission, though it was hard to hold out when this felt even better than getting fucked did most of the time. Uncle for once took pity on him and told Laurent he could come after only a few minutes had passed. Laurent pulled out at the last second and let his come pulse in small stripes across the boy's ass. It was nothing like as impressive as when Uncle sometimes did the same thing to Laurent, but Laurent was still young. One day he'd be Uncle's equal in every respect, including that.
Practically the moment Laurent's cock slipped free of him, Corbin collapsed from his knees onto his belly. Seconds later, after Laurent's hot come had finished hitting his skin, he then curled onto his side. He was shifting away before Uncle said he could. Laurent met Uncle's eyes, waiting for a punishment to be issued in recompense for the boy's gall. They were supposed to be breaking him in, after all. Training him. They couldn't be lenient even for his first time, or otherwise he would learn bad habits that they'd just have to punish him even harder to undo. Correcting him now was for his own benefit, really. That was how Uncle had explained it when he'd first done it to Laurent himself.

Uncle crossed his arms across the front of his jacket, for he still hadn't undressed at all, except for undoing the laces of his trousers, almost like they were at one of the court entertainments. He gave Laurent a very specific look in return. Expectant.

Oh. Laurent had been the one to fuck Corbin, so it was Laurent's place to correct Corbin when he acted out while Laurent was doing so, that look said.

Laurent would never shirk any responsibility that Uncle thought was important. It felt strange, but he would have to get used to it. Being able to dole out punishment was a King's job, ultimately. He had to be able to do it eventually. Why not start practising here and now? It only made sense.

"Get up," Laurent ordered Corbin. Laurent climbed to his own feet, even though his legs were a little unsteady. He'd managed to inject some urgency and authority into his tone, apparently, for Corbin was up just seconds later without complaint or question. "Go stand beside the bed and bend over, putting your palms on the mattress."

It was Uncle's favourite position for Laurent to pose in when he needed to be punished, so Laurent wasn't surprised to see the approval in Uncle's eyes that Laurent had chosen it. Just the sight of Uncle looking at him like that made him shudder. Uncle's unconditional esteem was so rare that every moment of it was to be savoured, just like Uncle said of the several goblets of wine he always slid over to Laurent in the evenings before he took Laurent's arm and brought him back to Uncle's rooms.

Laurent went over to the chest at the end of Uncle's bed, which was filled with Uncle's favourite items. He stared into it a moment too long, likely looking uncomprehending to Uncle's eyes. It was just that there were so many options, and Laurent didn't know which one he was supposed to use under these specific circumstances, when the boy was so new and this was just his first offence. Eventually, Uncle spoke up.

"The riding crop tonight, I think." It was phrased like a suggestion. Laurent knew it for the order it really was. "You should be familiar enough with using that."

Laurent wasn't, actually, but Uncle had never really paid any attention to Laurent's riding lessons, so obviously he wouldn't have reason to know that. Laurent had never been able to stomach hitting a pony or horse. If his horse had ever needed any treatment like that, Auguste had taken care of it. This would, in fact, be the first time Laurent had raised anything but a sword against another man. And even then, Laurent had never attacked anyone in actual violence with his blade. Not yet. It was probably lucky that Uncle was there to provide direction, then. Laurent might not have been able to bring himself to cause such pain to another creature, even a person, without Uncle watching, ready to issue commands or punishments of his own if Laurent faltered.

Laurent was so glad to always have Uncle there to help him when he needed it.

Laurent took the crop in hand. It was strange to have the handle pressed against his palm in preparation to use the tool himself rather than just holding it for a few seconds so that he could pass it on to Uncle to use instead. Laurent hefted it a little to get a bit of a feel for it, and then gave Corbin a first swat to the lower back, just above the swell of his ass. Corbin arched his back a little. It actually
looked much the same as his reaction to being penetrated. If Laurent wasn't too well-spent still, his cock might have twitched at the memory that evoked. He wondered whether Uncle would want Laurent to fuck Corbin against when this was done, and he was beaten into pliancy. That was what Uncle himself did to Laurent a lot of the time. After all, he had to test whether Laurent had learned whatever lesson he'd been instilling, and what better way than putting Laurent back in the position where he had to avoid making such a mistake? Surely Uncle would want to do the same with Corbin.

