Damianos is a demigod, the son of the king of Akielos and the goddess of strength, bravery, and victory, who wanders the land offering his strength to people in need of help. When the king of Vere calls his aid for dealing with a beast that supposedly devours children, he is taken to a cave on the outskirts of the city, where the monster lives. But he doesn't find a monster. He finds something--someone--sweet and sharp and protective who harbors a great and terrible burden...

Notes

Ohhhhh my god!
Hi everybody; I missed you! It's Reverse Bang time!
I started working on this fic while I was wandering around Europe and I'm so excited to share it with you all! Big shout out to my beta/hype-woman, Kittendiamore, who reads the drafts and yells at me and to my artist, Linecrosser/Momo, who drew me the most beautiful Naga in between my constant panic that I wouldn't finish in time. This fic is an AU I've always wanted to do and I took so much inspiration from Greek Myths (Medusa, Andromeda and the Sea Monster, the gods unable to control their
Horniness), St. George and the Dragon, and some of the darker European myths and Irish type wickedness of the fae. I'll be posting a chapter every day for y'all's enjoyment so I hope you enjoy this fic while I work on the one that will be coming out after this (I literally cannot ever rest)!
So good to be back!
The Demigod and the Monster

Aegis

As with most great epics, loving and tragic and terrible and beautiful, Damianos knew his story had started with the gods.

The gods of Akielos often came to earth from their lofty perches for any number of reasons, but most of their stories revolved around their dealings with mortals.

They came to celebrate festivals in their honor or bless Heroes or to reward the behavior of good and righteous citizens. Just as likely, they could cause mischief—riddles and tournaments that were meant to humble or exalt the loser—as well as dispense justice, start wars, or smite the undeserving clean off the face of the earth. But Damianos was born of an entirely different interference, though one that was not wildly uncommon.

His father was Theomedes, the king of Akielos, and a man as noble, handsome, and strong as any kingdom might have wished.

He had successfully brought down a beautiful pure red stag on a hunt where all others had failed when he was just a boy. A great contest had been established for the handsome young king’s hand and he took care to rule fairly in his kingdom with his new wife, always sending praise heavenward, where it was due. All of these qualities and more were enough to draw the gods to him like wasps to overripe figs but one event sent them over the edge.

The young queen died of a swift and deadly plague, leaving the king bereft but with an heir at the very least.

It was Egeria, the goddess of strength, sports, victory, and bravery, who came to Theomedes in his chambers one night, cloaked in a chiton the color of a bright blue sky, smelling of summer and hope, beautiful as most goddesses were. And…

Well, Damianos knew fairly intimately that the gods loved to fuck just as much as mortals did. He couldn’t blame his father either; the gods knew their way around mortal bodies so well, had such magic and power coursing through them that Theomedes had been nothing but pleased when his son Damianos was delivered to him nine months after their tryst.

Demigod, rang the collective thought of a nation and he did not let them down.

The word rang in his ears like the far off crash of waves, long after he had left the presence of what seemed like half the population of Arles. They had gathered in droves and collected in the marble and malachite halls of the Veretian palace, all whispering ‘demigod’ as he stepped forward to the throne, the jeweled eyes of carved, eldritch Veretian gods looking down at him.

The Veretian ‘gods’, he knew, were more arcane spirits: countless, inhuman, magical, and just as likely to do wicked as good. He heard their voices on the wind and in the water the moment he set foot in the country, the forests seeming to be especially fraught with them. ‘Do you want a treasure beyond kingdoms, godling?’ They had asked him, almost laughing, ‘Shall we grant your wishes?’ He had refused them with all courtesy; he had no need for their ‘gifts’ and no want for whatever they would take as payment. They did not give gifts lightly but they seemed to like him,
with bits of shine following him even into the capital of Arles. Damianos swore one of the statues winked at him, stone fur ruffling, before he turned his attention to the king of Vere.

Their king had called him, as many kings did when there was some insurmountable problem on their hands.

The Veretian king was handsome, distinguished as gold as he thanked Damianos for making the journey. He outlined, in a voice like silk, the problem that currently faced the Veretian public, that faced the boys. *The boys …*

“There is a creature--a great serpent--that lives in the caves an hour north of this palace. It stalks us through magical means and has a mouth that drips poison but more so than its terrible appearance, it steals Veretian children.” Damianos’ mouth curved down in distaste; above all things he hated violence towards children. “Seemingly at random, the beast sends word of a boy to be left at the mouth of its lair and we have no choice but to comply. For fear of poison dripping into our waters and crops, for fear of it devouring our livestock we are forced to let the beast devour our,” The king looked too pained to continue and took a moment to compose himself. “We have sent soldiers to slay it but all who have survived remain too petrified to attempt again. It is clear that…a stronger hand is necessary.”

His eyes flashed azure fire, indignation for those stolen children and dead Veretian soldiers. The crowd murmured in bloodthirsty assent.

“You are a demigod, half of heaven itself. If anyone can slay the creature, it would be you.” Damianos bit back the suggestion that Vere find a large mongoose instead; he was not much for slaying unless it was well-deserved. He also doubted the Veretians would find comfort in his suggestion. “If you bring back any of the children--if they still live--along with the creature’s head then you may have your heart’s desire of Vere. Any price you demand for our gratitude.”

There was a murmur of shock from the crowd but Damianos turned to the only one he trusted in the room: himself.

He could feel victory at his fingertips, like a thin line of gold ribbon, but there was something else underneath, like the pulsing of a heartbeat. He heard the familiar whisper of the Veretian spirits, as if one was perched right below his earlobe, ‘*Shall we grant your wishes? You need not tell us your heart’s desire; we already know it. Will you? Will you go?’* He did not care much for treasure but…

“I will help you.” He said without any further acknowledgement of what else had been said.

No, he did not care much for treasure but he could feel the hand of the Fates on his nape, though it was not the iron strong grip of the Akielon Fates. This one was like laces across his skin: binding, pulsing, and red hot, as if daring him to refuse. Nothing good could come from refusal and he heard a silky laugh in his ear, a glimmer of gold and blue. He shook his head and wished he had learned more of the Veretian gods.

The Veretians had cheered for him at his pronouncement and--less than looking relieved over having their children returned--most looked at him with unabashed hunger, men and women alike. It seemed if the snake did not devour him, one of the courtiers would be more than happy to. The king smiled down at him with obvious delight over this turn of events and Damianos wondered if he too was curious about the taste of Akielons.

“We will make preparations.”
The cave was only an hour’s ride outside the city and Damianos was able to find it with the help of the man the king had provided to guide him. Jord was as blank and stern as stones but he knew his way around.

As the court had described, there was a sort of ancient, crumbling amphitheater built around the yawning mouth of the cave, as if plays had been performed there ages ago. There were more recent signs of disturbance, the most chilling being an iron ring that had been hammered into the remnants of a granite column center stage.

Jord notes his gaze. “They have to…chain the boys. Otherwise the mites would run.”

“You’ve seen this?”

Jord looked down to compose himself. “It is something of a public spectacle. My presence is demanded to keep the crowds in check.”

“People come to watch?” Damianos was unsurprised but still horrified. Akielos had deadly gladiatorial games but…no children were involved. He wouldn’t be able to stand hearing their cries of terror.

“Until we force them to leave at sundown.”

It was a sickening thought and Damianos could feel the old screams and the sickening anticipation in the wind of the grass. At least there was mercifully no evidence of dried blood anywhere. “And when you return?”

“Everything gone but the chains we wrap them with.”

“Have you seen the beast yourself?”

At this point the two of them were forced to dismount as the horses would go no further, prancing in place and shuddering. Jord looked as though he was debating on what to say, his hands gripping the reins and releasing them in turns.

“No but…I know someone who has.”

Damianos sighed as he took his small pack and his weapons off the saddle and tried to think of how to put the man at ease. Jord didn’t seem to trust himself and Damianos half wondered if he had seen the creature himself and it caused him terror beyond words. He had to go about this delicately but…

“Your son?” He guessed the first damn thing that came to mind and cursed himself. He prayed it wasn’t the case that Jord had a child who had been taken.

Jord winced, releasing the reins at last. “No but—the only people who have seen it say it is an enormous serpent. Though…there are conflicting reports as to the appearance of the beast.”

“...Thank you.” Damianos said, privately thinking that Jord was no help at all.

He was sure the conversation would end there but Jord gave a sad little approximation of a smile and said, “he has a poisonous mouth. Watch out for it.”

It hardly seemed like a thing to smile over and Damianos began to hope Jord had nothing more to
say as they traipsed through the dried summer grass.

At the mouth of the cave, Damianos peered in without the assistance of the torch Jord had silently offered. His god’s blood allowed him to see fairly well in the dark and he would not announce his presence with a bright flame.

He smiled back at Jord, unsurprised when the man remained dour. “I’ll be back with the boys before you know it.”

Jord offered no parting words of encouragement…at first.

Damianos had resigned himself to a silent send-off and was almost enveloped in darkness when he heard Jord’s voice. The man was likely whispering but the acoustics of the stone walls made it sound like his voice was everywhere, as if the cave itself was speaking.

“Don’t kill him Damianos. Don’t hurt him. They’re all safer like this. Don’t…kill him.”

Damianos turned, alarmed by this cryptic warning, but Jord—unsurprisingly—did not elaborate.

He remained stoic, if a little sad, at the mouth of the cave. For half a heartbeat he stood in silence before turning away, leaving Damianos alone with a single word whispered amongst the stones and the darkness of the monster’s lair:

“*Please.***

The plea stuck with him as he explored what was possibly the most beautiful cave in the entire kingdom.

It appeared as though some ancient people had lived in the safety and sanctity within, because mosaics of geometric stars covered the floors in the first few caverns. There were dusty bits of crockery and idols carved from stone, pillars sculpted into the endless drip of stalactites.

In wilder offshoots there were pools of clearest water and walls studded with stones that would glitter under torchlight. There were even some places with great holes opening up to the sky, vines and roots and leaves creeping haphazardly over the rim of the natural skylight. Damianos, used to being a large presence in any room, felt very small in comparison to his surroundings. And there was no sense of evil either; most monsters were felt in their lairs with a general feeling of darkness and unease. These caves were lonely at worst.

It was so vast a system, it was a wonder no one ever got lost inside.

Damianos prevented this happening to him with a tool from a previous conquest. He had once slain a great magical spider that had been haunting a Vaskian forest and took the silk spinner from her dead, curling body.

With deft hands, he had tied the end of the gossamer-fine silk to a pillar in the first cavern and let loose slack as he explored. The silk itself was stronger than swords and never seemed to run out so he looped it around sturdy rocks in every cavern he chanced on. That way he would know if he was walking in circles.

In a cave with a large pool of heated water and stones placed there in the approximation of a path, he saw the first sign that, not only was he in the right place, but he was going in the right direction.
Like a sheath of silk, a gauzy length of a molted snakeskin was coiled on a rocky outcrop. It was only a small section, sloughed away no doubt as the beast grazed against a rock, but the individual scales were larger than a thumbprint and snakes shed close to a safe burrow.

His steps became slower, silent, and he paused before entering each new cavern. He saw no living thing until he entered the most massive antechamber yet.

It had clearly once been a temple or place where some cave-dwelling spirit had once lived. Stairs were carved haphazardly into the walls to reach high cliffs and sconces for torches were hammered into stone, though it was still semi-easy to see, likely through magical means. Despite some crumbling pillars and cracked tiles, it was remarkably well cared for and Damianos could see the telltale signs of something still inhabiting the quiet place. Cloth folded and stacked neatly, unlit torches and a tinderbox, chipped clay cups and a pitcher; so far no small piles of white bones, which Damianos counted as a relief.

As his eyes wandered carefully over every inch of the enormous cave, he nearly missed the human shoulder, resting on a block of stone. An honest miss, as the skin covering the shoulder was just as white as the rock it was resting against.

Damianos held his breath and crept closer, wondering if it was the corpse of one of the Veretian boys.

His relief was immense when he rounded the bulbous stalagmite and saw the shoulder rise and fall from breath, the sharp shoulder blades pushing at the muscle and the skin with each inhale. The back was lean and fine, clearly tapering past what Damianos could see, and he wondered if the boys were merely being held captive for long periods of time.

His next logical thought was why and he did not care for any of the reasons his mind provided.

As he moved a little closer—and saw that the youth’s waist was trim and curved as a bow—the young man turned over in his sleep to face Damianos, revealing that he was not a young boy and that he was beautiful.

He was clearly Veretian, from the height of his cheekbones and the fullness of his lips, and his body was muscular yet sleek, as if he had been made from fine china or carved from ivory. Damianos had never seen a man or god with such long eyelashes as this one and his hair was a color that would be the envy of polished gold.

He was getting close enough to see the young man’s hips begin to curve out, when the beauty breathed deep and stirred.

Damianos paused, hoping that it was not some trap laid by the monster to get his guard low. His heart hammered in his chest as he watched the young man stretch his wiry arms and smile softly. It took all he had not to make that lovely smile the center of his entire attention.

“I can smell you.”

His voice was just a notch above a whisper but thanks to the acoustics of the cave, Damianos could hear him perfectly. He did not even think of what an unusual statement it was as the response jumped to his throat.

“I hope I smell good.”

There was a snort of laughter and the eyelashes fluttered a little. “Mmm I cannot place it. But it smells similar to flower nectar.”
“You have a fine nose then.” Damianos said, wondering if the man could smell the nectar and ambrosia of the Akielon gods wafting from his skin and hair. “And a fine face to match.”

The young Veretian jolted slightly, his brow furrowing for a split second. “My face…”

“I was told that all the boys were fairly lovely. But you’re safe now. No need to fear. I’m here to protect you.”

There was a beat of silence before the young man spoke again and his smile was wider, his tone a bit more playful. “Well. This is new. I have not heard such a thing offered in a long time. Tell me: what is it that you’re here to protect me from?” Damianos got the distinct feeling he was being watched from under those long eyelashes and wondered again if this man was laid out as a trap.

“The monster that dwells within these caves. I have come to free you and the other Veretian boys from its grasp.”

“Mmm the monster,” muscles flexed under the skin in ripples as he stretched and Damianos swore that parts of his skin flashed the same gold as his hair, “did the Veretians who hired you describe the monster you seek? Do you intend to slay it?”

He seemed far too relaxed for being a prisoner and Damianos stayed still, one hand placed casually at his hip, near his sword.

“I am told… I was told it is a great serpent. With a poisonous mouth.”

The young man laughed into the crook of his elbow. “How…apt. And do you intend to slay it?”

“Only if it has caused harm to the boys it has taken.” Damianos wondered if the beast was out hunting. He had not seen a single glimpse of it. “I have no quarrel with the creature. If it does no harm, I’ll not harm it. The gods of Vere put it here for a reason.”

“You’re an odd one.” The man whispered. “But the boys cannot go back. Not so long as the real monster is alive.”

At that his eyes snapped open and he was looking directly at Damianos for the first time. The gaze hit Damianos like a rush of ice water. The wide eyes of the young man were unlike any he had seen before.

Wide and shining as cabochons of opal, they were the electric blue of sea lightning laced with fiery bolts of indigo. They seemed to flash with speckles of gold and red like the blue opals of Patras. The pupils were diamond slits for a split second before widening like a cat’s pupils would.

Surely these eyes were of the gods, beautiful and terrible.

There was the sound of flesh moving, slithering across stone and Damianos’ eye caught movement in the shadows behind the block where the beautiful man was lying. What he thought was more stone rubble was actually a massive creamy white tail, flecks of gold and opal-blue glimmering under shafts of errant light. A beast with such a tail would be enormous, big enough to swallow a man whole or pump him full of poison.

His hand touched the comforting warm leather wrapped around the hilt of his sword. “Have you been bewitched?”

That would certainly explain for his relaxed nature and his wild eyes but it would likely guarantee
the death of the serpent. Veretian spirits, as a general rule, did not like to give back souls they stole. The young man smiled, pushing blonde hair out of his eyes as the delicate pointed tip of the tail disappeared around the corner.

“Have you not figured it out yet?”

Damianos’ expression must have remained blank through the adrenaline coursing the muscles of his body with an intensity that would kill a mortal man. The young Veretian pushed himself off his rocky perch with the tips of his fingers and his torso seeming to float in the air. Damianos watched, realization coming on the heels of his adrenaline.

He was unsurprised as the first massive coil of the scaled white tail looped around the corner, bringing the pretty man with it. Just below his navel, at the flare of his hips, were where the scales began, the white matching his skin, the speckled patches of blue and gold matching his eyes and hair. Though he had no legs, the thick tail was more than enough to keep him aloft, using the rest of the coils as counterbalance. Though it looked precarious, Damianos did not lower his guard; even the sturdiest of pythons were quicker than thought when they wanted to be.

He stared with his sword still in its scabbard, wondering what manner of creature the Veretian pantheon had released into the caves. Most men would have charged with blades drawn, but Damianos had made that mistake in the past.

And he remembered Jord’s plea.

He looked very carefully and—“You are bewitched. You’ve been cursed,” he whispered and the snake-man winced a little as if he had been stung; it wouldn’t be noticeable to mortal men but Damianos’ demigod blood could recognize a curse if he saw one. Beneath a mess of enchantments the young man was human. “If the boys haven’t been hurt…please let them go. And then I can help you.”

The bright blue eyes glanced at the undrawn sword. “It’s safer this way.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Damianos insisted, wondering if he should toss the sword aside. “Who are you? What happened to you?”

He did not see any kind of weapon within the grasp of snake man and felt confident in his ability to grapple with him should the need arise. He began to walk towards the creature, that beautiful human half coiling back as if in preparation to strike. His big eyes were wary and wide.

