| **Rating:** | Explicit |
| **Archive Warning:** | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| **Category:** | M/M |
| **Fandom:** | Captive Prince - C. S. Pacat |
| **Relationship:** | Auguste/Damen/Nikandros, Damen/Laurent (Captive Prince), Auguste/Nikandros (Captive Prince), Auguste & Laurent (Captive Prince) |
| **Character:** | Damen (Captive Prince), Laurent (Captive Prince), Auguste (Captive Prince), Nikandros (Captive Prince), Jokaste (Captive Prince) |
| **Additional Tags:** | Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Barbarians AU, Auguste (Captive Prince) Lives, King Auguste, Brother Feels, Politics, Worldbuilding, Military Discussions, Cultural Differences, Language Barrier, Scheming, Ploppy, Explicit Sexual Content, (will be all in Chapter 2), Polyamory Negotiations, Traditions, Embedded Images, Threesome - M/MM/M, Rimming, Anal Fingering, Anal Sex, Blow Jobs, Spitroasting, Voyeurism, Sharing a Bed, Questionable arrangements within questionable traditions |
| **Collections:** | Captive Prince Reverse Bang 2019 |
| **Stats:** | Published: 2020-01-11 Completed: 2020-01-12 Chapters: 2/2 Words: 28145 |

**Para Bellum**

by Seek_The_Mist

**Summary**

In a world where Auguste is King with Laurent as his most trusted advisor, the prospect of a devastating war is looming over Vere. To avoid it, an alliance with the isolated, "barbaric" nation of Akielos seems to be the only way forward. Scheming and politics would have to meet in the middle ground of the reciprocal traditions, if Chieftain Nikandros and Damen are to be convinced.

"A king that begs, his father’s voice reminded him, can’t hold a crown on his head."

*In Arles, this would have been interpreted as begging. In Arles, Auguste would have paid for it.*

But he had chosen to leave Arles and chase the stars in Laurent’s eyes and his hope for this last plan.

*If I don’t hold this kingdom together, Auguste caught himself thinking, egotistical for once, there will be no point to a crown, nor a head to hold it."*
Notes

In which Momo's amazing art becomes an excuse for me to write the "Auguste and Laurent would be the ultimate royal-power-team" as we all know Laurent has always daydreamed in canon. That, and the possibility to explore rare-pair multishipping with impressive levels of mix and match.

What more can you want?

My infinite thanks to Momo (linecrosser) for being the best teammate, and to Stillwaterseas and Kittendiamore for cheering me through this.

The first part will be a lot of scheming, politics, worldbuilding, defining relationships and brotherly feels. The second part will truly earn the fic's Explicit rating ;)

Please enjoy!
The bells were chiming for the break of dawn, and the sound echoed all the way from the west tower and off the fortification of Arles. Walking through the passageway, Auguste caught himself pacing his steps with the rings, as light started to filter off the loopholes in the stone.

One, two.

He wasn’t dressed for the day, not in a way that was becoming of the king. No garments, no constricting twist of fabric, no golden lining at his heels. His steps brushed the stone softly and disappeared right after, a practiced quiet.

Three, four.

With no torches lit and no clear opening to the outside, the corridor was blue and grey all over, seemingly endless in the twisted perception darkness conjured from a man’s mind. The air was thick with stagnant humidity, but such was the burden of a full shield from the outside view.

Five, six.

For the last two meters, Auguste slid the tip of his fingertips along the brittle stone — an old habit he never quite got rid of. The door was lodged in the darkest spot, right before a turn, and could only be unlocked with the right key, with the right tricks in the shadows.

What opened on the other side was far from a clearing: just a gentle slope of green grass off the inner wall, and a miscellaneous arrangement of two-storey houses with shops behind closed shutters. Merchants and commoners had already started roaming the streets and preparing for the day. The outer gates would start to leave the right of way in a few minutes, as the sky slowly cleared out from the remnants of the night.

The rider arrived soon after, turning the horse around with a slow twist of hips on the sidesaddle. Everything in the appearance was nondescript, from the sigil of Varenne hanging off the reins as a mark of free passage into Arles to the dark blue clothing that flew free like any woman of good family would want. The rider slid off the horse rather than hopping, leaving the mount gently hooked at the post beside a house. With the same careful stride, the figure disappeared into the house, only to emerge from the backdoor and climb up to the walls, where Auguste was still waiting. The skirts barely touched the ground, swept up one-handedly, and a thin veil remained hooked overhead, concealing features like a layer of shivering water in a stream. There was no removing it, nor stopping on the track, not even at the end of the way up with Auguste two feet apart.

Unperturbed, Auguste went back the way he came, leaving the door to the passageway open behind him. Steps followed him, punctuated by fabric swishing on the floor.

“How was your travel?” Auguste asked.
“As uneventful as one would wish for.”

He turned around as the headscarf fell off like a shadow among shadows, and the slight impression of golden hair followed a fastidious shaking of shoulders. Auguste felt himself smiling.

“And what about things came before the journey back?”