Laurent tried to pretend that he didn't like the idea, because it didn't seem like the sort of thing he should want. Laurent still hadn't quite gained a knack for lying to himself, though.

"Not like that," Uncle sighed when Laurent moved to go for a second hit to the back. "Have you forgotten everything I've shown you? He'll never learn if you're so soft with him. You need to do it harder. And when have I ever hit you on the back when you've done something without permission in bed?"

Oh. Usually for Laurent, 'doing something without permission in bed' had been coming without Uncle saying he could. That had happened a lot back when he was still getting used to that rule. Laurent had conversely never really been one to retreat from Uncle as Corbin had tried to do from Laurent, so that had never been his issue. But Uncle could see Uncle's point. It was more or less the same thing, wasn't it? Either way, it was finishing things without waiting to be told it was alright to do so. So obviously it should receive the same punishment.

"Spread your legs wide," Laurent ordered Corbin.

An accompanying huff of amusement from Uncle told Laurent that this time he'd correctly understood what he was supposed to be doing. Corbin's thighs tensed as if he had some idea what might be coming, but he did as Laurent said, probably because he understood that it was what the Regent, his master, wanted. And it was obvious that Corbin, much like Laurent, wanted to please him. If Corbin didn't care to go along with this, he could have said no. Pets did that sometimes. Not usually the good ones, of course, but the option was there. Laurent shouldn't feel bad for doing this. Corbin was allowing it – willingly participating – just as Laurent himself always had.

Laurent held out the tip of the riding crop to brush over Corbin's tight little sac so that Laurent could judge where he needed to stand. He shifted himself to the left and shortened his grip a little so that he could manage a decent sort of underhand swing without the firm leather tip hitting the ground.

The first hit only caught the inside of Corbin's thigh, earning a slight jerk in place but no sound from the boy. Laurent could aim better than that. He'd started spending much more time on his sword lessons this past year, now that he had a goal he desperately needed to achieve with it, and he was getting significantly better at things like technique and accuracy. There were similarities in the motion of the swing. And much like in duelling, Laurent had to assume that it was mostly in the wrist. So Laurent should be able to aim just as well with a crop as a sword. Better, probably, since the crop was lighter to wield.

The second time he did manage to whack Corbin's balls, but it was light enough that it should probably have barely stung. Corbin still wailed like it was the end of the world. Laurent hit him again close to the same spot. The noise intensified. It annoyed Laurent, but at least Uncle seemed to find it amusing, so that was something. Corbin was apparently crying again, because Laurent could see tears dripping from his chin by the fourth hit.

Laurent expected to feel a massive swell of sympathy about then. Instead, he felt distanced from it somehow. The knowledge that it was happening to someone other than Laurent for once, and that Laurent was in control, doing rather than receiving the flogging, brought with it an odd kind of
euphoria. And when that wasn't occupying Laurent's mind, rather than wondering whether he was horrible for making another boy cry, he found himself almost idly wondering whether Corbin's tears tasted different from his own.

Corbin was shaking in place, his legs practically giving out from underneath him, not long after the twelfth strike hit on top of the growing red and purple splotches blooming across the small surface area of Corbin's tight balls. The hits hadn't even been that hard. Corbin would have to get used to it, if he thought he was going to manage it when Uncle was the one doing this sort of thing to him instead of just Laurent. Or when Laurent got better at it, for that matter. It was probably just like fucking had been in a way, Laurent told himself; once he figured out his rhythm, then he could go as hard as he wanted. Or as hard as Uncle wanted him to, really. For now, he knew he'd gone easy on the other boy just by virtue of his own inexperience.

Uncle must have known it too. Even so, Uncle decided, "That's enough. I think little Corbin has realised the errors of ways. Haven't you, my boy?"

Corbin nodded his head where it rested against his crossed arms that were now pressed into the mattress. His whole body sagged forward tiredly when Uncle told him that no more blows would be coming. For now.