“I—.”

Damianos caught the first stone as it whistled toward his temple, the rock smacking firmly into his palm. The second rock caught him squarely on the muscle of his shoulder.

“Ouch!” He yelped it more out of surprise than pain.

A third rock slammed against his abdomen and Damianos ducked for cover as rocks began to pelt down around him, some leaving hairline cracks in the stone tiles of the floor. Shouts and jeers in thin, reedy voices followed him as he slipped behind cover.

“You had better run!”

“Murdering bastard!” A hefty rock caused a spray of pebbles close to Damianos’ right ear.

“Get out of here! We don’t want to go back! We’re never going back!”
“F-Fuck you!” The wind of one stone ruffled Damianos’ curls and he had to admit their aim was pretty good. But rocks wouldn’t dent him like they would a mortal.

“Leave Laurent alone!” This last little voice had a babyish lisp, causing the l’s to sound like w’s, and he felt a warm wash of relief. It seemed a small army of boys were alive and living in the caves.

So Laurent was his name. It was pretty.

This snake ‘Laurent’ had them alive at least and he decided to test something.

He took one of the smaller pebbles that had been lobbed at him and peered over the stone that served as his vantage point. He could see a gaggle of boys from high up behind a ledge, almost as if they had been placed there out of harm’s way. Their eyes were glimmering with seething rage as they looked for new projectiles to launch at him.

“Enough!” He called back in his deepest shout, smiling as some of the little ones jumped in alarm.

And then he hurled the rock at them.

If he wanted to, Damianos could kill a man with a thrown pebble. His strength was deadly and his aim was impeccable; which was why the stone he threw looked like it would hit one of the boys with bone-breaking force even though Damen knew it would whistle narrowly past his smooth shoulder and hit the stone walls behind him. If it had hit, it would have only left the slightest of bruises.

But Laurent the snake didn’t know that.

When the boys shrieked in alarm, that smooth white body shot up to their perch with speed that left Damianos breathless. The coils of his tail completely obscured the children from view and the small stone hit Laurent directly in the chest.

His diamond-shaped pupils were tiny with fury and he fully looked as though he was ready to tear Damianos apart.

Damianos smiled at him.

“So. You *are* protecting them.”

“I’ll *eviscerate* you.” Laurent promised. Damianos almost regretted then that he would not get to fight the young snake man. He was too curious.

“I’m not going to hurt them, I swear on my life.” Comical, a dozen little heads popped up over the muscular length of tail, expressions at once wary and furious as Damianos tossed his sword aside. “Nor will I hurt you. I want to know what’s going on before I think about slaying anything. There seems to be some confusion in Vere as to your appetites and whether they run to human flesh.”

The question hung unspoken in the air: if not to eat them or cause them harm, why demand boys as sacrifices?

The tip of Laurent’s tail looked as though it had been dipped in gold and it flicked back and forth impatiently. His lovely eyes narrowed in annoyance; perhaps he would have preferred to just fight rather than answer questions.

“Who are you?”
His incisors were sharp. Damianos wondered if his bite was poisonous. “I’m Damianos the prince of Akielos and son of Egeria, goddess of strength, bravery, and victory.”

“Fuck.” Laurent said, his face twisting into a mask of beautiful distaste as he realized Damianos was a demigod.

“Laurent said ‘fuck’.” One of the littlest boys said in awe and disbelief. Apparently he tried not to curse in front of them.

“Oh, damn it.”

“Nice to meet you.” Damianos smiled.

“Are we taking him captive, Laurent?” The boy was older, on the cusp of youth, and lovely as a summer day with his aqua eyes and wayward curls. “Or killing him?” His haughty glare seemed to indicate that he would much prefer a kill but he deferred to Laurent.

“This one won’t die.” Laurent sighed. “Not by my strength in any case.”

“One of my many charms.” Damianos piped up to see Laurent’s lovely irritation.

“You can leave then.”

“I have no intention of leaving.” Damianos said cheerfully. “Where do you keep your captives?”

“Gods save me…”

The other little captives seemed to take it more positively, whooping and laughing as they climbed down from their perch. Laurent caught some of the smaller ones with the coils of his tail to help them down. One shy boy held on to the great tail, holding tight to it like a baby monkey.

It was clear that they quite liked being with Laurent, in spite of his lower half.

The boy who had asked whether he would be killed walked to Damianos fearlessly, beautiful even with the snarl on his face. “Hold out your hands. We have to tie your arms to make sure you don’t escape.” Damianos looked forward to effortlessly snapping the rope and watching the boy’s eyes go wide.

Laurent shook his head as if he was also considering how much stronger Damianos was than a length of rope. But he seemed to want to indulge the boys. It was…rather sweet.

“Who is going to give me the grand tour?” Damianos called as Laurent began to slither away, resigned to this particular stroke of bad luck.

“Not me.” Laurent replied without looking back.

The little ones seemed more than happy to oblige, crowding around him with shining eyes and enormous grins. They were much more at ease now that they knew he wasn’t going to hurt Laurent. In fact, two were dragging his sword along the rocky floor with some difficulty.

“Careful.” Damianos cautioned, thinking of how he had sharpened it that morning.

The two boys yelped in surprise as the dexterous snake tail coiled around the hilt of the sword and yanked it safely from their grasps. Laurent would not see them cut on the blade. He felt a small flutter in his chest.
Looking down he saw the crowd of boys gathered around him, eyes wide over the size of him. He smiled and many smiled back; they were far from some of the unsavory types who had tried to hold him captive before.

“Lead the way, boys.”

“Captives don’t give orders!” The poisonous brunet said, slapping Damianos’ arm with the slack left over from tying him. The hit barely registered and, though the boy’s logic made sense, Damianos wanted to shake his bravado.

Without breaking eye contact, he flexed his arms and ropes around them snapped like twigs. Several of the boys screamed and the bossy one almost seemed to wilt from shock. They were so cheeky, it was hard to keep from smiling.

Laurent had glanced over his shoulder at their alarm but, on seeing what had happened, he shook his head and Damianos swore he saw a smile.

“Shall we?”
Chapter Notes

Chapter 2, let's go!
It's Laurent's POV and I have him being a little less prickly, a little more shy with Damen. He's just always wary around stranger but Damen has now discovered 2 of his weaknesses haha ;)
Thank you guys so much for such a warm reaction to this story! After working on it solo for so many months, sometimes I wonder if the plot/dialogue is any good and I'm so happy you all are into it!

(Also big, big thanks to Momo for this art of Laurent; I love the gold and blue on his scales!!!!)
Laurent looked at his reflection in the still waters of their bathing cave and wondered what it was that others saw.

That silvery, sweet creature with its gentle, intelligent eyes and understanding expression. It had promised him to be a beast of great strength, capable of inspiring greater fear without losing his mind. It had seemed like the perfect gift at the time and no Veretian had been able to hurt him since but the boys had…complicated things.

The younger ones he had to hide from until they understood he meant them no harm and was, in fact, keeping them from a worse fate. But by the time they trusted him and felt no fear with his presence, they saw what he saw in the water: human from the waist up, snake from the waist down. There was no way of telling what the fools who tried to slay him saw.
He whirled just in time to see a familiar leggy body hurtle through the dark air and land with a splash directly above the thickest part of his tail. With a sigh and a roll of his eyes, Laurent pushed his tail up to see the sopping, joyous form of Nicaise. The boy’s chestnut curls were so long and thick that they covered most of his face, save his smile.

“Not bad.” With a smooth turn of his slick tail, Nicaise was dumped back into the warm water.

“I’ll be able to sneak up on you before long,” Nicaise promised as he surfaced, his face free of his dark curls.

“Never.” Laurent replied with a smile. “You celebrate too early. And besides, you’ll be old enough to leave soon.”

Nicaise frowned, looking more adult than he did when he smiled, and the fingers that took Laurent’s hands were those of a youth, not a boy. “I’m not leaving you ever. I’ve got no one who cares for me, no family except you and I hate Vere.” His tone took a shade of poison and Laurent squeezed his hands; regretfully, he had been a bit late rescuing Nicaise and so the boy knew exactly what evil was waiting outside. “You need me here to keep order with the little ones.”

“I shudder to think of you in command.” Laurent teased. His tail, responding to his fondness, began to wrap around Nicaise, squeezing him lightly, protecting him.

Nicaise rested his damp cheek on the scales. “I mean it. I’d rather die than leave these caves.”

“You are being dramatic.”

Nicaise yelped as the coils dunked him, “You’re cheating!”

“Revenge for splashing me. Now, where are the others?”

Magicked cave or not, it still took time to adjust to the passing of time inside. The parts of the caverns without access to the sky grew lighter when he woke, fell darker when he slept and he set meal times whenever stomachs rumbled. Nicaise’s had just growled against his tail and he was sure the others would be hungry as well.

Nicaise’s pretty face soured as he hoisted himself up onto the rocky floor. “With that demigod again.” Laurent sighed at that particular problem and it emboldened Nicaise. “I hate him.” He whispered as he stroked the scales on Laurent’s tail.

“You don’t.” Laurent sighed hoisting himself up next to Nicaise. The boy was afraid of men but he protected himself by saying it was hatred. Laurent knew that feeling intimately. “He’s just annoying, not hateful.”

Nicaise shook off the soothing words like an irritating insect. “His stories are childish. For little kids.” His pout of distaste was so lovely, Laurent wanted to make him smile. He slid his coils out of the water and had his tail flick Nicaise’s button nose on the way out.

“Lead the way, little kid.”

Nicaise stuck his tongue out at Laurent as he ran for the towel and his clothes and Laurent was struck to the quick at just how much he loved Nicaise.

Laurent never knew when his uncle was up to his cruelties until the little winged snake spirit came
to him in a flash of silver and told him that there would be a boy chained outside awaiting his rescue. He enjoyed this task only a little, most of the joy deriving from the annoyance his uncle would feel at being deprived. Most of the boys screamed and cried, even though it was the dark of night; Nicaise was one of the only ones who had tried to fight, kicking and spitting poison and even trying to bite. It had been an ordeal but Laurent liked his fire.

Nicaise wanted to live and some of the true cruelty that had been carved into him was softened by his time away from Arles.

As Nicaise led the way, Laurent branched off a little to the secretive tunnels that seemed too perfectly convenient for a thick, winding tail. He followed the sound of Nicaise’s footsteps and, when they got close enough, the deep, rich sound of a storyteller.

Laurent tried not to be interested.

But he had always loved reading more than just about anything else and the few books he had with him in the caves were worn into his memory. He tried to be as silent as possible as he edged toward where Damianos was sitting but the man was a fucking demigod. He could probably hear the stalactites growing.

As if Laurent had upset boulders, those warm brown eyes swiveled over and he smiled at Laurent. The stones seemed to glow bright from it and the cave itself seemed warmer. Laurent felt his heart skip several beats and wondered if Damianos could hear that as well. Still, he did not acknowledge Laurent aloud, letting him hide in the shadows, instead turning to the two dozen little faces staring at him anxiously. Food had already been laid out and mostly picked over, though two full plates had been set lovingly to the side: one for Laurent and one for Nicaise.

Laurent would eat later. He was too intrigued.

Damianos voice was perfect for storytelling, deep enough to echo but soft enough to soothe, and Laurent felt himself settling in as Damianos told his small audience of his life and some of his tamer exploits. The little ones edged as close as they dared.

“Is your mother really a goddess?” Etienne asked in his lisp. He was one of the youngest and, thank the gods, one of the ones still innocent and untouched.

“She really is.” Damianos said, his ease indicating that this was a tale often told. “She’s taller than most men and stronger than them too. She wears armor made of plate gold, golden laurels on her head, and a spear made of a dragon’s tooth strapped to her back; her shield I won for her when I was Nicaise’s age: a single perfect piece of lava glass.”

“You’ve seen her?” Stellan asked.

“Why wouldn’t I? She’s my mother.” Damianos said. “Until I was sixteen, I spent four years with my mother and the gods and then four years with my father in Akielos.”

This prompted a thousand questions from the boys about what the home of the gods was like, what they ate, what they did, to the point that Laurent was sure the story would never start back up again. But he did like to hear about it and, with eyes half-closed, he imagined the perfectly ripe bundles of fruits, the sky always as beautiful as a summer sunrise, the laughter and ease and music. It was a useful skill of his, to drown out horror with his vivid imagination, a skill born of necessity.

But Damianos patiently answered all of their questions and turned back to the tale at hand.

His mother’s shield.
He had apparently only been eleven at the time but already Nicaise’s height, and Laurent laughed softly at Nicaise’s visible indignation. Laurent stopped imagining under his eyelids in favor of watching Damianos speak; his storytelling was visceral and filled with movement. He could almost see the sunny young boy, fearless and wiry, climbing down the cratered edges of the volcano. His hands, already a young man’s, swiped the dust from the massive dome of magic black glass and, as he easily hoisted it over his shoulder, all hell broke loose.

The boys forgot their questions, sitting wide eyed and silent as Damianos described the lizard-like beast that launched at him, mouth as red as the lava it lived in, tail spiked with sharp volcanic glass. And he, a boy of eleven, didn’t climb but vaulted up the way he came, leaping from handhold to handhold just in front of the monster. And a blast of fire had licked at him on the way out.

“Did it hurt?” Nicaise asked. Damianos would likely think the boy was hoping for grievous bodily harm but Laurent could hear honest excitement in his voice.

Damianos laughed and his cheek dimpled. “Missed my skin but caught my hair. I came to my mother’s celebration smelling of cinders and with half a bald head.” Laurent wheezed into his hand. “She had to use the artesian font in her temple to wash me clean and sheared the rest of my head.”

“Was she mad?” Julien’s soft voice was almost lost.

Damianos softened. “No. No, I’ve done too many other foolish, dangerous things for this to cause anger. She did however laugh at me and call me a sheep—a stubborn, shorn sheep—well past when my curls grew back.”

Laurent felt a pang at that, thinking of the little nicknames his mother had once whispered into his hair, and—judging by some bitten lips—some of the boys were missing their mothers as well. The younger ones cried in the night for them at times and it broke Laurent’s heart that he was responsible for keeping them apart for years. Those nights he would wrap them in his arms or his coils and rock them until they fell asleep. Heartbreaking, but better than the alternative.

“Shall I tell you of the other beasts I’ve faced?” Damianos asked. Since talk of mothers brought on melancholy, he had switched to something that would excite any young boy.

Their eyes were huge and bright as coins. “Yes!”

Damianos shot a glance to Laurent and Laurent crushed himself deeper in the shadows. He wanted to hear the stories but—fuck it—he was…shy.

There were beasts aplenty: great spiders that glowed milk white and massive lions and bears, a turtle the size of a house and horses with massive wings—the latter of which Laurent desperately wanted to see. He missed horses and it had almost been too much for him to bear when they had screamed and shied at the sight of him. Damianos’ deep, gentle voice pushed those memories aside as he described riding them, shooting down towards the earth before pulling up at the last moment, Laurent feeling the jolt of it in his stomach.

Damianos told stories in an endless ribbon, until a good three-quarters of his audience was asleep and the remaining quarter were nodding at the brink of slumber. Laurent, still as hungry and wide awake as he had been during those late nights at the library ages ago, slithered down silently.

Damianos did not seem at all surprised to see Laurent and propped up two of the sleeping mites in his arms. “Thank the gods and my mother you’ve come; I was running out of stories fit for the ears
of young ones.” Laurent pretended to be annoyed to hide his blush at that. Surely the man would have twice as many of those stories.

“Bragging are we?”

“I may have inherited victory and strength, but the skill of love was a gift on reaching manhood. I had my choice of gifts of the gods and…I have no regrets of my immediate choice.” His smile was private, if a little smug.

Laurent felt himself blushing harder and worked quickly to find a way to end any further discussion of the topic. “Help me with them.”

It often took Laurent an hour to gather up his little charges if they fell asleep where they sat but the process was much quicker when Damianos could carry three boys at a time. Nicaise helped too, almost asleep on his feet as he roused some of the older boys and led them to their pallets and hammocks. Laurent took up nine-year old Danî in an unoccupied bit of tail as Nicaise rested his gangly body on most of it, his head resting on Laurent’s hip. Nicaise was asleep not long after Laurent began to comb out his fluffy curls with his fingers.

Damianos looked down at the pile of them and smiled. His voice was a deferential whisper as he sat down, “Nicaise’s temper is vastly improved in sleep.”

Laurent snorted. “He is much sweeter now,” and laughed again when he saw Damianos’ disbelieving expression. “It’s true. He’s wary of strangers.”

“A good story seems to dry his venom as well.” Damianos shrugged. “I’ll have to raid the common stories of the Akielon gods next.” Laurent watched as he laid his athlete’s body out on the pallet—or…three pallets he had shoved together to accommodate his frame—with all the silence and grace of a panther. The cave began to dim to semi-darkness, sensing that everyone was in a place for sleeping and Damianos did not seem startled by it; he could sense magic well enough.

“We are starved for them.” Laurent murmured, moving the underscales of his tail so that they softly rubbed Dani’s face. “I have long since run out of fresh tales and we have no books here.”

“And yet…” Damianos was clearly thinking of all the necessary provisions they did have. Soap, meat from livestock, clothes, blankets, medicine, dishware…

“Some of these things were left in the cave,” in suspiciously good condition compared with the rest of whatever civilization had been there before, “others…I am able to ask from the outside. But…most of these boys are commoners and cannot read themselves. I could read it to them but there are other things that are…more important.” Though he wanted it badly, he would ask for a thousand children’s toys before he would request the shortest of novels. Nicaise, as if feeling Laurent’s soft sadness through his skin, grumbled and turned in his sleep.