“Those were very productive because I don’t like to waste our time, of course.”

Skipping half a step, Laurent walked up to be right beside him in the narrow passageway. When matched with female clothes and a convoluted plan to return to Arles unannounced, the smile on his brother’s face was even more mischievous. Auguste snatched the veil off his hands to wrap it around his wrists, like he would with the favour of a lady during a jousting tournament. The fact that Laurent snorted was a reassurance on how truly productive his escapade must have been.

“Are you going to report to me or not?” The question lingered in the protective darkness of the hallway, bringing them both through a path marked by muscle memory. Auguste would never ask something like this to one of his courtiers — it would be a display akin to impatience, betraying — but he could ask it to Laurent, whose habits and quirks Auguste had honed step after step, as a big brother should.

“That depends,” Laurent replied, an impression of tilt in his chin. He would never be so defiant in public, either, but familiarity was a double-edged sword. “How did you manage the Council ten days ago? Did Lord Meuxille show up instead of sending one of his liegemen?”

Auguste clicked his tongue distractedly. “For the skies, Laurent...yes, he came. Yes, I held the Council under control, if that is what you are doubting here.”

“Not even for a second.” A line of teeth flashed and disappeared, and still Laurent offered nothing in return. Not yet.

Imploring the skies again for support in a silent roll of his eyes, Auguste resigned to give his accounts before receiving any.

It would probably not be this irritating if the situation were to be different. But it wasn’t, it hadn’t been for a long time, and even the illusion of control would be reassuring by comparison.

Vere was on the brink of war.

There had been murmurs of tension for years, budding slowly and then surging up precipitously. Conflict was now so close Auguste could taste it, sour in his mouth. He should be well acquainted with the sensation of it, for it had been everywhere when Auguste was just a Crown Prince and tension had ripped their household apart from the inside. Therefore, he should have known how to stop it before it went critical — now that their father was dead, in a mutual honour duel with their uncle in vindication of their mother’s assassination; now that he knew the sensation of a nation on the brink of unravelling, the weight of it on his shoulders as a young king. Auguste had worked hard to bring the situation back in order, and provide a sense of security to his subjects. Maybe that was the reason he had not seen their current predicament coming when it was still mostly quiescent.

In the rare occasions Auguste had expressed this sentiment, his little brother had been uncharacteristically lenient. There would have been no way of knowing, he claimed, and stabilising the Kingdom had to come first for Auguste. Laurent, who had grown up fast and snapping to keep pace with what the Court demanded of him, could always be trusted to provide a frank assessment
— yet in this case, and this only, a part of Auguste’s mind danced around like a whimsical horse, refusing to accept some solace.

As it had emerged from the last Council, the situation was the following: a little more than a year ago, King Torgeir of Patras had gracefully stalled the talks to offer his youngest sister’s hand to Auguste in marriage. Princess Toringen was in her prime, it was said, but still wished to make a name for herself in her country, with the King’s will to let her develop a new architectural project as her ally. There had been chats about it, but no real acrimony. That had started to rise later, when it became apparent that the same Torgeir was in talks with the Vaskian Empress to join one of her High Chiefs — and daughter — to Prince Torveld, the King’s brother. That would have conflicted with Vaskian custom, as their Chief women were bound to freedom first and foremost, and never to any men. There was, however, a single exception: if war was coming, and the Vaskian tribes were ready to expand the Empire.

“Meuxille reinstated the same assessment of eight months ago,” Auguste replied to Laurent. “The tactical advantage of the bottleneck valley of Aquitart will be worth nothing if the Patrans have a border more open than the sole region of Alier.”

“What did he had to say about that trick with the canyons of Lyssiska?”

“That I’m a great strategist but he’s sure I’m not as lousy a tactician to not recognise the unpredictability of having the Vaskians spread all over Ver-Vassel.”

It was a trite argument, one that Auguste and Laurent had poured over every detailed map they would find. Month after month, the outcome had not changed. The last time Vask had launched an extensive attack on Vere had been one-hundred and eighty-four years ago, and had refrained since because Veretian forces had been able to hold back any clan that tried to seep through the passages in the great mountain border. That constrain would fail them if they were to be forced to split forces in uneven directions — a nefarious occurrence that everyone agreed to be the most likely outcome of a Vaskian and Patran marriage of alliance.

“I suppose this is the point where you would like to hear my news, brother?” Laurent asked, canting on his feet like the mischievous kid he ceased being the day they buried their family and then put a crown on Auguste’s head.

“I’ve been ready to hear your news since the moment you arrived,” Auguste pointed out, not without indulgence.

They stood still against the darkness for a few seconds, as Auguste reached blindly with just habit to guide him. The royal ring at his finger caught the ridge where it was supposed to slot, and Auguste fished a key from a chain under his clothes, unlocking the mechanism that the ring had revealed. The door was heavy but silent in its slide when pushed, and led to yet another inner corridor, much narrower and warmer than the big stoney one had been — Laurent could have taken it to go to his rooms, but he didn’t. The door forward opened only when they shut the previous one. Beyond that, Auguste’s royal apartments stood lit and quiet as if he had never left them to go and recover his brother at the outer walls, his own guards oblivious in the palace corridor.