Laurent stepped backwards, letting the crop fall lax at his side.

"Aren't you going to thank Laurent for correcting you the way you needed, Corbin?" Uncle prompted when the boy remained silent.

Corbin eventually pushed himself up and turned around to face Laurent and Uncle. In a small voice, he said, "Thank you, Prince Laurent."

"Thank you for my punishment," Uncle corrected firmly. "Be specific."

Corbin parroted that back. Laurent hesitantly reached out and ran a hand through Corbin's sweaty hair in what was a probably poor mimic of how Uncle often comforted him after a well-earned chastisement.

"Go lie down in the other room," Uncle told Corbin. "I'll be in to see you shortly."

Laurent clenched his jaw unhappily. 'I'll', Uncle had said, not 'we'll'. Was he going to leave Laurent out of it now, even after all of that?

Once Corbin was out of sight, Uncle remarked, a smile playing at his lips, "You enjoyed that."

"Yes," Laurent admitted truthfully. In a moment of boldness, Laurent asked, "Did you?"

Uncle was visibly hard from watching, so that was a good sign. Often, though, Laurent really couldn't tell what Uncle was thinking or feeling at all, so he didn't know whether a physical reaction really meant that he'd actually liked it enough to want a repeat.

"I wouldn't have hesitated to tell you if you'd displeased me," Uncle said.

Which wasn't quite the same thing as saying he'd enjoyed it, Laurent noted. He wasn't sure how to interpret that either.

"It's good that you're learning so well," Uncle said. That was a strange way to put it, since it was Corbin who was the one being trained. Laurent had picked up a few things in the process, but it hadn't really been about that. Uncle did add, "You'll come back again tomorrow night to continue
Corbin's lessons, won't you?"

Relief swept through Laurent. As long as he was allowed back, it would be alright.

"Yes," Laurent said. "Your pet still has a long way to go before he'll be suitable for you."

Uncle was quiet longer than Laurent expected.

"Yes," he eventually concluded, "he certainly does. But I think he might have potential after all."

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After Corbin's year-long contract had reached its conclusion, the Regent showed no interest in renewing it. Corbin seemed to be in denial that he was being pushed to the side and forgotten at first. He seemed to think that his master actually gave a damn about him. Once he'd accepted reality enough to be getting on with, though, he came directly to Laurent practically crying about what had happened. He'd never really shaken that habit, Laurent thought with disgust. And he was a fool if he thought Laurent needed to be informed of his woes at all, as if Uncle hadn't told Laurent that he'd be tossing his pet out long before Corbin had ever known it himself.

It was about time for Laurent to take a contract, Corbin claimed at the end of his rant, since he would be sixteen soon enough. And Laurent had already sampled Corbin over and over and knew he was a worthy pet. Laurent could take him on himself.

"You know I can be good for you," Corbin claimed.

He was very full of himself for someone who was on his way out the door, Laurent thought.

"I know you're passable," Laurent corrected, "since I was careful to make sure you at least met my uncle's minimal standards. But honestly, there was only so much we could really do with you. It seems you're not good enough to hold my Uncle's attention any longer. So why do you think you could hold mine?"

"You've had me before," Corbin countered, as if Laurent's mind would be changed by petulantly continuing to press the existence of the incredibly ephemeral connection of having fucked a few times. Corbin was a fool if he thought that Laurent gave a damn about that. There was one person he cared for, and it wasn't this idiot.

Casually, Laurent said, "So? The fact that I lowered myself to bedding you a few times means I should be willing to continue settling for you forever, does it? I don't think so. Besides, over the past few months you've developed this entitled attitude, acting as if you've actually done something to earn the position you've been holding rather than it just being a matter of luck that you were in the right place at the right time. I find that supremely unattractive. I think it's about time that you realise that while you might have been vaguely interesting for the space of a tumble or two, now you're just used goods that no one will want to claim."

Though it was phrased a little differently, the content of Laurent's speech was a close reflection of what Uncle himself had said to Corbin when he'd dissolved the contract. Laurent knew, because he'd overheard it. And he'd learned from it, just like he learned most things from Uncle.