“I see,” Damianos replied and let the conversation end there.

But he was still watching. Laurent could feel it and he felt he had to get the man talking again for his own sanity.

“I noticed something.” Laurent whispered in between stroking Nicaise’s soft curls and continuing to rock Dani in a loop of his tail. “In your stories you rarely kill the beasts you face, even if they attack you.”

“Would you prefer I tell your boys tales of bloodshed and woe?” Damianos asked, innocent as one of the boys though Laurent could parse out sarcasm with his lifelong fluency.
“Continue in this vein and a tail of a different sort will catch you upside the head.”

“You would drop Danï and Nicaise?”

“They must not teach basic arithmetic in the home of the gods: I have two hands.”

The sound of Damianos’ muffled laughter reached Laurent’s ears and Laurent smiled thinking of the man pressing his face into the blankets. “Oh gods, it’s no wonder Nicaise is quick, what with you and your mouth.”

“Are you going to answer my question?”

“Another story you want? So insatiable.” Laurent wished he had legs in that moment so he could stretch them out and kick Damianos in the chest. “I made a mistake is all. In the folly of youth, I took on the request of a nobleman of Patras who said to me that a whale was destroying ships and devouring sailors. I had never taken on a sea beast before and I slew the creature with surprising ease.” His voice changed a little and Laurent could recognize the cadence of anger and sorrow and crushing regret. “The nobleman who hired me had lied; he wanted the rare bones of the whale. It was just a baby. Just a baby and I killed it. I spent the entire year atoning for what I had done and even so I still felt guilt. I swore that I would only kill as an absolute last resort.”

“I would have sworn the oath after dealing with the man who hired me.” Laurent suggested thinking of what a waste of humanity was a man who would mislead a vivacious boy into senseless murder.

“The gods have ways of working such things out. He has the bones but I’m sure he has gotten nothing but misery from them. I cast his payment into the sea. There are so many stories of Akielon heroes who… had the best intentions but wandered down the darkest of paths. I didn’t want to…”

“Sounds similar to the gods of Vere: to give you the greatest desire in your heart but still find a way to make it a curse.” He spoke from the hard place of someone with first-hand experience in the matter. “It wasn’t…it wasn’t your fault.” The folly of youth indeed; something you share, the voice was silvery and sweet in the back of his mind.

“Thank you.” His voice was so soft. Despite being the tallest, most intimidating man Laurent had ever encountered, Damianos had not once made Laurent feel unsafe. “I know that now but sometimes…thoughts creep up on me.”

For Damianos it was likely blood, the pitiful lowing of whales. For Laurent it was sickly warm hands: on his skin, through his hair, inside of him. Oh yes, he knew those insidious thoughts well.

“Thank your lucky stars you have such a strong moral compass.” Laurent said, wishing to turn the conversation light again lest he drown in unspeakable memories. “Because I, for one, would have had no qualms with killing you.”

Damianos choked back laughter again and Laurent felt safe to smile in the dark.

“Ahhh…you are too interesting by half for this world to lose. What a waste that would have been. Besides, it is in your nature to protect your babies.”

Your babies.

Laurent slowed Danï’s rocking, lowering him down so he was curled up behind Nicaise’s legs. No one had been there to keep Laurent safe so he had had to turn to the gods and suffer the
consequences. He would be damned if he’d let his boys suffer the same fate. His babies…

“I’ve kept you up too long.” Damianos’ honeyed whisper filled the cavern at about the same time the darkness did. Laurent’s eyes were heavy, drunk with a thousand thoughts and stories and he felt Nicaise snuggle up a little higher on his chest. “Pleasant dreams.”

Laurent dreamt of riding those winged horses, of flying.

Life with Damianos was so unpredictable that Laurent had almost forgotten their conversation about books.

The first time the boys woke and found him gone, the cave empty of his large, sunny presence, the mood was positively tragic amongst the boys—even Nicaise, though he hid it well—and Laurent refused to admit he was disappointed. Etienne’s bottom lip was quivering by dinner time when the demigod returned, two crates of warm apricots in his arms and a variety of wooden practice weapons strapped to his back.

It was astonishing that the stalactites did not fall down around them as the boys screamed and cheered and ran to him.

He grinned as cheeky as if he was still a small boy himself and tossed Laurent the ripest of the fruit.

There was less panic when he made other trips out, disappearing for half a day or more, only to return with fresh fruit, paper sacks of sweets, and games for the boys. Though the mood was dull with him gone, it was twice as lively when he inevitably returned.

They thought nothing out of the ordinary when he left one night immediately after dinner with a wide smile and a distinct spring in his step.

Laurent did not know when he returned or how a man so large could be silent enough to sneak up on him. Laurent’s body was hyper vigilant in slumber and even the slightest whisper of breath could wake him. But when he woke up with Nicaise curled up next to his tail, Laurent was shocked to see that a small wall of books had been built around them.

It was a struggle not to bolt upright.

But he glanced down at Nicaise, wanting to smooth those wild curls as he did before bed but never daring to touch him while he was in the depths of sleep, and sat up as slowly as he could.

There was a true mix of books around him, as if Damianos had raided someone’s personal library. Some were dusty and old, while others were new, but it didn’t matter to Laurent. He hadn’t held a fresh book in years and now there was a small library surrounding him. It felt like going home, if such a place actually existed for him. He touched a stack of spines with one hesitant fingertip and wondered how many he could hold in his arms at once. If he stuck out his tongue, he would likely smell the paper and ink—a snakelike sensation he had never really gotten used to. The very tip of his tail thumped twice against the ground, like a dog’s would, and Laurent shot it a glance for being so transparent.

It was a wonder how the man had managed to get them all into the cave, much less stack them as he had.

Laurent took one closest to him and let it fall open in his hands, words and fine drawings opening
up before his eyes. He could not read them yet. He had to savor the look and taste of the words, instead pressing the volume tenderly to his chest. He could not help but smile widely, the uncommon feeling of it causing a cramp in his jaw.

“Do you like them?”

Laurent jolted at the whisper, his tail humping up to shield Nicaise, but it was only Damianos, smiling from where he lounged on his pallet, and Damianos would not hurt either of them. The tail relaxed but Laurent did not.

“Where did you get them all? Did you steal a wagon from a bookseller?”

“Your imagination astounds. I have no horse. How would I manage such a thing?” His smile was sweetly wicked; he knew exactly how it had been managed but wanted Laurent to guess.

“I assume you just took up the bits and bridles yourself.” Laurent fired back.

Damianos clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle his voice but the first laugh echoed through the cavern and Laurent saw some of the boys turn in their sleep. Nicaise’s brow furrowed and he nestled down deeper into Laurent’s tail.

“Stop, stop!” He hissed, trying to be annoyed but failing miserably. “If you wake my boys, I’ll chase you from this cave.”

“I’ll take the books with me.” Damianos said when he was able to compose himself.

Laurent gripped the tome in his arms closer. “You cannot.”

“Do you like them?” His voice was gentle with an emotion Laurent could not place. He was clearly being genuine though and Laurent could not suppress his love for the books that surrounded him.

“Thank you.” He whispered with only a quarter of the joy and love he was feeling over being reunited with old friends. Still, even whispers reverberated and Laurent had a feeling that Damianos’ ears were not just for show.

“Don’t thank me just yet.” Damianos was sweetly wicked again and Laurent glared into the semidarkness, feeling his pupils dilate to narrow diamonds.

Damianos’ cunning did not reveal itself completely until later when he was half-watching Damianos spar with the little ones, at least four of the boys having abandoned their wooden play weapons in favor of hanging off of Damianos’ shoulders and arms. He was still managing to fight quite admirably. With a rare moment to relax, Laurent decided to read one of the precious, slim volumes in his new collection.

He darted out his tongue to let the smell of the paper and ink fill all of his senses before opening the book and--

Julien, Hugo, and Roux screamed as Laurent joined the fray, his tail whipping around Damianos’ torso in quick loops. Damianos did not even try to fight it but smiled in that bright, disarming way of his. Laurent smiled at him, the taste of it poisonous after he had gotten his hopes up.

“Are all of these books written in Akielon?”

Damianos smiled and cocked his head, Laurent’s coils loosening infinitesimally at the sight. “You can’t read Akielon?” Laurent had not studied the language in so long and could really only
remember the most basic of phrases and curse words. “My apologies. It looks like I’ll have to read them to you then.”

“Fuck.” Laurent hissed.

“Laurent said ‘fuck’.” Hugo said.

Damianos laughed and Laurent’s irritation fell away at the same time his coils did. *His traitorous tail*. He was at once charmed and disappointed and it must have shown on his face. Damianos leaned forward and swiped some blond hair from Laurent’s vision. “Only about half are in Akielon; I did the best I could. But I’ll read the others aloud…if you’d like.”

“How convenient for you.”

“It would be a shame to let this fine head go to waste.” He laughed as the tip of Laurent’s tail hit him upside his ‘fine head’.

And yet…

There was something nice, something comfortable, about Damianos tiptoeing to Laurent’s sleeping spot in the night, after the little ones had fallen asleep around them, with a full sized book looking like a miniature journal in his hands. Their corner of the cave stayed dimly lit, just bright enough to read, and Damianos’ voice filled all the corners and curves to bursting with tales that he translated effortlessly from Akielon to Veretian. Tales that were perhaps not always suitable for the ears of children and made Laurent feel like his head had been submerged in hot water. And just as pleasant was conversing with someone who was not under the age of fifteen.

While reading an epic novel about kingship, inheritance, and betrayal, Damianos would often pause after a particularly lurid bit and ask Laurent about his opinion on it. Or they would talk of statecraft and war and trade between nations for hours on end. They tactfully dodged the topics of magic and gods but Laurent scarcely noticed. It was apparent to him that Damianos truly was the son of a king for all he knew of leadership.

Laurent wondered if the man had any suspicions about his knowledge on the subjects…

They also talked of current events—though Laurent did more listening in that subject—art and music, and travel. Laurent knew he bombarded Damianos with questions about the places he had seen and what he knew of current events in Vere though he tried to keep his tone neutral and not as ravenous as he felt.

Damianos must have suspected in any case.

The two of them were watching Nicaise spar with an unwieldy wooden trident against Hugo and Cyrille and speaking of Kempt when Laurent sighed errantly about wishing he could go back and see Kempt again. It had been years but he still kept fond memories of the snow-capped mountains and idyllic valleys. It was clear in his condition that he would not exactly be welcomed in Kempt.

“Do you mind going outside of the cave?” Damianos asked.

“I…” Laurent paused. He rarely ventured outside knowing that the enchantments put in place kept him safe and forewarned inside. “I don’t mind it’s just…I am guaranteed protection inside. And that means the boys are protected as well. I don’t want to jeopardize that more than I have to.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ve found a secluded spot with easy access back inside. And,” Damianos indicated to the play weapons strapped to his back, clearly waiting his turn to take on the entire
mob of little boys, “if the cave’s magic does not extend outside these walls, then I will take up the mantle to protect you.”

Laurent was on the verge of refusal until Damianos offered his protection.

“All right…” He whispered.

Though he trusted in himself and in his own strength, it was still comforting to see someone tangible watching over him. When the little ones were fast asleep, he followed Damianos through the twisting caverns, wondering how the man could find his way around so easily. The opening to the outside world was one Laurent swore he had never seen before and he thought about how often the massive cave complex changed without him realizing; it was also somehow perfectly placed so that Damianos had to clamber up first and hoist Laurent up.

“All right.” He murmured. One hand gripped a lip of stone, his other arm firmly around Laurent’s hips, the feat of strength causing him no issues at all other than a more gentle smile than usual.

Laurent felt the first gust of a breeze ruffle his hair and he let his tail cup around Damianos’ waist in case he needed to use it as a handhold.

The exit had let them out atop a cliff in the center of the forest so that the two could have an uninterrupted view of the night sky and the blooming trees. Laurent had always loved spring and he closed his eyes to take in deep gulps of the warm, scented air. When he opened his eyes, Damianos had lounged next to him, gazing at the half-full moon, his enormous frame almost draping off the edge of the cliff.

“Is it like this in Akielos?”

“The nights? No, there are less trees and more rolling hills. Our trees our quite stubby.”

“The people have stolen all their height.” Laurent remarked and earned a laugh from Damianos. “What about in the halls of the gods?”

“There are so many stars that they almost block out the sky. You feel so close, you can see them moving and twisting. It even makes me feel very…small.”

“You must not be used to that feeling.” Laurent said ungraciously. Then… “Sometimes I silently wish that fate had surpassed me in this.” To speak such a thing aloud was just asking the Veretian gods to intervene and have the foolish wish-maker deal with the consequences. “To be born as a simple man or as a god; not someone caught between them.” His tail thumped despondently.

“I know how you feel.” Damianos said, patting Laurent on the shoulder. The spot felt as if it had been burned.

“Do you?”

“It is…difficult to be a demigod.” Damianos admitted looking up at the sky.

Laurent had often though the night sky was black, but it was nothing, a deep purple in comparison to the lush black curls that spilled over Damianos’ burnished shoulder. He had grown up amongst the finest art in Vere and his eyes were starved for the vibrancy and feeling of it. Damianos was a decent substitute.

“Difficult to ravish beauties and travel the world and be the toast of the halls you help?”
“To annoy the beasts I am meant to slay.” Damianos smiled and the warmth of the wind came with it. “No. It is difficult to have each foot in a different world. To be half a god in the mortal world, I gain the praise of people but it is hard for them to know what it is like. I,” he had clearly never explained this feeling before and was struggling, “I always feel different; not always bad, but just…” He shrugged his massive shoulders, “It is the same with the pantheon. I am always one half of something, never whole. You understand.” He glanced at Laurent’s tail.

Laurent remembered the feeling like silk over his legs, the warm pressure behind his incisors as he was… “I know exactly what you mean.”

Even if he were to return to how he was, he would be forever changed after knowing what the touch of the Veretian gods felt like. *That snake, with wings like a dove, scales the glittering silver of starlight.*

Damianos smiled again; he was not built for melancholy and loneliness. “I rarely meet half humans, and even less that don’t want to try and kill me on sight.”

“My great mistake was listening first and looking later.”

Damianos laughed at his cheek and Laurent immediately began to plot how to make it happen again. “It is refreshing to have someone who understands.” He wrapped his arms around his knees and squeezed them to his chest as he looked up to the sky. “That was one of the reasons I’ve been reluctant to leave.” Laurent wondered idly what some of the other reasons were but he was not going to pry, not going to arouse suspicions.

Instead, he brought the rest of his tail up, the coils curling up in white-gold curlicues. The tip of the tail touched Damianos’ leg and he let it rest there. “The boys like having you here. They feel safer and… despite Nicaise’s charming debate abilities,” he said this with all possible sarcasm, “it is pleasant to have an adult to converse with.”

Damianos smiled and this time he turned the full, warm force of it on Laurent. “You’ll have me as a conversation partner. As long as you like.”

Laurent had to look at the stars then. For fear his heart would spill out of his mouth.

In the warm darkness of the cavern where Laurent and the boys slept, it was always the perfect temperature so there were rarely needs for blankets. Comfortable pallets were laid out for those who wished to sleep on the floor and Laurent had hung hammocks from the sturdy stalagmites for the boys wanting privacy. Even now there were slim, smooth legs dangling in midair. Some of the youngest boys slept on his tail, comforted by the weight and heat of his coils.

Despite the darkness, some type of mossy creature glowed a soft green color on the walls so anyone roused could see fairly well. It helped Laurent to see when his tail shifted and began to grow very warm.

He swore he heard the tinkling of laughter, laughter that was familiar to him as he opened his eyes.

His tail had bumped against the sleeping form of Damianos and had begun to wrap around the tempting warmth. Only in this instance did it appear the snake half of him was obeying the laws of cold-blooded animals and Laurent wanted to roll his eyes. It was worse than the appendage having a mind of its own; it seemed to be actively doing exactly what he was trying to hide but…

Damianos rolled in his sleep, a tumble of warm curls resting lightly on Laurent’s scales. Like the
boys did for comfort, he reached out his arms and held the tail close to his cheek. Laurent might
have thought there was cunning in the move, since he was so weak to it, but there was no cunning
to Damianos. His tail, emboldened, piled on top of the man and pulled him closer until his soft
head was pillowed on Laurent’s stomach. It was a wonder he could sleep through it, though
athletes of his size often slept deep.

As Laurent began to fall back asleep himself, he dug his fingertips softly into the curls, softer than
lamb’s wool, on his stomach. The tail had consumed Damianos entirely, wrapping around his torso
and arms and legs like a tendril of ivy.

It was useless to fight it and he gave up with a dangerous thought:

‘If I was truly a snake, I’d have squeezed you long ago.’

He swore he felt a squeeze in return.
It's Christmas! I suppose this chapter is my gift for you all and it is my favorite chapter in this story.

It has a little bit of everything and is a roller coaster of emotions for Damen. Also I like to imagine that Laurent (and his tail) when touched does that charming thing snakes do when you tickle their smooth bellies: their body seems to kind of suck in like they're ticklish. If you ever hold a snake, you should try it sometime ;)

Damen is so, so smooth, I wish I could be this smooth when flirting haha! And one of my personal favorite things in this story is Laurent basically sassing a god in this chapter and Damen being so proud of his lover's snark.

Enjoy this chapter and I'll see you all again tomorrow!

Damianos first felt a change when Laurent’s gaze warmed slightly.

It was the slightest shift in the blue opal depths but he felt their fire trace his steps even as he was sure he had seen the young man engrossed in a book not but a moment before. His pupils were rarely the sharp little pinpricks of concern and distrust, but huge and guileless when Damianos caught him staring. Red flush was easy to spot on the cream of his skin and scales.