Between the light of the day seeping through the half-drawn curtains and the candles burning quietly, Laurent was now showered in a soft light for Auguste to give a proper critical look at him. The road favoured Laurent as it probably would any eighteen years old, his complexion healthy and his hair wild even as the blue of his eyes shone too bright and spoke of a punishing pace to make his way back to Arles.
His little brother — sheltered and bookish until a book suggested him he might save his Kingdom. Auguste sighed.

Laurent carefully balanced on one foot, and then the other, to remove his travel-dusted boots at the very edge of the secret entrance door and maintain their deception intact even for the servants that would come in a few hours. “Nikandros will be meeting Damianos next week, and together they will move towards the land of the Delpha clan.”

Auguste stilled from where he was pouring a glass of water for Laurent. “Are you absolutely sure, Laurent?”

With his skirt sliding off for good measure, Laurent closed the door behind himself — the edges of the upholstery disappearing perfectly in a hunting scene, velvet against wool — and walked across the room in an underskirt, as if he was ten years younger and playing at deception with a twenty-years-old Auguste and their mother’s clothes. “I told you already that I don’t waste our time. Jokaste is organising the provisions, the two chieftains are expected as close to the border as we’ll ever get them within three weeks.”

Silence trickled through the room, and Laurent let him stew and recovered the half-filled glass to down it as Auguste thought about their chances, all over again.

Almost a year ago, now, Auguste had told Laurent: “We need something to tilt the balance. This is a war of attrition now, way before it comes to battle.” This was the culmination of Laurent’s response to his King’s request.

“How positive are you on this working? Honestly, Laurent, if you please.”

Laurent opened his mouth, closed it again, and emptied the rest of the glass before replying. “As sure as I can possibly get at the pace imposed to us. We can let this go, if you wish, but I don’t know when we will get another opening.”

If it had been anyone else but Auguste asking, the response would have probably been a scathing Do you have a better plan?

Auguste felt it in the substance, if not in the sentiment.

The tall windows of his chambers opened to the wings of the palace, a garden sliding down what hadn’t been used as a place of arms to gather an army since the times of Auguste and Laurent’s grandfather.

He very much didn’t have another plan.

“We will take this opening,” Auguste deliberated, turning around to face his brothers. “And I will be with you for it.”

“You will need to be with me for it,” Laurent countered, smiling a little wicked. “I’ll organise it with my Guard. Let me handle it.”

Desperate times called for desperate measures, but Auguste really hoped he wasn’t now living what would be written in the history books as the beginning of the end of Vere and its Royal bloodline. He felt a sigh rising and suppressed it. Laurent was looking back at him with the boldness of youth and the pride of never, ever, having failed Auguste before.

“I’ll entrust you with it.”
As a child, Laurent was obsessed with Akielos. It had been a mixture of the scarcity of records on the matter and the strangeness of everything he could find, foreign in too many ways to count.

He had learned to read early, as young as four years of age as Queen Hennike always recalled proudly. At the time, he had thought he would find immediate use of it and sit at his parents’ sides on those impossibly tall tables, among ever-growing piles of documents — aid the running of a kingdom, because wasn’t that what a prince did? As it turned out, his little fantasy wasn’t applicable to reality at four years old, nor at six, and not even at eight. In the meantime, Auguste’s twentieth birthday had marked him as of age, ready to succession at any moment, and his indulgence of Laurent didn’t mean that he could be supported in his duty. The net result of this conjunction was an extensive series of tutors — eager, but never quite able to satisfy the full extent of Laurent’s intellectual curiosity. Court interactions were a requirement, and training with his brother whenever he could find time a joy, but holing up in the Royal Library was the closest thing to personal indulgence Laurent pursued.

The scouring of the foreign section had started with the books about Kempt, which had given his five years old self a lot of leeway of conversation with Mother, which he always appreciated. But then he had fallen into the epic recollection of a war between Kempt and Patras, which in turn had led him to read about the old Artesian Empire that had once unified the world as far as the eyes could see on the top of Mount Diracynt.

There was a saying for which the Akielons were the last descendants of old Artes, but plagues and natural disasters had scoured the region until that long peninsula trailing off the continent, so eye-catching in every map, was unrecognisable from what it had been in its golden age.

The people that still inhabited the territory south of Patras, and south-east of Vere, had many names and many customs depending on which author you trusted the most to tell the story. At best, they were unstructured; most commonly, they were barbarians.

For about three months after his discovery of this new option of entertainment, Laurent had become obsessed with the idea of memorising — and possibly cataloguing, even — each and every clan in Akielos. However, as he stumbled through obscure texts that would take him hours just to decipher the calligraphy, reality had left him with the sensation he would learn to recognise as the frustration of a scholar. Pinning down the clans was just not possible — too many, too variable, too time- and region-dependent. His newfound exploring hero — Jeraques de Rignon — had been to Akielos five times in the span of forty years and had lamented of having found it different every time, very few points of reference left behind by a state of constant internal skirmish.