Once Corbin had disappeared from the palace, hopefully never to be heard from again, Laurent almost let himself hope that his departure and Uncle's current lack of a pet meant that things would go back to just himself and Uncle. That was what he had been hoping for – holding out for, even – since Corbin had first appeared. But Laurent could hardly deny that he'd lately been feeling increasingly like Uncle wasn't paying much attention to Laurent himself whenever Laurent came to
his rooms in the mornings or, more usually, the nights. It was as if Uncle's main focus was the pet. He kept inviting Laurent back, but it was clear that at least part of his attention had moved on from Laurent, as much as Laurent would have liked to pretend otherwise.

So it wasn't entirely surprising when Uncle brought up his intention to get a new pet. Unwelcome, yes, but not surprising.

This was what Laurent had to continue settling for, then, it seemed.

It was better than nothing. Laurent just wanted to have Uncle with him however he could, at this point.

Laurent tried to be happy that he'd at least been asked to accompany Uncle to search for the replacement pet. Honestly, Laurent should be glad for the opportunity to have some input. Uncle wouldn't want Laurent to be involved in picking out a pet if he didn't intend to keep Laurent close once he had the pet in question. Likely Laurent would help to train this pet too, just as he'd done with Corbin.

Uncle had Laurent point out a few appetising options from among the array of available pets. "Don't you think he's too old?" Uncle asked of the first one Laurent pointed at.

He was probably about a year older than Laurent. Not exactly ancient, and Laurent said so.

Uncle explained, "He's probably already been trained the wrong way. It's better to get them nice and young so you can start painting with a fresh canvas, don't you think?"

Oh. Yes, that made sense. Now that Uncle said it, he felt foolish for not thinking of it before. Laurent and Corbin had both been young when Uncle had started teaching them as well. Of course Uncle wouldn't want a pet who'd had a previous master and bad existing habits. They were 'used goods'. Just as Corbin had been.

Laurent determinedly didn't follow that thought to the next logical progression. It wasn't true anyway.

Uncle found a boy he liked from those that Laurent pointed out eventually. Laurent expected them to head straight back to the palace to have the official contract drawn up at that point, but Uncle seemed to be in no hurry, continuing to peruse a group of boys like they were fine glasswork at a market.

"I think you're ready for a pet of your own as well," Uncle eventually said to Laurent.

Laurent had been thinking of that possibility since Corbin had brought it up. He didn't need anyone but Uncle, though, so he hadn't really been planning on getting one. Certainly not yet, when he was still young enough that people weren't even starting to question why he didn't have a pet.

Apparently unaware of the train of Laurent's thoughts on the matter, Uncle pointed out a specific boy. He was perhaps eleven or twelve years old. His eyes were sweetly downcast, and his skin even paler than Laurent's. It would show every tiny mark, Laurent thought distractedly.

"That one would be good for you, I think," suggested Uncle.

If Laurent were going to take on his first pet, he would have expected him to be older than Laurent. It was more or less the norm for a more experienced pet to be contracted so that he could teach his young master all the youth needed to know about sex. So he wouldn't start with bad habits, like Uncle had been saying. But Laurent didn't need that from a pet. He'd already had his teacher. So he supposed it made more sense to go for a pet closer to his own age. Or younger.
"He'd look so good bent over for you," Uncle said quietly, practically a whisper. "And they're so perfectly tight when they're built so small. You remember, don't you?"

Laurent did. The mental picture Uncle conjured was a compelling one. And the boy really was very pretty, his rosy cheeks looking like they'd be prone to flushing attractively pinker.

Laurent let his attention be caught. The boy wouldn't have been his first choice on sight, but Uncle knew best what Laurent would really like.

"If I did take him," Laurent said thoughtfully, "would you help me break him in, Uncle?" Laurent wasn't really interested in having his own pet in general. But if the boy could be another excuse to spend more time with Uncle...

Uncle's expression was indulgent. "Come now. Of course I would. Have I ever just left you to struggle through things alone before?"

Laurent risked a smile in return. "You're always there for me, Uncle."

He was the only one who was.

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