He was witnessing it firsthand during one of their reading sessions while the boys were napping, exhausted from sparring with Damianos. He and Laurent were halfway through an epic they were both excited to finish and Laurent was fidgety as Damianos read softly from the latest chapter that was…fairly erotic.

He could feel Laurent’s gaze on his face like beams of sunlight, but whenever he glanced over, Laurent’s eyes were firmly on the pages of the book. He was flushed pink, some spots of it sparkling across his tail as well, and Damen felt the sudden urge to tease him a bit. Fair payback for all the little cuts he had gotten from Laurent’s sharp tongue.

“Do you think this scene was skillfully written?”

“Akielon writers are too flowery.” Laurent’s tone was tart. “He may as well have been eating ripe grapes as sucking cock. I’d be worried such a man would be too busy worrying about what to compare the color of my nipples to rather than giving actual pleasure. Just fuck and get it over with.”

“How pragmatic of you.” Damianos admitted defeat, outmatched by Laurent’s sharp tongue and Veretian blase when it came to sexuality. “But surely you would be thrown out unclothed in Akielos if you--how did you put it?--‘just fucked and got it over with’. I personally would love any lover of mine to know that I enjoyed drinking their pleasure down as much as I loved the taste of fine wine.”

“I suppose...I would not mind it so much on occasion.” Laurent glared but his tail thumped the ground erratically. “So much interest in this?”

“I am very interested in lovemaking.” Damianos grinned, recalling fondly on some of his past
encounters.

“So you ask my opinion to vex me or simply to brag?”

“I might just be interested in your thoughts.”

Laurent’s ears turned pink to match his cheeks. “I think it was you who wrote this book.” Damianos smiled at Laurent’s suspicious nature; it would be hard to determine what kind of way Laurent would like to be wooed if he was so prickly.

“I’d have written it in Veretian so you could enjoy it.”

“Please tell me you’ve supplied us with some Veretian smut; I want to hear you read about a Veretian lord who installs a wooden cock into his saddle or a pet who can juice tomatoes inside of himself.” Laurent began to shift, his stomach growling. “Typical Veretian fare.”

“How romantic.” Damianos laughed, though he knew he would only make it a few sentences into that particular story. “The rest will have to wait until later then?”

“I’m hungry, Nicaise is about to fall in the water,” Laurent pointed out dryly, “and I guarantee you do not want him to hear any part of this conversation, lest he label you a book-fucking degenerate, or some other wildly insulting name.” Damianos muffled his laughter as he looked back to see that Nicaise had rolled over and was almost halfway into the warm water of the pool.

Gods knew he would deserve it though.

Laurent stretched out his arms, his tail bunching up sweetly as well, as Damianos stood and went to make sure Nicaise didn’t fall headfirst into the water.

Laurent must not have noticed his intent until it was entirely too late and Damianos had already slipped his hands under Nicaise’s back and knees. Laurent’s yelp of dismay echoed through the cavern and Damianos noticed that the golden feeling of victory had fled, leaving him with a chill over his skin.

The moment Damianos lifted Nicaise, the boy’s blue eyes snapped open and his face drained of color. Only years of dealing with all sorts of unexpected emergencies kept Damianos from dropping Nicaise on the stone floor when he began screaming and thrashing like a wildcat. He was clearly out of his mind and his fingernails raked at Damianos’ face and chest.

He was so shocked, he did not even attempt to defend himself.

A solid blur collided with Damianos and Laurent wrenched Nicaise from his arms, his pupils pinpricks. It reminded of the first time Damianos had thrown a rock at the boys his first day meeting them.

Laurent pressed Nicaise to him, cradling his dark curls, and ignoring the way Nicaise’s nails were raking lines into his arms in favor of whispering to him in the gentlest Veretian. Damianos was duly aware of the other little boys awake and staring with terrified eyes as Nicaise began to relax in Laurent’s arms. His hands fell from Laurent’s arms, his fingers bloody and trembling.

“It’s not real.” Laurent cooed, rocking Nicaise softly. “Not real at all. You’re safe, Nicaise. I won’t let anyone get you.”

When Laurent looked up at Damianos, his face was at once exhausted and relieved.
“Forgive me.” Damianos said, still shocked and horrified that his touch had sparked such a reaction. “Forgive me, I…I did not know.”

“I know, I know.” Laurent assured him, though he was still clearly on edge. “I should have--please take care of the others while I...handle this.” Damianos nodded and the fight seemed to have left Nicaise. He was limp in Laurent’s arms as Laurent slithered away to some quiet, private spot where he could soothe Nicaise from whichever demons had plagued him.

Small hands clutched at Damianos’ chiton and he looked down to see half a dozen of the other boys clinging to his legs, eyes still wide. At least they were not crying.

“Will Nicaise be alright?” Hugo asked between biting his fingernails.

“Laurent will take care of him.” Of that Damianos was sure. “It was my fault. I did not know he would react like that. But Laurent will make sure he’s safe.”

There was quiet amongst the boys in a way that Damianos didn’t like and he scooped up Etienne when it was clear the boy would not release him, even if he began walking. Etienne nestled in, curling into a tight little ball and began to whisper in his lisp:

“Nicaise is scared, so scared. Only Laurent can wake him up.”

“What is he frightened of?”

“The bad man in Arles. He’s scared that the bad man will wake him up.”

Damianos was incredibly unsettled by Etienne’s words and the reappearance of Laurent over an hour later did not help matters. He looked stressed and Nicaise was not with him. Clearly he was still not ready for company.

“Laurent,” Damianos approached him and Laurent flinched infinitesimally. It hurt, especially knowing how quietly warm the man usually was. He stepped back, not wanting to appear threatening and Laurent softened.

“Damianos…it wasn’t your fault. Nicaise does not blame you.” Damianos felt the end of Laurent’s tail wrap around his ankle. “It was just a difficult way to learn that Nicaise cannot be woken up.”

“He is not...scared of me?” Damianos had never considered his height and musculature as a terrible thing, but he was suddenly very aware of how frightening he might appear to a young boy. Laurent smiled, though it was exhausted.

“Nicaise is frightened of everyone.”

This did not set Damianos at ease, and when demigods were ill at ease, the gods themselves tended to take notice. With the horrible events of the afternoon coursing through his mind in a terrible ribbon of echoing screams, he fell into fitful sleep. It did not surprise him that his dreaming was lucid.

His ‘dream’ was in a great temple in the Akielon style, the simple lines of the marble stark in black and silver, the floors silver and onyx mosaics. He relaxed a little, knowing that he was back in an Akielon environment, in his element. At the temple altar was a great chair and a tall, slim female figure was seated there.
As he got closer, he recognized the Oracle, unsettling as she was.

She lounged on her chair, flaming bowls lit on either side to illuminate the glossy, silver-blue of her robes and veil. Her bare skin was silver, as if she was a steel statue come to life, though her jewelry was gold, set with white moonstones. Though her face was covered, Damianos always had the feeling that she was watching him carefully and that her eyes would be like fire, the same as her flaming bowls.

‘*Or Laurent’s opal eyes*’, someone offered in a tinkling bell voice.

The snake was a new touch.

Curled on the right armrest of the Oracle’s throne, it had stardust colored scales and soft little white wings protruding halfway down its slim body. Its bead black eyes were too intelligent for a regular snake. Damianos sensed a massive amount of power coming from the small creature.

“What do you know of Laurent?” He asked to the snake-creature, unthinkingly.

‘*Everything*’, two voices came back to him: the bell-like serpent’s and the deep, watery Oracle’s. Damianos cursed to himself; he had asked a question carelessly in front of the Oracle and she was going to answer it whether he liked it or not.

He chose his next question more carefully. “Was it you who cursed him?”

The snake lifted its delicate head, looking as lazily indignant as a snake could look. ‘*He pleaded for it. Granted, he was only fourteen and all boys at that age are foolish, but I told him the terms. And he accepted.*’

‘*Everything has its price.*’ The Oracle agreed.

‘*This price was better than what he had to face.*’ The serpent settled back down, though its neck was bunched up in preparation.

“Why did I come here?” He asked.

‘*Your heart cried out for it.*’ The Oracle said, resting her hand against her veiled cheek. ‘*And this one—*’ the snake looked up at her, ‘*asked it of us. We honor honest requests from gods and their children.*’

Damianos felt his cheeks heat and wondered if he was truly so transparent.

“Will you show me how to break the enchantment on Laurent?”

‘*I can show you everything.*’ The snake sounded delighted by the idea. ‘*Though Laurent might prefer to stay as he is. It’s safer that way.*’

Damianos knew he was being baited into a question.

He made his decision and steeled himself for it. But he didn’t ask why. He thought back to when he had first met Laurent and to the thing Laurent had told him that had haunted him. The unknowns haunted him. “Who is the monster?”

The snake’s eyes widened and the Oracle clearly tensed. It was not what they had expected of him.

“There is something monstrous at work in Vere. Laurent finds his safety in isolation though he is hungry for the outside world, he loves those boys even though they have been ripped from their
homes, and the boys have accepted their fates in this cave though I feel Laurent would let them leave if they truly wanted to go.” Damianos spoke quickly, trying not to lose any of his thoughts, his passion flaming bright on his tongue, “Laurent is good and kind and intelligent. He is not the monster the Veretian people make him out to be but there is something that necessitates his one cruelty, something that has forced this enchantment in the first place and it must be even worse than this isolation.” He took a deep breath knowing he would have to seriously consider killing whatever it was that had caused such pain and fear. “So I ask, who is the monster in this?”

The snake shook its head in disbelief and if it had had hands Damianos was reasonably sure it would have clapped. ‘I underestimated you. So many great heroes are so…predictable and yet you seem to have the wits to match your muscle.’

‘It is your question to answer.’ The Oracle said to the snake. ‘I will help you any way you wish.’

The snake never removed its eyes from Damianos, clearly pleased with the situation. ‘No, no, I have the power for visions as well. I was going to just give you a riddle, demigod, a push in the right direction. But you are more clever than you look.’

“Likewise.” Damianos shot back without thinking and the Oracle coughed from behind her veil.

The little Veretian god did not seem at all upset by Damianos’ equally rude reply. ‘And you have the fool wit of a Veretian. I’ll show you this monster so you can truly see…’

There were twin gongs, the sound of a snake tail hitting the bowls of fire, and the fire went out, leaving pale gray smoke pouring into the massive room. Damianos did not move or fight or fear as the fog enveloped him. He considered another question as the snake’s piercing black eyes remained the only thing visible.

‘This is simply a vision, godling. You cannot change this.’

Although there was the familiar tone of its mocking, Damianos sensed something darkly bitter as well. He nodded; he had seen monsters and villains aplenty in his twenty-five years alive, one more would not destroy him.

When the smoke cleared, Damianos was in a library--a Veretian library, if the elaborate and unnecessary decorations were any indication.

It was a very fine library as well, something that even the royals of Vere would be proud to call their own, and night had fallen so it was dark through most of the shelves. Damianos walked softly, as quietly as he could even though it was unlikely that anyone would be able to sense him in this dreaming state. He followed his pounding heartbeat through the maze of shelves until he came to the most remote spot in the entire place.

The light of the moon was coming in through the large window and it made the soft, golden hair of the boy reading on the floor look silver.

Even though he was smaller and younger and fully human, there was no mistaking Laurent’s fine features.

He was curled into the tightest ball possible, clutching a blanket around his thin shoulders, and there was a massive book resting on his knobby knees. Damianos was so utterly charmed by the sweet intensity of the man he knew and cared for that he forgot his trepidation and moved to sit near Laurent. He wished the boy could hear him if only so Damianos could tell him to light a candle and spare his eyes.
The scene was so sweet and comfortable that it did not occur to him that something could be wrong. He had momentarily forgotten about the monster.

“Little bookworm.” Damianos whispered fondly. He thought what it might have been like if he had known Laurent when he was young. If this was Laurent’s general nature then he would likely be shocked at Damianos’ ferality.

It took him a few moments to feel that something was wrong with the scene in the library, that Laurent’s hands were trembling on the page and that his pulse was almost visible against the skin of his delicate neck.

Damianos felt little Laurent’s fear as if it was his own.

Any soft noise, any sound of footsteps from the outside had the boy looking up with wide eyes and a stilled hand and Damianos felt his heartbeat flutter in panicked unison. Fear tasted coppery on his tongue and he knew for certain that the boy lived in mortal, petrifying fear of whatever was going to creep into the library in the dead of night. Damianos continued to sit by Laurent’s thin shoulder, wishing to himself that he could reach through the past and--

His heartbeat stopped, chilled with terror as he heard the rattle of a doorknob, the click of a lock, and saw a slice of light cut harshly orange into the soft, dark safety of the library.

Laurent curled in on himself, freezing up and trying to make himself even smaller in his resolute terror. The book slipped from his hands and landed with a soft thump on the plush carpet.

“*No, no.*” Damianos whispered. He wanted out of this nightmare but the Veretian serpent was nowhere to be found.

“Please, no.” Laurent whispered into the dark.

Damianos longed to offer soothing words or the protection of his body but it was no good. It was torture. He could only stand by, helpless, and hope that the horror would pass soon.

The shadow walking towards them began to take shape, even in the darkness, and Damianos could make out something recognizable through the thick layer of fear he was sharing with young Laurent. His skin rose up, as if chilled, when the thing--the person--hunting them grew closer to the window and the light of the moon. His features were handsome and familiar and--in Laurent’s eyes--terrible to behold.

Damianos tensed as a hand reached gently for Laurent’s head.

He was too weak to look on.

He closed his eyes, crushed them shut--something he had not done since he was a child--though he could still feel what Laurent felt. And it was worse than any curse he would wish upon his enemies.

Damianos bit his tongue from clenching his teeth, the taste mingling with metallic fear in his mouth and he felt every sensation with the greatest terror and disgust. The soft nap of the carpet grated on his skin, he broke out into a cold sweat, the hands on his skin felt clammy as warm, slick stones, and then inside, something was--

He screamed then.

It sounded like a child’s scream and, though Damianos’ throat was raw by the time it was over, in
his ears the sound was Laurent’s voice.

It took him a moment to even catch his breath and he retched as the monster in human form whispered something sickly, sweetly cruel to Laurent. He would kill the man and feel not an ounce of guilt for it.

The moonlight shone on the face of Laurent’s attacker and Damianos recognized him, though he was almost ten years younger. He committed to memory every inch of the king of Vere’s smiling face so that he could remember to take his time carving it off. Laurent did not look up from where he was curled on the floor by Damianos’ knees as the king left him to his pain in the soft darkness of the library.

“I’ll not let it happen again.” Damianos hissed, though he knew Laurent could not hear him. “He was dead the moment he put hands on you. Laurent, oh gods…”

“Oh gods, help me.” Young Laurent whispered. “Help me; I wish no one could touch me again.”

There was a flash of silver that seemed to come from the moon itself and Damianos had to bite his tongue a second time to keep from cursing the little snake god for coming far too late. It fluttered down in a cloud of diamond dust from the windowpanes, its black eyes filled with sorrow and fury.

‘Your Highness, didn’t your parents tell you not to say your wishes aloud? The gods could be listening.’

Laurent slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position and stared at the pretty, winged snake with eyes that were exhausted and adultlike. “My parents are dead, as is my brother. The gods, in all their infinite wisdom, have left only my uncle to… ‘comfort’ me, as he says. I do not fear my wishes, as they are the only things keeping me alive.”

Damianos was so shocked by Laurent’s cold pragmatism that he almost missed it.

‘You are bold. I can respect that and I wish to offer you help.’

“Apparently your parents did not warn you to say your wishes aloud either.” Laurent responded. “Fun, isn’t he?” Damianos said, delighted by Laurent’s cheek.

The snake ignored him. ‘We give gifts to royalty in need.’ Its scales shimmered with magic. ‘I cannot bring souls back from the dead, nor can I kill but… speak carefully and I will grant your desire. But know it comes at a cost.’

“I do not care about the cost.” Laurent said coldly. “I have nothing, I have no one. Not even my body is my own.” He stared at his bare feet from where they peeked out from under the blanket and Damianos knew that the time had come. Laurent thought on his desire for a few moments
before he spoke.

“I wish to be protected. Make my body untouchable unless I wish it and keep all other boys safe from my uncle.”

The snake moved closer until the tip of its tail rested on Laurent’s chin. ‘Yours is the wish of a child so I will tell you the conditions of granting it. I will give you a body that is too fearsome for grown mortals to touch and a place to keep yourself safe. I will save any future boys from the same fate. But there must be one day where you return to human form and—with all magic, all enchantments—there must be a way to undo this.’

“Tell me, so that I may avoid it.” Laurent said. There was no youthful sweetness in his face, only the hard determination of a boy desperate to protect himself.

The tip of the tail glowed silver. ‘This enchantment will fall if you find one willing to protect you to the death. You will not need our magic then; you will have the love of another to keep you safe.’

It might have seemed a paltry price to a boy with nothing but Damianos winced at the dire terms.

It sounded like the breaking of the spell required another person to love Laurent enough to die protecting him. It sounded like a painful price to pay but there was no need for him to wait in anticipation; he knew the outcome of this.

Laurent set his book aside and shakily got to his feet. His pain was palpable and Damianos was afflicted by another rush of fury as something dark and viscous spattered onto the carpet. Laurent seemed not to care and squared his thin shoulders.

“I accept your terms,” he said quietly.

‘Your Highness’

The glass windows exploded into a powder like diamond rain and it shimmered in a white smoke around Laurent. It became harder and harder for Damianos to see through the thick white smoke, the edges of the library beginning to fade into pitch darkness. The snake god glowed with power and Damianos heard his parting words as Laurent’s legs disappeared in favor of a long, sinuous tail.