Isolated, diffident and almost insensate in its wildness, Akielos was a lost cause.

And yet it had flourished in the most unattended of Laurent’s fantasies, full of poorly reported epics that were meant to be listened to around the fire and an extensive while brutal mythology. Having outgrown the unquestioned plausibility granted by childhood, it became a secret escape that accompanied Laurent’s mind into his youth and his increasing responsibilities. It was a well-kept secret, too, albeit one that often tainted with guilt when facing his brother.

The crown weighed heavy on Auguste — his brother, his only family, his king — and the chronic,
lingering unhappiness that seemed to accompany it soured in Laurent’s mouth.

He could not help, but he tried. He was too young, but he could grow where it mattered, and maintain his princeling cloak as a disguise.

Then, as his sixteenth year of age approached, Laurent had met Jokaste.

As many other times in Laurent’s life, things hadn’t gone as planned and the week-long retreat in the sole company of Auguste and a restricted entourage had been swayed off track by the surprise arrival of a delegation from Patras. Laurent had found himself alone in the fort of Acquitart, which was ancient and beautiful, enclosed by the imposing mountains that marked the border — Vask at north-west, Patras at north and Akielos north-east. Laurent loved this place so much that Auguste made it part of his inalienable belongings — Prince Laurent of Vere and Acquitart — and still he had been bitter in his solitude.

The morning it had become clear that Auguste was not going to be able to join him at all, Laurent had left the fort for a solitary excursion, maybe even a hunt, in the sole company of Jord — captain of his personal guard, appointed personally by Auguste. As his horse galloped through the dew-sprinkled grass, two hours after the break of dawn, Laurent had felt a bit better, but still not at peace with himself enough to avoid rerouting them towards the old ruins.

Jokaste had been there, barely hidden by the ghostly skeleton of arches and columns with no more walls or ceilings. Crouching behind a crumbling altar, she had been nursing a hurt leg, her calf neatly pierced by an arrow like the ones the Veretian border patrol was supplied with.

Jord had helped her because that was a very Jord thing to do. Laurent had helped her because the twist of her hair, and the decorations at the hem of her clothes didn’t just speak of foreign — she was from Akielos.

“Who are you?” Laurent had tried at first, but he had asked in Veretian and Jokaste had just glared at him with a pair of clear blue eyes shining with pain.

“Who are you?” Laurent had given it a second try — a shaky one, made jarred by the lack of a proper phonetic. It was almost the full extent of his Akielon, even after years of books he had tormented.

At this, Jokaste had looked at him as if he had grown a second head.

After that, a painful procedure of trial-and-error had steered them towards an atrocious border dialect. It was spoken close to Acquitart and, with the horror of his royal parents, Laurent knew it because he and Auguste had spent too much time in the region. Jokaste knew it because a variation of it was apparently spoken all the way along the mountains to the east.

Under Jord’s flabbergasted supervision, they talked — and for the first time in his life Laurent had someone who embodied his special interest better than any book.

Much to Jord’s continued reluctance, he had him smuggle her inside the fort, injured leg and all. It was a worthy pursuit, for that evening, in front of a burning fire that exacerbated the smell of medicinal salve on Jokaste’s leg, Laurent had learned something interesting.

“I’m not from the border,” Jokaste had said, unperturbed over the fact that they were consuming their dinner on a carpet on the floor like toddlers. She had eaten with her hands — occasionally spoke with them too — as if it was a common occurrence. She hadn’t known that Laurent was a Prince, but even if she had she wouldn’t have known how to address him as such, that was for sure.
“Not from your border. The Aegina clan? Do you know of it?”

The bookworm in him had rebelled at the sight of Jokaste’s meat-greasy hands touching the only map he managed to recover in Acquitart’s limited library, but his own ignorance had been far more frustrating. More knowledge — he had reasoned — required some calculated sacrifices.

The territories of the Aegina clan, as it turned out, were so far off to touch the Ellonsean Sea on the Patran side, and from that border to Bazal — the Patran capital — Jokaste estimated it would only take a day of riding.

“How far is the Aegina clan from here?” Laurent had asked.

“Three days with horses,” Jokaste had said. “Two, if the big forest is clear.”

The big forest, in Laurent’s understanding, occupied most of the region where the mountain cliffs of the Veretian border descended into hills. He had made a mental note to draft some better detailed maps, but only after a more stringent question had found its answer.

“How are you so far from home?”

Jokaste’s brows had furrowed, not in misunderstanding but in scorn. “My home is with the Delpha clan, now.”

That clan, Laurent had known. It was ancient enough, evidently, that even outdated books reported it.

“They sent you here? To get arrows at the border?” Laurent had caught himself gesturing as Jokaste tended to gesture — yet another thing a prince of blood should not do, but it had worked to smoothen the way of their reciprocally clamped vocabulary.

“I sent me,” Jokaste had replied, chin up with pride.