“It is done.”

When he woke at first Damianos thought he was unable to breathe. There was a heavy pressure on his chest and he wondered briefly if it was from the shock of his vision. But when he clutched at his lungs he felt the heavy meat of Laurent’s tail resting on him and calmed himself.

Laurent must have felt his distress through sleep and mistook it for one of his boys because Damianos felt smooth scales rub his cheek. The coils dragged him closer to Laurent’s torso and Damianos remained very still as hands stroked his curls.

“Shh…shhh…” Laurent’s voice was slurred with sleep. “It’s ok.”

Love struck Damianos in the chest like a physical blow.

Laurent who had gone through so much was comforting Damianos in his sleep. Everything was ok. Though he had been hired to slay Laurent, he would ruin anyone who would try anything similar. He shifted so that their places were swapped and Laurent’s human half was draped across Damianos’ chest. Carefully, Damianos ran his hands over the soft gold of Laurent’s hair, the way
he had ached to do in his vision. Laurent huffed a little and nestled closer.

“Shh, shhh. It’s ok. I’ve got you now.”

It was an unfortunate side effect of being the son of a victory goddess, but Damianos was utterly unable to hide that he had seen something he was not supposed to have seen. He felt as though guilt had been stamped on his forehead with a branding iron, that he could not look people in the eye. Moreover, anyone with eyes and common sense--namely his mother--could tell he was hiding something.

The morning after he woke from his unsettling vision, he found it hard to meet Laurent’s eye. When two of the boys, still sleepy, snuggled up next to his warmth to enjoy their morning meal, Damianos was careful not to move too quickly or pat their heads unthinkingly.

It had only occurred to him that all the boys had that similar slender loveliness that Laurent had as a boy and Damianos was sick over the horror of what might have happened to them. He felt like he could not breathe for all the things he didn’t know and the things that were too terrible to dwell on.

And he thought of how he could broach the subject with Laurent.

In the end, despite all of his strategic skills when it came to fighting, he decided that the easiest approach would be to ask Laurent outright. But first...

Nicaise’s fear of men and being touched was wholly understandable and Damianos had steeled himself against his enormous guilt as he had approached the boy the morning after his dream. Only the golden threads of victory kept him from becoming lost, finding Nicaise tucked behind a pillar of crystalline quartz. Though his blue glaze was as wary as usual, there was still an edge of fear there after Damianos had seen him at his most vulnerable.

“What do you want?”

“May I sit?”

“No.”

Damianos sighed; he was a fool to have thought Nicaise would make this easy on him. “Alright. Nicaise, forgive me. I did not mean to frighten you and I know now. I’ll never put hands on you while you sleep again and, if you wish, I’ll take care not to touch you again.”

He could tell that the boy was fully ready to be angry and lash out but Damianos’ sincere contrition seemed to have jarred him. He squeezed his skinny knees to his chest and placed his head between his knees.

“You won’t even speak to me if I don’t want?” His voice was muffled.

“Umm...yes, I can try that.”

“Will you let me hit you with that wooden trident?” The trident was Nicaise’s favorite to use when they were sparring and he was annoyingly good at hitting Damianos exactly on the outer bone of his wrist, where it stung.

“I can hardly respond to that if you’ve asked me not to speak.”
“You’ve already failed then and I don’t forgive you.” Nicaise said.

Damianos smiled as he threw up his hands. “I accept defeat, you brat. Just know that I won’t put hands on you until you say I can.” He saw the turquoise glint of one blue eye and smiled again as he got to his feet. “I won’t ever harm you.”

As he was walking away, something solid collided with Damianos’ back and he was very slow as he turned to look behind him. Nicaise had his face pressed into Damianos’ back, his dark curls completely obscuring his face. “If...if you avoid me then you can’t show me how to fight properly and you...you can’t toss me up in the air into the water. I’m not fucking afraid of you.” Damianos smiled down at him, feeling warm happiness spread from where the guilt had been.

His touch on Nicaise’s curls was light, just a gentle pat. Nicaise stepped on his toes in response.

The look of warm relief Laurent gave them both as they returned filled Damianos with the rush of confidence he needed to spill his thoughts to Laurent. It was a simple invite to the spot outside where they liked to sit and stare at the stars and talk. It seemed like a private space not even the gods would invade.

Nothing could calm him, even though it was a beautiful night and Laurent was so clearly at ease, letting his tail swing softly over the lip of the cliff.

“Laurent?”

“Yes?” Laurent looked at him, his gaze soft and Damianos could see nothing of the frightened little boy in the relaxed, lovely man beside him. He felt it like ice in his throat.

“Do you know of the Oracle?” Laurent’s brow furrowed, but Damianos continued. “She is an Akielon goddess of prophecy and dreams, though she is...a very old, arcane goddess. She came to me last night...with a winged snake.”

Laurent’s eyes grew very wide, his body tensing and tail coiling.

Damianos could not speak entirely of what he had seen. What he had seen felt. “Your Highness, I am going to murder the monster that plagues you, by any means necessary.”

Laurent closed his eyes and kept them closed a long moment. “So...you know.”

“It felt wrong to keep this from you. And that snake is not a very good guardian.”

Despite his tense state, Laurent’s mouth quirked up for a split second. “You know why I have to keep the boys here then. I cannot let…” His veneer cracked and some of the pain leaked into his expression. “No one can hurt those boys. I’ll accept this fate for them, to keep them safe. I was too late for Nicaise and some of the others before and I...cannot forgive myself for it.”

“It is not your fault!” Damianos was struck by the unfairness of the situation. “I--”

Laurent stared at him, eerily calm.

The words were trapped behind his teeth, fearful of being said aloud for the first time. Damianos tried to breathe. “I’ll protect you. While I live, he won’t harm you again. I’d...I’d…” He would slay a king for Laurent, live in a cave for Laurent, fight the entire Veretian army for Laurent, he’d do anything. He met Laurent’s gaze and hoped all that he could not say was evident in his eyes.

Laurent’s chest rose and fell rapidly, his opal gaze intense.
"Your Highness. Laurent." All feeling went into it.

Laurent exhaled softly and shifted.

"You’re leaving?"

"I need time to think. You’ll forgive me if I...if I keep my distance. I need to make some decisions." Damianos nodded, his heart sinking. He had learned the darkness of Laurent’s past without meaning to and it was the least he could offer in return. But...

"Laurent, if you ask me to leave the caves, I’ll leave without question,” even though it would break his heart to do it, “but once I leave I am riding back to Arles to kill that false king. I swear it.”

Laurent’s smile was small but soft. “I believe you.”

That smile was the only thing that held Damianos over in the week that Laurent kept his distance, refusing to even join Damianos for their daily reading sessions. He was beginning to fear the worst when Laurent finally slithered over one evening, his expression calm.

“Damianos. I won’t ask you to leave. We like having you here.”

Relief rushed through Damianos. “I like being here.”

“I have something I need to show you though, if you plan to stay. After the boys are asleep, will you come to the cavern on the western side of the baths?”

A strange request, but Damianos would have done anything Laurent asked of him. He waited impatiently, pacing the cavern as he wondered how long it would take for Laurent to show him this great secret of his. Even though he sensed the gold of victory in swirling motes around his skin, he did not trust it entirely.

He startled as the sound of footsteps echoed through the hall.

Footsteps.

Pale as shafts of moonlight, dressed in the loose white cloth of Veretian pajamas, Laurent stepped into the cavern, gracefully unsteady on his very-human legs. Damianos knew his mouth was hanging agape. Laurent smiled at him at little self-consciously, as if showing his legs below the knee was a great scandal.

"Your...your legs." Damianos sputtered.

Laurent grinned. “Did you not listen to that fool snake god? The magic has to abate one night of the month: every full moon. I get my legs back and hide out here.” Damianos tried to recall then if he had seen Laurent during any of the full moon nights he had been in the cave. It was so hard to remember with Laurent having uncountable secret passageways to utilize in order to hide out.

“How does it feel?” Damianos was unable to control his grin, he was so delighted.

“Slow. Though I will say it is convenient to be able to open my mouth and not be able to smell everything around me.”

“That was why you said you could smell me when we first met...” Laurent flushed at Damianos’ memory. “Curse the Veretian gods though, for covering up such a fine pair of legs. Akielon masters should sculpt their likeness.” Fear gone, he realized Laurent was trusting him with this and
his heart could have burst from delight.

Laurent rolled his eyes but he was clearly charmed. “There you go with that flowery Akielon prose.”

Laurent sat next to him on the pallet and Damianos realized how vulnerable Laurent was allowing himself to be. “I’m glad. But...why have you shown me this?”

Laurent stretched out his legs and wiggled the pale pink tips of his toes. “I...there are things that...I cannot do as a snake.” Damianos had seen enough athletes to know when someone was building up their strength for something. “You are honest and foolish enough to tell me that you know all of my secrets but I have one last...I have something I’d like to ask--.”

“Yes.”

Laurent, startled, looked up and was met with Damianos’ widest smile.

“Anything you ask of me, I’ll do it. If you call me ‘Damen’.” It was his most cherished nickname since childhood, a pet name he only allowed those he loved to call him and he longed to hear it from Damianos’ lips.

Laurent looked over his shoulder at Damen and his shirt slipped a little lower, revealing a strip of his rosy collar. “Damen, has anyone ever told you that you are a massive pain in the ass?”

Damen met his eye. “I’ve been told I’m rather gentle,” he relished in Laurent’s blush, “Do snakes even have asses?”

“For gods’ sake Damen!” Laurent laughed, “You know I am a prince of the blood and yet you vex me so!” He leaned closer unthinkingly and Damen felt it in the very deepest part of himself.

“You like it when I vex you.” Damen grinned and saw Laurent’s eyes dart to his cheek.

“I have never... desired.” He was wringing his hands on his lap. “I have never wanted to be desired but I think...I think it would not be so bad if you... Damn it, how do people broach this without sounding like fools?” His eyes said all that he wanted and Damen, ever so gently, pulled Laurent’s head closer to his.

“I know. You know the trick to make me stop being a pain in the ass? Just kiss my mouth and then I cannot say anything--.” He was interrupted when Laurent leaned forward and took his advice.

His mouth was just as warm and sweet as Damen had imagined it to be, his exuberance making up for any inexperience. And he was inexperienced, Damen realized as he cupped Laurent’s cheeks in his hands.

He had experienced only the most violent of touches and had spent his puberty alone. Always coiled tight, with a damn good kiss he all but melted in Damen’s hands.

When the kiss ended, Laurent still nuzzled his lips at Damen’s. “I...like this. I like... you. And I want more...so much more.”

“I know. I like you as well.” Damen felt like he was glowing.

“How could you possibly know?” Laurent snorted. “I am hardly known for being transparent.”

Damen laughed, pressing his forehead to the precious spot on Laurent’s neck where he could
sometimes see his pulse fluttering. “Royals here, they receive gifts from the gods, no? As a sign of good will?”

“Yes.” Laurent admitted, though he was clearly confused. “But it is when we are babies, on our naming day. I received a fair face,” his barely concealed disgust showed what he thought of that particular gift, “a sharp wit, and the heart of a god.” Damen at first took the last gift to mean bravery, until he realized that he would give his heart to Laurent if the man so much as expressed passing interest in it.

The Veretian gods truly were crafty little bastards and he counted himself lucky not to have stumbled across a bored one on his way into Vere.

“We have something similar. Though it is given at the beginning of manhood so we demigods have more choice in the matter. For a young man like myself there was no question of my choosing: I asked my blessing from the goddess of love.” He grinned, seeing up close how quickly Laurent’s neck flushed. “Not only did she grant me…the skills of a lover, she also gave me the ability to feel when people are in love with me.”

Laurent’s neck was positively crimson and Damen could sense desire and love rolling off of Laurent as clearly as if a pink, perfumed cloud was glowing from his skin. If he had Laurent’s snake-like sense of smell, he was sure he could stick out his tongue and taste the desire like his favorite flavors.

“So shallow.” He whispered, clearly embarrassed at having been caught.

“I can be…quite deep in the right circumstances.” He couldn’t resist.

Laurent looked like he was being boiled, his cheeks were so red. “Oh for fuck’s sake --!”

Damen gasped and Laurent looked startled, his eyes wide until Damen decided to open his mouth and tease Laurent again. “Laurent said ‘fuck’.”

His laugh seemed to take him by surprise, bubbling up and echoing sweetly through the cave as he bent double. “Gods, stop! I’ll die before--before--”

“Before we fuck?” Damen offered helpfully. As the only two adults in the room--a rarity--he also wanted to take advantage of the ability to curse aloud and Laurent nodded as he tried to contain himself. “No, that’s the wrong word; I’m going to love you. And you don’t need to stop. I like your laugh.”

Laurent continued to laugh in bursts as Damen cupped his face and kissed his blushing cheeks, kissed his sweet mouth and the lovely length of his throat.

His hands stroked down softly to the collar of Laurent’s jacket and Damen briefly wondered why his lover would go without any sort of garment in his snake form but would lace himself up to the wrists on the full moon. Then he remembered how desperately Laurent wanted to shield his body from harm.

His fingers slipped under the fabric, as gently as he could, and he was unsurprised to feel Laurent freeze under his touch.

Trembling fingertips touched Damen’s wrists. “Wait. Please…”

Damen leaned over and kissed Laurent’s hand. “I’ll wait. As long as you like.”
Laurent breathed smoothly but the warmth was gone from his cheeks. Minutes passed by and Laurent must have felt each one acutely. He shook his head. “I…I’m s--I just…”

Damen could see it in Laurent’s eyes, though he would likely never admit it aloud. He was not dirty, he was precious and Damen touched him accordingly, taking his hands from Laurent’s neck to trace the lightest of touches down the fine curve of his cheek. The thought came to him easily and he spoke softly into Laurent’s ear.

“You shed your skin often, yes?”

“About…once every four months.” Laurent admitted.

“Then…I’m the first to touch here,” He ran his hand down the length of Laurent’s creamy neck, feeling the fluttering pulse beneath the thin skin there, “and here,” he followed the pulse to the source, the firm muscle of Laurent’s chest, “and here…” He let his knuckles graze on the cloth a little below Laurent’s navel and felt the flesh dip a little, like a snake’s would. “Ahh, it makes my heart race.”

Laurent’s eyes grew huge and glistened with something before he blinked it back. “I…shed the skin.”

Damen pressed his cheek to Laurent’s, “It’s gone. No one has touched this body.”

Though they were cruel in many ways, Damen could understand this gentle touch from the gods of Vere. It must have been such a relief to know that his body was his own again, that it had long since sloughed off any remnants of unwanted touch. Laurent leaned into Damen, his body relaxed.

He guided Damen’s hands to his laces. “You can--please. Touch me.”

“Slowly.” Damen promised.

He had never understood the Veretian love of laces before this exact moment, unwrapping Laurent with expert hands. When the shirt was draping loosely around the ivory glow of Laurent’s skin, Damen sank to his knees.

“What are you doing?”

“Do you not kneel to worship in Vere?” Damen asked. Laurent sputtered, unable to come up with a response.

His hands had never moved slower than they had under the hem of Laurent’s shirt. He delighted in feeling every bit of raised flesh, every tremor that rippled down Laurent’s skin in helpless waves. Damen went so slowly that his hands began to shake. As the thin shirt was pushed up to Laurent’s chest, Damen kissed the soft skin near Laurent’s navel. He raked his teeth across the thinner skin at Laurent’s hipbone and felt the young man’s knees nearly give out.

Damen caught him, one arm just below Laurent’s ass, before lowering him to ground. “You’ll be undone by my lips alone.”

“Tease me and I will pay you back tenfold.” Laurent hissed though it had no venom.

“Make it a hundred-fold and I’ll consider it a blessing.” Damen grinned and saw that Laurent flicked his gaze to Damen’s cheek and bit his lower lip. “Are you…are you comfortable with disrobing?”
“Attend to me.” Laurent spoke quickly, having gathered his nerve, before whispering, “Please.”

Damen placed one hand on Laurent’s bare stomach, the other placing Laurent’s hands on top of his. He would not move his hands unless Laurent guided him to. Laurent’s hands were slow, hooking Damen’s thumbs in the waistband of his trousers before guiding them down to his ankles. Laurent’s breath shuddered out the moment his lower half was free and gasped when Damen kissed the inner skin of Laurent’s leg, just above the knee.

“Wait.”

Damen waited.

“Forgive me, I was overcome by the beauty of your legs. A shame they do not have the same blue speckles as your tail.”

“You are utterly foolish.”

“May I do it again?” Damen was not contrite in the least. It was clear Laurent was very interested, what with the way his knees were pressed together. Damen kissed Laurent’s shin, pleased that the one he loved had such shapely legs. “You can ask me for whatever you want.”

“Yes.” His voice, normally so assured, was so soft and shy that it would have been lost without the acoustics of the cave. “I want it.”

Love and victory, the feeling of it heady in Damen’s temples, trailed up the inner muscle of Laurent’s thighs. And just as with his earlier touch, Laurent unraveled with slow kisses, infinitesimal strokes, the very tip of a darting tongue. Damen hardly dared to bite or suckle if such soft worship could bring Laurent so much pleasure. He wondered if he left marks if it would show up on the tail.

The heat between Laurent’s legs seemed as though it would smother a cold-blooded creature. “Trapped in that tail, with only one day a month for relief, I wonder how you haven’t gone mad.”

“I have you driving me mad to take my mind off of things.” Laurent groaned, crossing both of his arms over his eyes.