“Why?” Laurent had asked again — with an unbelievable lack of persuasion, brought upon by language barriers.

At that, Jokaste had been silent for a long time, pecking at the meat still on the bone and looking at the wood popping in the fireplace. Far in the corner of the room, Jord was chaperoning them as any nobleman should be when conversing with a woman and in his defence he had appeared only mildly disturbed by the whole exchange, probably impenetrable in meaning for him.

“My father sent me to the Delphian,” Jokaste had piped up, at some point. “But I don’t want to be in Akielos.”

That had made absolutely no sense to Laurent, who had spent so many years before this encounter fantasising about open lands, imposing Artesian architecture repurposed for new use, and that type of wildness that Jokaste displayed every time she flicked back her hair and spoke a bit too brittle.

*Wishes are always bred in the absence*, Queen Hennike used to tell him. This must have been the case.

Upon more attentive inspection, Laurent had caught Jokaste’s gaze lingering on the high stone ceiling, on the upholstery that managed to narrow a huge room as the one they had occupied into a cosy, enclosed environment.

Vere was nothing like Akielos. And Akielos was nothing like Vere.
Jokaste, even through the stilted sentences of an uncommon language, appeared to have the mind of an intellectual — a politician, even. She had taken some coal from the fireplace and defiled Laurent’s map further, for the purpose of explaining to him something that would have never occurred to him, and seemed counterintuitive even as the night proceeded and the story became more convoluted.

There were, at the moment, eight main clans in Akielos — not counting the isle people because those were always hectic, according to Jokaste herself. When Laurent had tried to point out that the entire story of Akielos pointed exactly towards hectic, Jokaste had shot him a wicked, somewhat bitter look.

“Things move. The clans are moving.”

It took a while for Laurent to understand that had meant moving as in changing.

The Delpha clan had acquired a new chieftain in the last years, one young and strong. He went by the name of Nikandros and men older and more unruly than him followed him because he had a vision. He also had a half — which Laurent understood belatedly as meaning that Nikandros had a husband — and that was fresh news, one that was spreading throughout all the other clans, because that half was Damianos, chieftain of the Ios clan. That could only mean two things: trouble, or greatness, and the two were not mutually exclusive.

For all his effort to remain unperturbed and focused, Jokaste must have caught some bewilderment in Laurent’s expression, if her knowing smirk was anything to go by.

“Don’t you know the clans?” She had asked, not even bothering to try and hide the undertone of mockery — Laurent had suspected she wouldn’t have not even with the fluency of the ladies of the court of Arles. “There is no alliance without a half. No trust.”

Laurent had nodded, pensively. He had begun to suspect that Jokaste’s presence here had something to do with an unwilling marriage, but the cards were shuffling too fast to follow, now. “So why did your father sent you to the Delphian?”

“My father is a sharp man,” Jokaste had said, after another long moment of silence. “He looks ahead, but says that Nikandros looks better. So he wants them to look together, before the others notice.”

He will try to unite the clans, Laurent had thought, suddenly, with something all too similar to a rush of adrenaline. None of the books he had read had a recollection of anything like this — so if Laurent was seeing it, he was actually witnessing history in the making.

“He sent me to Delpha because I am what I am, and he says I can cut through Nikandros’s problems like a blade,” Jokaste had continued.

Laurent had no qualms picturing it, and yet she had said it with yet another wave of bitterness, as if an overturn of all her world was still unsatisfactory.

“But you still came over here,” Laurent had considered, slowly.

“I want something new,” Jokaste had replied, with the blatancy of ambition.

That, even through the cultural difference, Laurent had been able to appreciate.

They had come to the consensus, as the night proceeded, that it would have been difficult for her, as it was, to just stay. She was too foreign, rushed in her resolution, and not even Laurent could
have helped. But that didn’t have to last forever.

In the following years, Laurent had met with Jokaste at least twice a year, letting Jord carry the word of when he would have been at Acquitart to arrange her crossing the border again. For as much as he would have liked, he had never tried to be the one jumping over to Akielos — not even when after the first successful encounter he had told the tale to Auguste, which had caused some overwhelmed dismay but no real repercussions. However, Jokaste had taught him Akielos and he, in turn, had helped her through Veretian.

It had been smooth and intellectually beneficial in a mutual fashion. Laurent would have been satisfied to keep it that way.

Then life fell apart and he had to start thinking about how to keep the Kingdom together with his brother, the King, rather than wallowing in his grief and rage — or worst even, his whims.

Everything changed again when his brother got curtailed on what was supposed to be a smooth royal marriage.

From one day to the next, Laurent’s whims morphed into a shape that could actually be of use.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” Auguste had asked him when Laurent made him part of his plans, one inconspicuous afternoon amidst the birds for falconry.

“I have not!” Laurent had protested, smoothing the feathers of a hawk that had glared at Auguste, appalled for his outburst. “We don’t want to fight this war, do we? So we have to persuade them not to fight it.”

“And you want to do it by forging an alliance with the Akielons?” Auguste’s voice had changed pitch, lowering into a hiss and switching to the Kemptian language mid-sentence. That had been rather paranoid of him, but Laurent would not fault his brother for it.

The Kingdom was stable — but just for now, perilously. Trust was reserved to each other, and should be withheld from anyone else, to some degree.

Laurent had let the hawk scuttle off the inside branches of the aviary and turned to face his brother completely. “I do, because no one has ever done it before.”

“There might be a reason for that, Laurent. A good reason.”

“There will also be a reason why we’ll succeed in what everyone didn’t even dare to wonder,” Laurent knew his emotions didn’t always serve him, but it had been difficult to conceal the adrenaline that the plan had sparked in him. “The clans are getting united, it’s the closest thing to a federation they are likely to get to. So why normally I would tell you that an alliance is not feasible because you would not be able to trust it, nor hold it, in this case you’re going to leverage on someone else’s work.”

Auguste had pinched the top of his nose — a habit of stress that he would always conceal in front of anyone who wasn’t family — but still hadn’t quenched the conversation. “Is this about the Chieftains Nikandros and Damianos and their marvellous quest, again?”

“It’s not, their marvellous quest seemed almost settled last time I met Jokaste,” and that had been a good eight months prior, when they both had agreed that the clan of Mellos would just fall in line before the winter. “This is about you, and how you’re going to make Vask and Patras quiver at the thought of what could happen if they do ally, if they do attack us.”
The pause that had followed had been too long for Auguste’s interest to be properly concealed. Still, he had demanded more time, and more planning, and more alternatives.

A strong part of Laurent, inevitably, wished for his scheming to be the winning one. Another one — aware of the risks, sharing the burden of his brother’s responsibilities — would have been happy to see the situation resolved in another way, one less likely to flare up in their faces. A bout of good luck, so to speak.

Luck hadn’t been Laurent and Auguste’s strong suit for a very, very long time.

As such, it hadn’t been an overwhelming development to see the talk degenerate, and the tension escalate.

“Go find Jokaste again,” Auguste had told Laurent, one late night in his chambers, camping on his bed as if the canopy could shield them from the reality of their adulthood. “Your rearguard is about to be promoted to cavalry, if things will go as we suspect.”

If this had been just a game, Laurent would have probably managed to not feel queasy at the prospect.

But he had gone, once again, for the second time in the same year.

The first time, it had been just preparation, to be as theoretically prepared as his brother asked him to be. The chessboard had appeared to be in place — all the clans unified under Nikandros and Damianos’s guide, a begrudging stability that was solidifying over the sudden benefits of shared resources that did not require a constant arm-twisting from one clan to another.

Laurent wouldn’t have bet on how long it could really last — maybe a summer too prosperous would get the arrogance rising, or a winter too harsh would press a clan to want more than some tolerance. The most delicate scenario for them would be if, conversely, this newfound Akielon stability were to settle so deeply that the isolated country — the one that only ever rebuked invaders, never actually pursued a venture beyond their borders for anything more than the theft of some livestock — would start to look at what surrounded them with renewed interest.

Avoiding mulling over it was impossible, especially with a mind like Laurent’s that would always attempt to look six steps ahead in every direction. Nevertheless, it was almost preposterous in a situation in which the choices for him and his brother were narrowing. Laurent didn’t need the Akielos to be stable for ages — maybe a year or two, to get the plan going and the war dissolved. After that, he would find a new plan.

It was easier said than done — easier said than believed, even — but Laurent pushed through all the same.

And now he was back from his second visit, the one dedicated to factual logistics, and Laurent had names, and places, and spies to arrange and couriers to send, because he and Auguste were doing this.

It felt like a fever dream, after all.

Once everything was set, their official excuse arranged and Auguste and Laurent were on route with their retinue, there was nowhere to hide, no other task to muddle the waters and give Laurent an escape from the reality that, for better or worse, this was on him.

“Do you really believe Jokaste will manage to bring the two of them on the hills of Marlas?” Auguste asked him while they rode side by side.
They were avoiding moving in plain daylight or in the darkest bits of the night, which was slowing their route up from Arles, but allowed for all the plausible deniability that they needed. Berenger, Vannes and Estienne will take care of making it look like the King and his brother the Prince were exactly on the duties the rest of Vere might expect from them, and nothing else.

The late light of the afternoon shone off Auguste’s hair, tainting them of a burnished gold full of shadows. Such a perfect bright King, even more so as Laurent could constantly seeing worry that he was not doing enough to uphold his status and responsibilities.

This time, for once and for real, Laurent should be the one standing up to the challenge.

“I do believe it. Nikandros has apparently a very practical nature, Damianos tends to court impulsivity more, but between the two of them they will want to know what brings foreign royalty to tell them there is a common enemy to speak about.”

They had spent so long with Jokaste, talking over this and every angle they could take to maximise their chances. It was a delicate opening, a King’s gambit not meant for amateurs, but Laurent still tried to tell himself he had played more difficult chess games.