The possessive part of Damen—which was more of him than he cared to admit—was wildly pleased with the idea that he monopolized Laurent’s thoughts. “Let me thoroughly divert you then.”

Laurent relaxed his legs accordingly and Damen set to giving them a month’s worth of attention. His tongue ran the curves and taut lines of Laurent’s thighs and he saw with greatest pleasure the nectar of him dripping onto their soft pallet. His pink cock, when it became readily visible through the moistened cloth, was thankfully human.

“I am so, so thankful to the Veretian gods for providing you with a day without your enchantment.”

“Oh?” Laurent was clearly more interested in what Damen’s mouth had been up to a few moments before, his lovely blue eyes almost glazed over. If Damen were to move his limbs, he’d likely find them limp and pliable.

“I’ve never sucked a snake’s cock before. Can’t guarantee I’d be any good at it.”

Laurent laughed hard, the muscles on his inner thighs twitching from the laughter and anticipation. Damen, smiling, kissed the soft skin there and then bit gently as Laurent’s laughter hitched. He
lifted the hem of Laurent’s shirt and opened his mouth.

Nectar and ambrosia.
Hey all!
Only one chapter left after this and before you read this one, please, please remember to check the tags because there is TW: MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH this chapter and I've had to rewrite some of my tags because I accidentally put one up before and realized it might be misleading.
In any case, I always was intrigued by like djinns and the fae and how you have to word your wishes and listen to their terms very carefully or dealing with them could cause a lot more pain than pleasure. I feel like the Veretian gods would be like this; they're brutal. And I'm normally so weak for happy endings that I've never tried something so bittersweet as this.
Thanks for reading and the end will be up tomorrow!
Damen’s hands had been warm and light on Laurent’s body. Maybe it was the residual bits of snake instinct in him, but those warm hands were as comforting and relaxing as rays of afternoon sunlight. He could have rested for hours with those hands on his body.

In Veretian ‘novels’--if someone was to be so generous to refer to graphic pornography as such--authors often waxed poetic about having their cocks sucked and Laurent, who had honestly only been on the giving end, had always been appalled. The idea of it had always made him feel sick to his stomach and he never understood how anyone could enjoy that particular act without gagging.

But…

When Damen had nuzzled at Laurent’s thighs and opened that raspberry-dark mouth of his and lapped at Laurent like he was spilling milk and honey, Laurent felt it like strains of soft electricity
vibrating over his skin.

His toes curled and his legs began to sweat, his hands shook as he took up big handfuls of Damen’s curls and, despite the self-control he was so proud of having built over the years, the feeling was so delicious that a few soft moans slipped from his throat, unbidden.

He had never known that orgasms lasted so long; the writers of Vere always said it was like a small death, your soul ascending but never that it seemed to last half an age and made him feel like his bones and ligaments were stretching skyward.

And afterwards Damen had offered to use two fingers to rub more out of Laurent, to take advantage of the rare full moon.

What could he say but…

His nails dragged down the lovely expanse of Damen’s back, his ‘yes’ too soft for even the hollows of the cave. And he cursed the moon and the gods after his fourth orgasm, that he had not requested more nights with legs and a human cock and that spot that Damen liked to rub softly. His toes pointed like a Veretian pet’s would when they danced en pointe.

He wanted more.

He had never wanted more before.

He never fucking dreamt of having gentle, warm hands mapping the length and width of his body, trailing kisses down his flanks. Damen, like the warm wood of a sailing ship, built like a god, smelling of sunlight and the sweetest syrup of the Akielon pantheon. Of someone disregarding their own pleasure in favor of his.

His legs had wrapped around Damen’s, squeezing him closer.

“More.”

The reply was more of a grunt, a solid thing that had startled Laurent awake into the dimly lit cavern.

Though he hazily remembered Damen pulling him onto his chest when he was half-unconscious, two fingers still inside of him—pruning most likely—he was now crushed under Damen’s massive form. Damen’s tangle of curls fell across Laurent’s lips and chin and Laurent’s tail was wrapped around almost every inch of him. It was no wonder he had grunted as the tail had likely been squeezing him.

Laurent relaxed and began to run his fingers through Damen’s hair, causing the man to sigh in contentment and snuggle closer. Laurent felt a rush of love and desire, his scales shifting in response to it.

He wanted Damen to hold him. He wanted to be crushed against that firm chest and ravished. He wanted to touch and be touched. Hell, he even imagined with joy what noises the demigod would make if Laurent sucked his cock.

His tail shifted slightly, as if reminding him that his pleasure would have to wait another month.

It was only when he began to pepper kisses along Damen’s face that his lover began to stir in his arms. His cheek dimpled the moment his dark eyes cracked open and Laurent poked the dimple with his finger. He pulled it back as Damen playfully bit at it.
“Blankets shouldn’t bite.”

“Pillows shouldn’t constrict me.” Damen shot back. “Ah…” Eyes open now, Damen looked down and could not hide the brief flash of disappointment over seeing Laurent’s legs gone and the tail returned.

“It’s daylight.” Laurent said and his tail thumped on the ground for good measure.

“Blasted curse.” Damen groaned, running his hands along the side of Laurent’s tail. The feeling caused the scaly flesh to dip and Laurent shuddered with the good feeling of it. “After last night...I ache for those lovely legs of yours. Would that you were in your human form nightly.”

“I intend to remain like this.” Laurent whispered, motioning to his tail. Damen’s look of hurt and dismay hit Laurent viscerally. “You know the terms of breaking this cursed blessing and I will not have anyone I love giving up their life to keep me safe.”

Damen’s warm hand covered his. “The Veretian gods are crafty, much like the Veretian people. Surely...there must be another way.”

“And if not?”

Damen smiled and it warmed Laurent’s negativity. “Then I will stay with you.”

Laurent’s heart thumped unevenly, touched by the thought of this prince of open skies and sunlight choosing to live his life trapped in a cave system. “Y-You cannot. The Akielon gods would come for you. Your people need you.”

“You are bold, ordering around the gods.” He leaned over and Laurent felt warm lips trace the length of his cheekbone. “You could not drag me from your side and nor could the gods.” Laurent thought of Damen’s mother, the queen in gold with her volcanic glass shield, and wondered if he would meet her in the cave, beg her for the honor of her son.

Laurent ducked his head down but was unable to avoid Damen’s gaze, unable to stop the spread of heat across his cheeks. “You are an unstoppable force of nature, do you know that?”

Damen grinned and it was as warm as sunlight on Laurent’s face. “I was about to say the same thing to you.”

It was Laurent who leaned forward for a kiss and Damen was more than happy to accommodate him. Laurent’s lips felt swollen and overripe; his body and tail, addicted to the heat of Damen’s skin, curved closer to Damen’s chest. He felt warm fingers rolling and rubbing his nipples and he gasped. If the gods of Vere had made him half lizard, he might have breathed fire in that moment.

“You squeeze me.” Damen laughed, tugging lightly at Laurent’s speckled coils.

“Do you intend to discover the intimacies of serpent anatomy?”

Damen stared at Laurent’s tail, clearly considering how the reproductive organs of a snake worked, and Laurent—who did know—was amused to see whether or not the demigod’s curiosity would win out. Damen’s following smile was so wicked, Nicaise might have envied it.

“I bet I could bring you to the heights of pleasure with just your chest.”

Laurent’s mouth became a little dry. He had no doubt that Damen could do as he promised.
Laurent opened his mouth to respond when he heard the familiar sound of small feet running tiptoe on stone. Though he would have loved Damen’s hands to remain on his chest, he did not want his boys walking in to his tail coiling like a spring while Damen twisted his nipples. Damen would have to be satisfied for the moment with a simple kiss.

Damen followed Laurent’s lips, clearly wanting more. “Put that python away, demigod. We have company.”

Only then did he scramble for the thin length of cloth that served as a loincloth and wrapped it hastily around his waist.

Not a moment too soon, Nicaise rounded the corner, wicked delight clear in his face as he launched himself headfirst at Damen’s stomach. Laurent laughed as he heard the air knocked out of his lover. The others who were not as tall or bouncy as Nicaise slammed into Damen’s legs as he waded back into the main bathing chamber, bellowing as if the dozen children hanging off of him were truly holding him back.

Laurent unfurled himself slowly, enjoying the soft shivers rippling up from his hips. He slithered out just in time to see Nicaise squeal with delight as he hurtled through the air and into the water of the baths. Several more of the boys followed him, plunking into the water like stones, and Nicaise helped Julien splash water at Damen. The lot of them screamed as Damen took off at full speed and catapulted into the water, dousing everyone in a single decisive victory for the splash battle.

When he emerged, smiling with wet curls plastered to his handsome face, Laurent couldn’t help but return it.

“Come in, Laurent! Come on!” Nicaise called, throwing Stellan and Etienne at Damen’s back. Clearly they were itching for a second round of a splash fight and Laurent could be a hell of an ally; he could hardly refuse them when their faces were so sweet and hopeful. “Help us Laurent!”

Damen opened his arms as Laurent used his powerful tail to push himself up and into the water.

The water surged into the air as it followed the length of his tail and Laurent heard the clear shouts of joy from his boys. Strong arms plunged beneath the surface and Laurent felt his scales shift in delight as they wrapped around him and pulled him to the surface.

“Hello again, traitor.” Damen was all bark, no bite, his face sweet.

Laurent responded by splashing him in the face; his body and heart were almost unable to bear the deepest and most profound happiness he had ever felt.

Though it had always been hard to keep track of time while in his cave, Laurent had tried his best to count the months and years he had been away. Perhaps it was his snake half as well that kept him aware of the changing seasons, but he was aware of spring coming, warm and sweet and almost blossoming behind his scales; it was no wonder he shed his skin oftenest in spring.

His seventh spring with a snake tail, his twenty-first birthday approaching…

Any birthday gift that could have been offered to him by mortal hands paled in comparison to the gift of waking up, knowing he would first see his beloved demigod and two or three boys who invariably used him as a mattress each night. Damen was a heated blanket across most of Laurent’s torso and tail, one massive bicep serving as a pillow for Cyrille, while Nicaise lay with the very tip of Laurent’s tail clutched in his hand.
Attempting to wriggle free was futile when faced with Damen’s bulk and Laurent had to settle for leaning forward to kiss him until he stirred. Damen grumbled but Laurent could tell it was all for show since his dimple was showing.

“Wicked serpent.” He mumbled. “How long until the full moon?”

“Not soon enough, lover.” He sifted his hands through Damen’s thick curls and Damen nuzzled his head against Laurent’s chest. “Now move so that I can wash and relieve myself. Gods, but you’re heavy; I think your mother must have carved you from stone.”

“Don’t go, I’ll miss you.” Damen complained quietly, kissing Laurent’s flank.

“You are going to wake Cyrille and Nicaise up.” Laurent tried to be firm but he gave in and kissed Damen’s handsome face until he was able to wiggle his tail free. “I’ll be back soon.”

Damen pretended to pout and the gold tip of Laurent’s tail flicked him on the nose as he slithered from the room to the baths. He was looking forward to a long, relaxing soak, free of any ornery children or demigods who liked to try and sneak up behind him and cause a splash.

He could also wash his chest in peace without Damen trying to ‘help’ him. Surely no one’s nipples were so filthy to warrant such extensive cleaning and he found they were still sore from yesterday’s bath.

Alone with his thoughts, Laurent admitted to himself that he was counting down the days until the next full moon when Damen could hold him tighter and touch him more. All Damen’s talk of victory and love had Laurent feel like he was full to bursting with it, wanting to cover his face as he grinned like a fool.

‘Your Highness.’

Laurent felt a shiver up his spine, destroying his pleasant mood; he would have recognized that wickedly sweet voice anywhere. Now it was only a matter of finding that tell-tale glint of silver perched in some watchful alcove.

The small snake was coiled on a massive pillar of quartz, staring lazily at Laurent. “You meddling little snake. Is there another boy I should prepare for?” The little god never came to him unless it was to cause mischief or pain to someone. “Or,” a horrifying alternative came to mind, “is it something to do with Damen?”

Those tiny white wings fluffed up and Laurent swore the snake god was smug as hell. ‘You call him Damen. I’m sure his heart all but explodes when you call him that.’

“Are you just here for a friendly visit? Or do you actually have business with me?” Laurent was not a fan of small talk, especially with errant Veretian gods who knew entirely too much about him.

The wings were softer than silence and the snake fluttered down to eye level. ‘Business of the bloody kind, Prince Laurent. Your uncle, that bastard, thinks his paid demigod has died on your poison fangs and so he is assembling men to storm the barricade, so to speak. Likely there is another boy he does not want to surrender to your expert care.’ Laurent felt his chest rising and falling, felt his heartbeat behind his eyes as the snake god’s eyes sharpened in severity. ‘He is coming to kill you, Your Highness, and I have come to warn you. As your guardian, I don’t want you dead and I especially do not want an angry demigod swearing vengeance on me.’

“He is not coming …is he?”
Laurent needed more time to prepare himself for that kind of ‘reunion’...or he would have to be completely out of his mind.

‘He is a coward. You’ll not see his face in these caves and he would not recognize you. But...they will come soon and there are a lot of soldiers determined to slay you. You must make preparations.’

The boys.

They jumped to the forefront of his mind and cool fury replaced fear as he thought of them being taken back to Arles. His discomfort was pushed deep down to be dealt with later. He glared back at the god with the calculating stare of vipers.

“How much time do we have?”

After receiving the answer, it did not take him long to return from the baths. Damen was with the slowly waking boys, carving breakfast apples as he told them the origin story of apples in Akielos. Normally Laurent would want to hear of the harvest goddess’ exploits but they had less than three days and only two fighting men. The fire of it must have shown in his eyes because Damen dropped the knife and the apple in his hands.

“Laurent.” His hands were warm, one on Laurent’s shoulder and the other on his cheek. “Is something the matter?”

There was something intensely comforting about having a demigod willing to fight with him and...protect him. Laurent caught his breath, calming himself so that he could lend his sharp mind to their current predicament. “My uncle is sending men to kill me,” he whispered, not wanting to terrify his boys, “there are more than two dozen of them set to arrive in three days.”

If he hadn’t been so on edge, Laurent might have been aroused by the look of black fury that had darkened Damen’s normally gentle face. “Let them try. I’ll destroy anyone who wishes to harm you.” Surely creatures the world around shuddered over Damen’s newfound willingness to kill.

Laurent had dealt with smaller groups of soldiers successfully on his own but the sheer number this time had him worried and it must have shown on his face. Damen moved both hands to Laurent’s cheeks in an attempt to soothe him and it worked slightly. He was able to think and plot.

“Tell us what we must do.”

It was not in Damen’s deep, rich voice but Nicaise’s high one. His expression was also furious and determined and Laurent saw a brief flash of what a lovely and fearsome man the boy would become. Laurent felt a rush of affection for him and prepared himself to lead an army, no matter how small, to victory.

Laurent was happy he had decided to frisk dead soldiers for their armor and weapons, storing them in cool dry places so they would not rust or dull. He was armed with swords and daggers and his normally bare upper body strapped into the finest armor Vere had to offer. Unfortunately none of the men had Damen’s height and musculature, but he seemed wholly unconcerned as he laced gauntlets onto his wrists and shins.

With a shield and two swords, Damen was an army in and of himself and Laurent felt a little better knowing that he had such a man fighting by his side.
The daggers were sharpened and Laurent gave them to his boys, glad then that Damen had taught them how to defend themselves. Though they took them with wide terrified eyes, there was determination there as well.

“Will we have to kill anyone?” Roux asked, clutching his dagger close to his chest.

“I pray not,” Laurent stroked his cheek, “The first thing you should do is to run. If possible, try to make your way to Fortaine. It is far but...I have friends there who will keep you safe if the worst should happen. You all are the most precious to me so we must do this to keep you safe.”

All the boys nodded solemnly; they had heard these instructions multiple times before and after so often having Laurent come back safe, they were more at ease with the plan of escape. The daggers were new, but a better precaution for the roads of Vere.

Nicaise alone had a dagger and a polished trident that he was leaning against, like some young ocean god. He had insisted on it but somehow his confidence and love of the weapon made it look dangerous instead of just an enormous fork.

“Nicaise, you’re the oldest. Keep them out of sight.”

“You know I will.” He set the trident aside for a moment so he could walk forward and embrace Laurent, pressing his face against Laurent’s stomach. “You have to come back though. I don’t want to walk all the way to Fortaine.”

Laurent hugged him back and the others took it as an invitation to join in the embrace before Damen helped him lift them all up on a ledge out of harm’s way that also had an exit to the outside world.

Then it was just a matter of waiting.

Although he always took care to appear calm in front of his boys, Laurent was always nervous when unknown men were traipsing around inside the caverns. He constantly warred between feeling hunted and being poised for an ambush, contemplating using his lovely tail as a crushing vice or a whip. He had never liked killing but...it had to be done.

The cave became darker in preparation and Damen stretched out his hand to hold Laurent’s. Though they had agreed on silence for the element of surprise, Damen did seem startled that the cave was dimming outside of night approaching. His whisper was almost a relief in the heavy silence.

“Can you see, Laurent?”

“We’ll hear them coming. And I can smell them.” His tongue rested lightly on his bottom lip and he could taste the sticky, fruit-like flavor of Damen’s skin as if he had just been kissing his lover’s skin. “You?”

“I’ll follow the victory.”

Laurent thought of Damen’s description of ‘victory’ as ribbons or dust clouds of gold and wished he could feel it or that Damen could feel victories other than his own. “It will be hard to fight while holding my hand.”

“I like holding you.” His tone was so soft and warm that Laurent’s scales might have melted off. Damen’s thumb rubbed soft circles on Laurent’s hand.
“I like when you hold me.”

“Gross!” hissed someone who sounded very much like Nicaise. Laurent made a promise to himself that when Nicaise found someone he was hopelessly in love with, he would pay back the boy back a hundred-fold. See how he liked it.

And they waited, hand in hand.

Laurent sensed them first, despite Damen being a demigod.

It was almost as if there was a shudder or a ripple through the stones of the cave floor; Laurent was a part of the caves and he knew well enough the feeling of being explored in unwanted ways. They had arrived for his head.

Then he smelled them, with his tongue resting lightly on his lower lip: the salt of their sweat, the metal of their weapons and armor, the animal smell of their fear. Hatred coursed through him in one quick, sharp bolt.

He felt Damen tense next to him and Laurent only released his hand when he sensed them growing closer. His tail coiled tight even though he did not see the light of torches; the fools clearly thought they could sneak up on him.

But no one could sneak up on the demigod of victory.

The first group of soldiers screamed sharply, the sound echoing through the caves as Damen fell on them. Laurent tasted the iron-salt flavor of blood in the air and he followed the smell of it.

Moving purely on instinct, he drew his sword and sliced at the smell of heat and sweat in between the chinks of armor. More blood and cries of pain filled the air as he whipped his heavy tail and felt it crush bone. He felt like the terrifying beast of Veretian nightmares when he was being so brutal, lost in the smell of blood spray.

He felt like he was holding his breath until he felt familiar warm arms catch his and pull him forward. *Victory*.

“Are you alright?” Damen asked.

“Yes. But…” But it had happened so quickly. Anticipating his needs, the cave lightened and Laurent saw only five men dead at his feet in his uncle’s colors of red and gold. “This is only a scouting party. There are more coming.” Just as he had suspected; he was glad he had not sprung his traps prematurely.

Damen nodded, pulling him back into the shadows so that they could get back some element of surprise. Laurent felt his tail coil back like a spring in preparation to strike as the orange light of torches grew in the cavernous halls. Clearly the next group was not as stupid as the first.

Laurent waited until he could see creeping shadows before carving through the thick rope he and Damen had tied around the sturdiest stalactite in the cavern. There was the sound of stone moving and further screams.

Laurent recalled fondly how Damen had managed to hoist heavy, loose stones onto his massive shoulders with ease, securing a pile of them at the lip of a cliff with a net of ropes. Cutting the support would send the miniature boulders crashing down onto unsuspecting trespassers below. It was a beautiful trap and it had the added benefit of allowing Laurent to see Damen glistening with the sweat of vigorous exercise.
Veretian soldiers spilled into the cave in a panic and screamed when they caught sight of Laurent.

Damen was a human battering ram, smashing through the ranks and ruining their careful formations. Laurent saw red around his vision, the fire of those opal irises taking over, as he used his superior speed to overtake groups of men. His tail alone could sweep two men up and slam them against the stone walls.

And Damen and Laurent were not the only ones who had been busy with preparations.

A hail of rocks sailed through the air at the Veretian soldiers and Laurent heard their shouts of dismay as the stones smashed against their armor. At once Laurent was fearful that his boys were getting involved and proud of their tenacity. He heard them screaming their familiar greetings to unwanted visitors:

“Fuck you!”

“Murdering bastards!”

“Leave us alone!”

Laurent slid along the wall, slicing a man’s hamstring as he passed, and the spears started to fly. Clearly his boys had been busy, Nicaise’s influence was clear in it, and had taken it upon themselves to sharpen some short spears to use as projectiles. And thanks to their lessons with Damen, they were excellent shots.

Spears made heavy dents in armor, that would bruise skin and bone beneath, and some found flesh. Damen fell on those who had been unlucky to have been hit by the spears and Laurent picked up any spears that had missed their mark, finding a new body to bury them in.

Even so, they were still hopelessly outnumbered.

Laurent’s tail was a massive target, even as quick as he was, and the first arrow sliced across his tail in a stinging scarlet line. Damen bellowed, crushing the archer’s arm, but the others had seen his weakness.

All attacks focused on his tail and he screamed as four guards surrounded him and began to stab at his tail. His blood joined the guard’s blood already pooling on the cave floors and he lashed out in a bestial effort to survive: stabbing at random, whipping his tail in a frenzy, and even biting in hopes that the gods had given his incisors poison for the afternoon.

There was a small hopeful little voice inside Laurent that had once been all but extinguished but had recently come alive coinciding with the presence of a demigod. It was the voice of a boy who had believed in the good in gods and men and it sent up a silent plea to that snake god that had cursed him with this blessing.

“You said you would keep me safe.”

Laurent saw and felt, entirely too late, the change in the air.

It had been so long but he remembered the sound of a spear whistling towards him.

He heard Damianos screaming his name over the realization that it was going to hit him and likely kill him. He tried to bring up his tail to take the wound but it was slow, moving entirely too slow. He was going to die.
A small part of him was relieved.

Life had been just as cruel as it was kind and he did not want anyone to fill the terrible terms of his release.

Then there was speed to his left, a blur with the warmth of life pushing in front of him and the spear found its mark. Red splashed across Laurent--his chest, his tail, his face--in sickly stripes and spots and he heard air whistle in and out of his lungs in a paltry excuse for breathing. No…

He wasn’t breathing. He was screaming as he saw.

Laurent held his arms out in preparation and screamed, the sound of it echoing horribly around his ears.

Nicaise had come down from the ledge and now fell into Laurent’s arms, the spear jutting from his thin chest and thin back, his hair darker and darker as his face drained of blood. The blood was staining his clothes and the ground and Laurent. He looked at his wound, his fatal wound, and his lips trembled as he looked up at Laurent, wide-eyed at what he had done. His downy cheeks ran with Laurent’s tears, thinning the blood that dribbled from the corner of his mouth.


The answer came to him soft and terrible: because he loves you.

Laurent held him tenderly, unaware that the fighting had stopped around him. The cave could have come down and he would not have known or cared. His hands shook as he stroked Nicaise’s curls from his eyes, as he had loved to do to soothe the boy to sleep. His grief was unspeakable.

“Laurent…” Nicaise nestled closer to him with what was clearly the last bit of strength in his skinny body. “I’ll…be good. I promise to be…good.”

Laurent held him tight, wanting to say that he could be wild and wicked if only he stayed, but his mouth only gaped open in painful gasps. His shoulders shook and the gasps took on the quality of sobs as he felt one last soft, shuddering breath against the skin of his nape. And Nicaise was gone.

Laurent cried into Nicaise’s shoulder. If he had words he would have begged any Veretian god in earshot to bring Nicaise back; at any cost, he would pay it gladly.

The cost…

He felt it as if someone had pulled silk sheets across his tail and only such a feeling of powerful magic could have pulled his attention away, his tears falling to the floor of the cave.

Blood freckled his tail and above the tail was a cloud of silver fire that twisted like snakes. He recognized it, though it had taken other forms before. He remembered the requirements of his cursed blessing and the way to break it. His heart broke at the price of breaking his blessed curse.

The silver thing must have known, “You remember: you will be safe enough to lose our magic once someone loves you enough to protect you to the death.”

“Not like this,” he whispered to the small silvery god, tears dripping off his bottom lip.

“The terms were fulfilled, Your Highness. The price was terrible but--”
But, in the folly of youth, Laurent had been willing to pay it. His heart felt like there was a chip of glass wedged there as it beat and he watched as the length of his tail began to disintegrate. The scales fell off and floated away, weightless as petals in cream and gold and blue, and the long, muscular legs of a grown man took their place. At least, in all their mercy, the ephemeral snakes in front of him had seen fit to heal his legs and leave him in silk trousers in the same colors his scales had been.

But the fabric was still stained with speckles of red.

His eyes changed next, his pupils dilating, and he knew if he looked in a mirror then they would be the same natural, clear blue he had been born with.

“The people will remember you now. Your people.”

At this moment, Laurent only cared about one of his subjects, and that one lay far beyond his help. His eyelashes were warm and wet on his cheeks as he pressed his eyes closed. “Is he…is he at peace?” He held Nicaise close, uncaring of the blood, cupping his delicate head. “Is he safe?”

The silvery dust moved to his free cheek and he felt it settle there, more tangible than the sparkles and the silk. It felt like a comforting hand on his cheek, the thumb wiping away the residual tracks of his tears, and he leaned into it.

“Laurent.” There was a chorus of voices and he picked them out as the pain was soothed from his chest. His mother’s gentle tone, all liquid honey, his father’s proud voice, the joyous sound of Auguste, and finally the bell-like, unbroken voice of Nicaise. Laurent shuddered out a breath, his tears easing.

“I’m…sorry.” He whispered. He felt helpless in that moment. That he should live and all the others had died.

“You’re safe now. I have no regrets. And I promise to be good.” Laurent opened his eyes to see the silvery faces of his mother, his brother, his father, and his Nicaise kiss his cheek. The pain in his breast dislodged a little, the anger and sorrow slipping from him. As he breathed out, he heard a sound like sand scattering the in wind and…

The silver dust was gone.

A heavy, warm hand was placed on Laurent’s shoulder and it took a moment to find the strength to turn. Damen was crouched by his side, head down but regret, fury, and sorrow etched on the handsome lines of his face. Without ceasing to cradle Nicaise’s body, Laurent leaned back into Damen, taking comfort from his warmth.

“Laurent,” he whispered and his voice was raw, “the enchantment…forgive me. It should have been--I should have--”

Laurent could not have imagined losing this warmth and love either.

“The fault of all of this lies with one man alone.” He murmured in reply. He tried to let go of some of his guilt in favor of the much more comfortable feeling of vengeance. “And I intend to pay him a visit after…” He was going to say ‘after he brought his boys home’ but then remembered that there would be one who had said his home was at Laurent’s side and his eyes watered.

Damen swiped his thumbs under Laurent’s eyes and then kissed his forehead. His warmth cut through some of the cold sadness. “Let’s get you home. Let’s all go home and we’ll set things right.”
“Y-Your Highness?”

Laurent turned, back toward the Veretian soldiers-- his soldiers--who had been trying to kill him only moments before. They blinked at him, as if all of them had difficulty seeing, and a pair of almost-clear scales seemed to fall from their eyes and shatter to diamond dust on the stone floors. More enchantments.

He was unsteady on his legs, unused to having them, but he felt Damen’s hand on the small of his back. He shifted Nicaise’s body so it was draped across both his arms, his sweet, heavy head resting against Laurent’s shoulder so Laurent could get to his feet. He was not going to let go of the boy until they reached Arles and he could lay Nicaise to rest under the boughs of a blooming tree.

He swallowed his tears back down into the depths of himself, to that hollow spot where he used to keep all unwanted emotions. Any further grief would have to wait.

He squared his shoulders and felt Damen’s hand press comfortably on the center of his back.

That bell-like voice of the snake god echoed around him, sweet and sly, “You have our gifts and a god by your side. You need not fear anything in Vere, Your Highness.” He could almost hear Nicaise’s wicked joy in the potential of it.

He breathed out and held Nicaise closer. His voice was flint and venom.

“I am. I am Laurent of Vere, sixth of my name and heir to the throne.” His cheeks brushed Nicaise’s curls. “And I am coming home.”
Another bang fic finished! Thank you all for coming on this ride with me and I hope, after the hell in the last chapter, that this one makes up for it ;)
I actually didn't really like this title so much but it grew on me after a while. Especially since it means doing something while being protected by wise, powerful, or kind source OR a shield in Greek mythology bearing the head of a gorgon. Though Laurent isn't a gorgon...he is close enough haha!
Thank you to all the bang organizers for putting this on and again to all you lovely readers who leave me so much love in my stories! I'll be posting a new story again in 2020 so keep an eye out!
(Also I forgot to post the last piece of art for chapter 4 so I'll put it there now ;) )

It was clear to see the magic that encircled the royal Veretian family the moment Laurent--Prince Laurent--took his first step out of his cave in years.

Though he was barefoot and clad only in his simple silk trousers, though he was so pale that Damen ached to toss a cloak over his shoulders to save them from the sun, his posture was straight and firm and there was a magnetism to him. The wind blew a little softer at his approach, the sun was warmer on them, and it seemed as if every spirit within the distance of the cave was rejoicing, welcoming their lovely prince home. If gold dust had fallen from the clouds and coated his body and brow in iridescence, it wouldn't have made it any clearer that he was truly beloved of the land.

Though a common man might not be able to place his feelings, Damen had felt too often the laurels of the gods and could sense when they wanted to make a man exemplary. Laurent didn't seem to notice or care.

Nicaise was still cradled in his arms, wrapped in a blanket, and Damen felt visceral pain in his chest.

He thought of Nicaise leaping at him with sweet, delighted fire in his eyes, the intensity of his expression when Damen was telling him one of his more exciting stories, the sharp carelessness of his wit and remembered that it was gone from the world. His death would not go unavenged.

Laurent walked over to the horses that had been tied off nearby and seemed to hardly blink as the creatures stared at him placidly. His breath shuddered out in relief as one horse's head bumped lightly against his. “It has been so long,” Laurent whispered, “and I cannot even touch you.”

He turned back to the soldiers who were following fearfully in his wake. “I will be taking this horse. Damianos will be riding the largest one, whichever it may be. If it is your mount, then you will take one of the horses of the dead soldiers.”

“And the boys, your highness?” One of the men asked, motioning to the cluster of them who were almost tangling themselves in Damen’s legs.

He stroked some of their heads as they bumped into him, though it could hardly soothe them in the situation.
They were terrified of strange men, fearful of their beloved Laurent’s anger and grief, and absolutely horrified by the violent death of Nicaise. Damen wished he could calm them but that would have to wait until they were home again and all threats were gone.

Laurent looked at them and tried to smile reassuringly. “They’ll ride with you. Though you all have behaved in the bounds of treason, I will overlook it if every one of these children arrives in Arles unscathed. If anything should happen to them,” his blue eyes blazed with blatant murder, “then not even the gods will save you from me.”

His soldiers all blanched in unison and Damen felt a dozen little hands grasp at his clothes. When he looked down, the boys were all staring at him with wide, brimming eyes and Damen knew if they were hurt he would help Laurent in exacting punishment. “Be brave.” He whispered, hoping some of his inherited courage could flow from his heart into theirs, “Laurent would want you to be brave like he is.”

There was not a further complaint from the boys or the soldiers—-even the luckless few who were injured—as Damen helped the little ones into the saddle, save little Etienne who would ride with him.

“Attend to me, Damianos.”

As a prince and a demigod, Damen rarely responded to direct orders but he would have moved heaven and earth for Laurent, much less be ordered around. It was nothing at all for him to lift Laurent and Nicaise into the saddle and he reminded himself to rub soft oils into Laurent’s bare feet when they were safe in the palace.

His fingers traced along the cream line of Laurent’s calf and Laurent tried to smile. “We’re close.” Laurent gave him the briefest of smiles, a slight upturn of the lips.

Though the forest had seemed a little foreboding on Damen’s ride to the cave, it was filled with gold and sunlight on their return to Arles. More magic at play, the forest smelled of wild heather and honeysuckle, the joy of the gods all but mocking their fresh sorrow. Etienne had fallen asleep not long after they had begun their ride, his head bumping against Damen’s stomach and Damen turned to look, every few moments, to take tally of the other little ones riding behind them.

The soldiers stayed a respectful distance behind Damen and Laurent, giving them privacy to speak. Damen only dared one time to broach the silence of their ride. “Laurent. If you wish to avoid even looking at that man I will…I will handle it.”

Laurent looked at him and his expression was that of preternatural calm. “He ordered the spear that killed my…my boy. If I had fangs I’d bite him if only to watch his blood destroy him. Thank you but his death is mine alone.”

“I’ll not let anyone stop you.”

Laurent’s smile was more a snarl of bared teeth. “I doubt even the gods of Vere or Akielos could stop me in this.”

Damen’s heart palpitated as the tops of the castle towers became visible over the canopy of trees. It had only been a few months since he had last been in the ornate halls of Arles but there was something exhilarating about returning with the true king. When they did encounter the townspeople of Arles, the people shifted out of the roads and stared at their returning prince with the same awe as if he had been circled in starlight.
Laurent did not even spare them a glance and rode without pause into the beautifully manicured courtyard of Arles.

He only took a brief respite while dismounting.

He counted the rest of the frightened little boys on horseback with his soldiers to make sure they were all accounted for. “You all wait here.” He said softly, though it was filled with force. “If any of the boys are missing when I return then I will personally flog each and every one of you.”

“Laurent.” Etienne sniffed, terrified and Damen saw other lips trembling.

Laurent’s expression softened. “I will be right back, I swear. But first I must handle the regent on the throne and I don’t want him to even look at any of you. I will be right back.” Despite these soft reassurances, there were still some tears and only the most profound fury and grief could have kept Laurent from staying in the courtyard to console his boys. He would spare them the sight of another murder.

Steeled to his fate, Laurent turned to Damen next. “Will you come with me?”

“I would never leave your side.”

Laurent blinked a little too quickly and his knuckles whitened. “I cannot…I cannot carry him while I do this.” It was clear he did not want to put Nicaise down but the reclaiming of his throne would require his hands and arms. “I cannot leave him out here alone.”

Damen could deny him nothing when his eyes were so wide and his voice was breaking with pain. He held out his arms and accepted the feather-light body of Nicaise; Laurent’s hands trembled as he gave up the boy.

“Give me a sword.” He gasped, when it was clear Damen was going to hold Nicaise with all care.

One of the guards tossed his sword—still in the sheath and attached to his belt—to Laurent without complaint and Laurent discarded it all in favor of the blade itself. He took a deep breath and Damen felt victory swirling around him in laces of gold. These Veretians were not ready for him.