“Won’t she face repercussions, for this liaison of yours?”

Laurent cast a dubious look at his brother, only now pondering over the fate of their barbarian connection. “She won’t be there to face repercussions. If we get what we need from this little escapade, Jokaste is going to Kempt.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She wants a new life, I’m handing it to her. Fair is fair, this wouldn’t work without her.”

Laurent wouldn’t even know how all these possibilities could exist, without her. He wouldn’t be able to consider himself more expert on clan dynamics, he wouldn’t speak fluid Akielon, he wouldn’t know where to go or what kind of reasoning to appeal to. He could get Jokaste an out, in exchange for an in.

Only hours later, sharing a bedroom that their guards got for them in an inn they only accessed, unseen, from the backdoor, Auguste continued the conversation.

“Forget the falling into the narrative,” he started, as Laurent washed the dust of the road off on the basin in the corner. “Or, I mean, don’t forget it, just…say they believe in the proposal because it’s consistent. Would they really be bound to the deal, if they strike it as we discussed?”

Laurent made more of a scene of rolling his eyes than what he was actually feeling, “If you keep questioning the fundamentals of this plan exactly while we’re riding into it, I would have to think you’re not trusting me, brother.”

“I’m here exactly because I trust you,” Auguste protested, with a furrowed brow.

To this, Laurent could just sigh deeply. “I know. I know you do.”

He abandoned the basin and shuffled back, barefoot, towards the bed. The tension of his shoulders reflected more than just the chill in the room — so different from the Palace’s chambers, kept as warm as the Royals might desire them. The predicament he was setting Auguste into wasn’t much different, conceptually: nothing overwhelming or truly unacceptable, but just on the edge of possible discomfort — one could get use to it and melt it into habit, or become ill-acquainted to it to the point that forgetting the subtle slither of uneasiness would be impossible.
“I think it will mostly be a matter of perception,” Laurent murmured, gladly accepting the space in the bed that Auguste offered to him, with a washed-thin duvet lifted to reveal a lumpy mattress. “Akielons are very set in their ways, the mistrust towards what lays across their borders is not just because the clans are traditionally disorganised. We will have the effect of surprise for the fact itself that we want to talk, and while I admit it’ll be tricky if we land on the actual negotiation your proposal will be unprecedented enough to breach. Jokaste thinks so also.”

Auguste huffed and let himself fall back against the mostly flat pillows, the curve of his reclined neck strong and regal as it led to his chin. High enough to bear the weight of a crown. “You’ve been thinking about this almost a disturbing amount.”

There was no rebuking this, it was undeniable, so Laurent just followed his brother’s gesture and blew on the candle. The whole room was pooled in a flat blue light as their eyes adjusted and just the moonlight filtering from the uneven glass of the windows remained. Laurent laid back, shoulder by shoulder with his brother. He wasn’t cold anymore, but some tension still remained.

Auguste sighed again, jostling a bit around on the mattress, very much of purpose. “But Laurent,” he lamented out of the blue, vowels shaking with dramatics, “what if they don’t like me?”

The scene sliced neatly through Laurent’s anxiety, and he felt himself laughing before he even realised it fully. The room felt less claustrophobic, when Auguste followed suit.

“Everyone likes you,” Laurent added, breath heavy, when they finally stopped giggling like two kids in the middle of a mischief. “Beside, you’re blond. I’ve been told it’s going to be a huge advantage.”

“Are you going to show off my teeth as well?” Auguste countered, with exaggerated interest that evidently defied any attempt on returning to a serious discussion.

They were supposed to sleep, but they ended up laughing and bantering again. The next day, they took off for the last leg of the journey on too little rest and too much adrenaline, and yet the crisp air of the early morning clogged less in Laurent’s lungs.

The sky was pastel blue and placid, and flocks of birds coursed through, their formations diverging and converging as Laurent, Auguste, and their retinue followed the only beaten path that opened through the fields.

As the border grew closer and closer, thin layers of clouds stretched over the hills, pink with the light of the rising sun. If Laurent squinted, he could see the column and dismembered arches of the Artesian ruins overlooking the region in the distance.

He inhaled subtly, lips pressed together, and brought his gaze forward.

This was the place to walk through, if one wanted to touch history.

Today, Laurent was here to do exactly that — and where the fires of war burnt the Artesian Empire to the ground, he would make history by commandeering peace.
As a general rule, Nikandros didn’t trust Jokaste.

That had been true even before he met her, as tales of her cunning intelligence had travelled throughout the tribes. Some said she had made a blacksmith and a tanner sit at the same table even though their families had a thirty-years feud against each other — and at the end the only winner had been her father, the Kyros of the Aegina clan. Other said she could find paths that never existed before, for her clan to move against others, even though she herself was not among the warriors. Inevitably, there were whispered suppositions that she was a witch, capable of reading in people’s minds and instilling thoughts that hadn’t been there before, and that was why her eyes were as clear as the sky, for the skies saw everything.

In each and every one of these tales, Nikandros supposed, there must be a fragment of truth.