The heavy front doors were mysteriously open, the gods of the castle itself welcoming their prince home with open arms.

Even with his long legs, Damen struggled to keep up with Laurent’s determined stride. Though it had been years since he had walked through the hallowed halls, Laurent had not forgotten the way to the main audience hall.

Damen had just enough time to see that the door handles to the audience hall were carved in the shape of winged serpents before Laurent slammed his shoulder against the polished dark wood. Clearly some of the magic had yet to leave his body, because he pushed the doors with such force that it slammed against the marble walls with a crash loud enough to wake the dead.

Or to gain the attention of the entire royal court of Vere.

A thousand eyes were on the two of them, two careless interlopers ignorant of decorum. Damen felt magic ripple through the air in a crackling wave, all the way up to the throne.

There was a visceral rush of hatred and disgust that had Damen’s vision blurring when he set eyes on the false king of Vere but the man seemed not to have noticed him. His attention was exclusively on his prodigal nephew.
“Hello uncle.” Laurent whispered. His voice was so flat, he almost sounded like a man who had
gone mad. The sword had all the sharpness of his fury.

Though it was a whisper, the acoustics of the Veretian architecture carried it so that every Veretian
lord and lady in the hall caught his words and blanched white. Like the unavoidable rush of a
massive wave, Damen could see the recognition hit their eyes and the spell was broken, the
memories returned. The name ‘Prince Laurent’ rustled through the crowd like wind through wheat.

The ‘king’ of Vere looked like he would have collapsed, had he been standing.

Damen held Nicaise close to his chest and added the only help he was going to offer the man. “I
have fulfilled my quest, I have brought back the children. And the serpent’s head, though it is still
attached to his body.”

“I have come back for my country.” Laurent said. “And you have some things to answer for.”

His voice did not break and Damen was in awe of Laurent’s control over himself. Damen would
have yelled. Hell, the ‘king’ of Vere was yelling, though it was for his guards to come and deal
with this unwelcome ghost.

Though his tail was gone, the speed of serpents had not left Laurent either.

His bare feet made almost no noise, as if he ran on tiptoe, and he covered the distance to the throne
before most people got over their shock of seeing him alive. The sword looked dainty and
weightless in his hand as he plunged it forward into his uncle’s chest. Damen was perceptive
enough to notice that the sword pierced the same spot where the spear had killed Nicaise. Laurent
silently pulled the blade out and stabbed his uncle in the stomach. The false king wheezed and a
fine spray of blood joined his exhale. Laurent was methodic, slow and as cruel as his uncle had
been to him.

Though they were laced to their throats and had so many rigid rules for decent society, Damen had
always suspected that the Veretians were more like their gods than they let on. There was an
element of ferality and wickedness underneath their tight clothes and Damen was vindicated to see
it in their crown prince.

It was clear the false king was going to die after the seventh stab and Laurent’s vengeance seemed
to go out of him.

Crimson drops on the fine marble and Damen felt the rush of approval from the very marble walls.
Laurent turned back to him and his face was calm but his eyes were blazing blue opal fire and his
hands were trembling softly.

“I am here for my birthright.” He said to everyone and no one.

“No one here will stop you, Your Highness.” Someone piped up from the king’s guard and Damen
recognized Jord, the man who had first led him to the caves and begged him not to kill Laurent.

Laurent nodded and looked to any of his shocked citizens to see if anyone would object.

No one spoke against him.

Laurent slipped the bloody sword through his belt loop, uncaring of the silk of his trousers, and
threw the dying monster of Vere down the marble steps of the dais. A weaving swipe of blood
looked like a red ribbon leading from the seat of the ornate throne and Laurent sat down without a
glance at his uncle or the blood that was staining his trousers. Despite the mess of blood on his
clothes and the fact that he was barefoot, he looked like he had been seated on the throne his entire adult life.

Damen was breathless for the love of him and he heard laughing from the walls of the palace.

It seemed that the Veretian gods were not bothering to hide themselves from the courtiers, pets, and soldiers who had been lucky enough to be in the great hall and see their prince return. People were looking around wildly and Damen saw the carvings move and grin, saw the flashes of malachite fur, pearl fins, and silver scales.

‘Do you want a treasure beyond kingdoms?’ They asked the crowd through their laughter, ‘Shall we grant your wishes? Only a small price to pay. All hail the king, All hail King Laurent, the serpent king of Vere.’

Damen held the price in his arms and kissed Nicaise’s cold forehead. He saw a silver statue, a winged starlit snake above the very throne of Vere and joined the gods, “All hail the king.” The beloved king.

Laurent caught his eye and smiled softly.

Clothes were fetched for Laurent that befitted his station and, though the turquoise and coral brocade was beautiful on him, Damen missed the ease of Laurent in his serpent form. He would miss his lover sneaking about with a constantly bared chest and waist. A cape, boots, and a golden circlet were also offered to complete the look before Laurent would go to speak with his countrymen for the first time in years.

Damen stole a moment.

Laurent’s lips were set in a cold, determined line until Damen set his hand on the base of Laurent’s neck and kissed him into warmth again. “It’s over. They can’t put hands on you any longer.”

Laurent leaned his cheek into Damen’s palm. “I should have done this years ago.”

Damen could think of nothing appropriately comforting in reply so he just held Laurent, shielding him physically from the outside world. “It is done. And, gods’ willing, I will see a crown on your head before that bastard uncle of yours is cold in the ground.” He said nothing of Nicaise, whose beloved body had been taken to the physician be cleaned and prepared for his burial.

Laurent was able to smile, though it was still fraught with sadness and pain. “Having a god by my side does ease my worries. Though it is regrettable you cannot smite any of the fouler councilors with lightning.”

“I am only half a god.”

“Plenty enough.”

“I could always storm into their home, unannounced and uninvited, and annoy them until they fall in love with me.” Damen suggested. Laurent pounded his fist softly against Damen’s chest in distaste for the idea.

“That honor is solely mine.”

They might have stayed like that for hours, Damen slowly taking Laurent’s mind off of the storm
that was waiting for him just outside the doors of his room but it was inevitable that someone would interrupt. Laurent’s expression became cold and haughty again as a gentle knock came from outside.

“Your Highness?”

Laurent wasn’t about to respond until Damen nudged him, reminding Laurent that he was now also in possession of that title. “Come in.”

Damen recognized the dull and unassuming form of Jord as he escorted in a lovely young man with a tangle of dark brown curls and matching, dark eyes. The youth brightened as he saw Laurent, though it was tempered in a manner similar to Laurent’s joy. “Prince Laurent, you’ve returned to us!”

“Aimeric!”

Laurent strode over to the lovely Veretian and rested his forehead against Aimeric’s, the most physical intimacy a common man could hope from his future king. Still Damen felt a flare of envy in his chest. It only abated a little when Laurent smiled back at him.

“Damianos, this is Aimeric, one of the sons of my councilors.”

Aimeric, clearly intimidated by Damen’s frame, ducked his head by way of greeting. “I have seen you before, Your Highness, when you first took up your task. It was I who told Jord to ask you not to kill Laurent.”

Damen had wondered why Jord alone had seemed empathetic to the monster. Another glance at Aimeric and Damen was struck by how Aimeric’s lovely face would fit in with Laurent’s boys and his realization it must have shown on his face.

“Aimeric came with me the first year to avoid being hurt.” Laurent explained gently.

“Oh.”

“I did not need to stay long.” Aimeric said. “Just until I…grew past boyhood. It was difficult that first year learning to plant vegetables and darn shirts; when more boys began to show up, Laurent and I planned what to do if this continued.” Damen nodded, in awe of their craftiness at only thirteen or fourteen.

“Aimeric was the one who provided food and supplies to us.” Laurent said. “He would usually come on the full moon to give them to us.”

Damen thought of the bedding and the clothes and the food that had mysteriously appeared in the caves for Laurent and his boys and he smiled widely at Aimeric who flushed. Laurent frowned slightly.

“Though we did not remember you in full, know that you have loyal subjects here, Your Highness.” Jord said. “Aimeric and I have taken the liberty of bringing the young boys into the palace and setting them up in the guest rooms if you wish to see to their safety.”

“I will be sure to see them after my public address. I also have…arrangements that will need to be made for Nicaise.”

“Your Highness, you can rely on us for all that you need.” Aimeric said. “Jord and I will let you know who can be relied on and where to find anything you need. We won’t leave you to face the
wolves alone.”

It was clear to Damen that Laurent was touched, though he hid it well. “If I can survive this
demigod,” he rapped Damen on the chest with his knuckles, “I’ll not let any person in this court
frighten me. Thank you, Aimeric. It is good to see you again.”

Aimeric’s joy and pride at being acknowledged by his prince set Damen at ease.

Laurent’s people would love him.

They laid Nicaise to rest at sunrise the second morning after Laurent had come home.

Though there were seemingly a thousand other things that needed Laurent’s time and attention, he
had insisted and Damen had stood as a very imposing barrier between Laurent and the pushy
royals.

There was a large, flowering magnolia tree in the royal gardens and a grave had been dug at the
gnarled roots. Laurent had stayed up most of the night, his head rested on Damen’s bare chest and
had told him of Veretian burial traditions, his tears hot on Damen’s skin. “We bury our families in
silk, embroidered silk, and place messages on colored ribbons so we can find them when we join
them after death.” Damen stroked Laurent’s hair. “The greatest honor is to be buried under trees.
Something grows and flowers from your—” he had to stop and press his face into Damen’s chest.
“And we…put plants on the soil above.”

“I should write my message to him on the twine he attempted to tie me in when your boys took me
captive.” Damen said softly. “He would love that.”

Laurent laughed at first and then it took on an edge that made Damen hold him tighter. Warm tears
spilled down his neck into his hair. Laurent’s voice was very small and soft in the protection of the
darkness and Damen’s arms. “I don’t want to say goodbye.”

At dawn, he had composed himself. He was strong for the two dozen little boys and leggy youths
who had known Nicaise in the caves and were crying steadily.

Laurent himself carried Nicaise’s gangly body, eternally boyish and lovely, to the tree and draped
him in the funeral shroud. Fine as spider’s silk, embroidered with silver and turquoise, Laurent had
ordered gems in every color of blue to be sewn onto the hem; the jewels looked like drops of water
in Nicaise’s dark hair. Beautiful as it was, there was something terribly final about the cloth
covering Nicaise’s face and Damen patted Etienne’s head as he sobbed.

“Nicaise,” Laurent spoke softly, trailing his fingers down Nicaise’s cheek, “you saved my life and
I…know that I would have done nothing less for you. Your love deserves the highest honor and so
we lay you to rest in the gardens of Arles. Your name will live in immortality, I swear it.” And
finally, ever softer. “And I will miss you so.”

He allowed the boys to come and say goodbye, to carpet the hole of the grave with lilies and
messages on lengths of ribbon before he and Damen nestled Nicaise inside.

Damen recalled how the boy had loved to sleep on the coils of Laurent’s tail and his head ached as
tried to hold back his own tears. Two spilled out in rebellion as he put a silver coin on the boy’s
cold forehead, as was Akielon tradition.

“Rest well, sweet little brat. I’ll miss your venom.”
Atop Nicaise’s grave Laurent, Damen, and the boys planted poisonous plants: belladonna, oleander, foxglove, and amaryllis. Damen thought of how Nicaise would have liked to give him a bouquet of these exact flowers in hopes of sickening him. It was somehow fitting.

Only after did Damen step back and let Laurent have a quiet moment with his boys.

They clustered around him, holding onto his arms and legs and waist. The next day Laurent would work on returning them to their homes, reuniting them with their families. With the pain of a man who had his fill of farewells, Damen realized this was likely the last time that they would all be together. Knowing how Laurent loved his boys, Damen silently wished that the moment would never end.

Even after Aimeric and some of the older boys had ushered the little ones inside, Laurent remained, staring at the tree.

Damen approached Laurent slowly, seeing that his love was coiled tight. He lay his palm flat on Laurent’s shoulder, sliding it softly until it cupped Laurent’s head.

“You can go in if you like.” Laurent said.

“I will not leave you. Take your time.”

Laurent moved slowly, leaning into Damianos in the smallest increments until his face and body were pressed into Damen’s chest. Damen had also turned so no prying eyes from the palace could see Laurent through the barrier of his body. Laurent trembled and Damen ran hands up and down his back, through his hair.

“I cannot wish for it,” Laurent’s voice was muffled.

Damen understood. It must have been unbearable to have so many he loved leaving him. “I know. I am here.” I will not leave you.

It was the full moon when Damen woke to find Laurent gone from their bed.

Laurent was sitting in the window nook with an unread book on his lap, wearing only his thin sleeping shirt as he looked at the moon. Even though Laurent was warm-blooded, Damen felt he was too cold and had the instinctive urge to hold Laurent’s bare skin close. He pulled back the sheets and padded over to his lover.

“You sleep through your own snores, which could wake the dead, and yet my absence from bed has you awake in a moment.”

Still, he opened his arms so Damen could curl up on the nook and most of Laurent’s lap. Damen felt cool fingers in his curls. “I can’t sleep without being squeezed within an inch of my life. You are too nervous to sleep on the full moon?” Waiting to have his tail return and his life to collapse again?

“Another visit from that meddlesome oracle I see.”

“I cannot notice something about my lover?”

“You notice entirely too much for my liking.” Laurent joked, perhaps remembering how and where Damen had kissed him the evening prior. Damen felt a soft cheek rubbing in his curls and he
melted. “I cannot help it.”

Damen looked at the moon, fat and full and taunting.

“Come with me, lover.”

Damen did not put on clothes as he tossed a heavy blanket around Laurent’s shoulders and scooped his love up into his arms. He followed the tug of victory, the gold feeling of it, and walked into the dark and silent halls of Arles. He felt a glow that Laurent trusted him enough not to wonder aloud where they were going. They saw not a single soul and Damen almost felt regret. Surely anyone who came across the feral sight of a naked demigod carrying their king through the dark halls would be shocked beyond belief.

Laurent settled in, flush with delight as Damen carried him into the stables.

He was delighted by horses and had spent most spare moments in the company of the beasts or his books. Damen had experienced one of the greatest crises in his life as a demigod when Laurent had beaten him in a horse race, laughing at Damen’s expression at the finish line.

“I’ll never let you forget this.” Laurent had been delighted.

“The horse is the one running.” Damen had argued.

“Clearly yours was not blessed by your mother.” Laurent laughed. “Next time, I’ll ride my horse and you can run.”

Damen’s horse was eighteen hands, red as clay, and—annoyingly—loved Laurent more than most anything else in the world. It nickered softly as Damen placed Laurent on its back and Laurent stroked the fine auburn of its mane. Eschewing the saddle, Damen hoisted himself up behind Laurent and pressed his heels into the horse’s flanks so that the horse carried them out into the watchful darkness of Vere.

He avoided the open vistas and white pebbled paths of the Veretian gardens and turned them towards the magical tangled forest north of the palace. Though it might have seemed foreboding to the average Veretian citizen, Damen could not sense any malice coming from the black roots, branches, and soil. The gods of Vere likely did not want to cross Damen and the vast majority of them seemed to love Laurent in their own way.

But the air was heavy with magic.

“Are you tempting fate?” Laurent asked. His voice was softened by the thick foliage and carpeted moss of the forest.

“I am taking my lover’s mind off of the moon.” Damen kissed Laurent’s temple. “If you prefer, I can tie off the horse and do things that will amply distract you and any gods who spy on us. Thankfully, I have left my pants at home to expedite said pleasure.” Laurent’s flush was clear even in the darkness.

“There are wicked things in this forest.”

“I should know, I have one in my arms.” There was the sharp jab of an elbow in Damen’s stomach and he laughed. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“As long as you’re here.”
Laurent’s voice was dreamy, a little sad and it cut Damen to the quick. Apparently the spirits surrounding them could hear his regret as well because sparks of pale blue flame bobbed midair around Damen and Laurent’s heads. Foxfire, the flames had no ill intent and too little magic to curse either of them.

Damen let the horse walk at its own pace, in whichever direction it liked so he could tilt Laurent’s beloved face up to his. The face was no longer bewitched to haunting beauty but still beautiful enough to have Damen’s heart ache. Laurent smiled and only months of studying Laurent’s face could reveal the slight veneer of pain underneath.

“I would stay in Vere.”

“What?”

Damen thought of his transient lifestyle, his isolation, his half brother ruling Akielos, beloved by his people and comfortably mortal. “If you’ll have me, I would stay with you. I told you before: you understand what it is like and I would fulfill the gods’ terms for you, a thousand times over.” One of the flames blinked violet and Damen squeezed Laurent’s waist. “Moreover, I love you.”

Laurent’s breath came out in three soft shudders, as if he had been in pain, holding his breath. “I never thought…” He left most of his quiet, fearful thoughts unspoken but Damen knew Laurent was thinking of all the other people who could use the divine help of an Akielon demigod.

“You never stop thinking.” Damen teased softly.

“You’ll stay?”

“If you wish it, I’d never leave. I love you.”

Laurent buried his face in Damen’s chest. “Take care wishing aloud in the forests of Vere. You never know what might grant your desires.”

“I know exactly what would grant them: you. I love you.” Perhaps a third declaration would have the prince believe him.

“Stay with me.” Laurent blurted out, before he lost his nerve.

“I will.” Damen kissed his face, his neck, his shoulders. “I’ll stay.”

Laurent’s ‘I love you’ was almost lost in the darkness and the overwhelming silence of the forest, but Damen heard it with his body blessed by the goddesses of love and victory. He felt the tension leave Laurent, his lover leaning closer into him under the light of the full moon.

And the gods let them be.

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