The supposition had approached certainty when her father had sent Jokaste to Nikandros. Had she been a warrior, she could have been tied to himself and Damianos, strengthening the alliance through the clans. But while she did nothing to hide her appreciation of Damianos — and enjoying the mutuality of it as well — she was disdainful of any kind of weapon and remarkably uninterested in warfare, and as such they would not assess each other on the fighting field to tie a bond.

“I know you like your games,” Nikandros had told her, one unassuming afternoon in the main Delpha settlement. “But I won’t allow you to play them with my clans.”

Jokaste had smiled at his use of the world clans as if Nikandros had been a kid testing out a magic trick, and she had indulged him just as much on it. “As I was sent here to you, there is little purpose in toying with my own life. Your success will be my success, as it appears, so wouldn’t you be better off telling me what you want from all this?”

All this had been the busy coming and going of his and Damianos’s clans united together, which had not gathered more momentum with the Aegina delegation merging with them, Sicyon ready to join them if they were to walk south, and Dice handling things with Jokaste’s father himself.

“I want the glory of the Akielos to be worthy of our songs.”

Jokaste’s smile had shone brighter, and a little bit sharper, like a mountain lion ready to pounce.

“For this, my dear Kyros, I think we can be in agreement.”

More than one year had passed since that conversation, but Nikandros could not help but thinking about it now, as he travelled towards the border with Vere with Damianos at his side and a hastily arranged group of companions from their inner circle.

When the messenger from their outriders had come to the communal clan hall in Delpha, Nikandros and the higher circle of the clan had been in the middle of having breakfast. Everyone, from Damianos to their ranked warriors to the elders, had stopped in their tracks to listen to the tale of a delegation of men dressed like Veretian that had stopped in a clear on the hill of Marlas. It was only five men, and the reins of their horses were lined with white seashells.

He and Damen had gathered immediately to consult over the matter, but Jokaste had stood by them not even fifteen minutes later, as they were still discussing the possibilities.

“You’re stalling,” she had told them, with the flatness of certainty in her voice. “The ground is sacred, they entered it bringing the ancient signs of a peace meeting. Are you going to go, or do you need the Elders to push you like two misbehaving boys?”
They didn’t need to be pushed, after what it took to bring the clans together and keep them from devolving into conflict within one full moon. The crux of the matter of having a combined council of elders was exactly to never make them move to steer Nikandros and Damianos from their chosen path. Thus they had gone, taking the decision that was appropriate even as Nikandros mulled over the weight of Jokaste’s gaze on his back as they galloped out of the settlement.

They stopped fifteen minutes ride away from the clearing on the hill, dispatching Pallas to scout on behalf of them and their own five-people group.

No Akielon would ever ride with a saddle, but each of their horses wore the white-shell garnet around their necks, lest were they found in contempt of the tradition. The merged high clan had been all too excited to see them upholding it, after all, and even more excited still when the Elders had given them the appropriate paraphernalia for a meeting like this. It was a sort of wonder that they even had it to begin with — as far as Nikandros knew, no one had gathered at the place of the Ancestors for at least a hundred years.

But the memory of the clans was long, and tightly woven.

Dismounting from his ride, Nikandros gestured Makedon — lead of the most prominent Sicyon clan and the one that had helped them bring the North into compliance of their great transversal alliance — to bring him the bundle he had been left in charge of. It was a great honour, and Makedon treated it as such, slowly undoing the dark leathers with geometrical incisions with more carefulness than he would devote even to his own sword.

Underneath, there were the skulls.

Even after meeting all the current leaders of the many and varied Akielon clans, Nikandros wouldn’t be able to tell where they came from. As a child, he had pestered his clanmates to tell him once and for all which animal had sourced them, at least, but after a list of increasingly absurd answers the only reasonable one had come from one of the Delphian Elders, who had told him those animals were long gone from the world. But the clans remembered, and paid their respects.

The Elder had also told Nikandros that he would only get to wear it in times of great perils — provided, of course, that he became Kyros of the clan to begin with — but in the last years Nikandros had taken the skull in his hands so many times, for so many battles, that the weight of was almost familiar. Every chief would wear the skull as a helmet, if they were hollering into battle with their minds set on peace — and Nikandros had worn it, and worn it, and worn it, until Damianos and he got to sit in a circle with every clan, in concordance.

Today was the first time he would wear it to meet a foreigner.

The thread of his thoughts was interrupted by Damen sliding by his side to stand face to face, and Nikandros became aware of the furrow of his own brow just for the tilt of Damen’s smile.

“Let me,” Damen said, simply, and ran a hand to push Nikandros’s hair away from his forehead. It didn’t feel like a needed gesture, but the willingness of it was heartwarming.

“Oh course,” Nikandros murmured, just as Damen crowded closer to him to kiss him — brief and a bit rough with a self-assured possessiveness.

It was familiar, like the tent of the Mothers in one’s birth village, and Nikandros ceded the skull to him with ease.

Damen closed one hand over Nikandros’s jaw and kept his head perfectly still, tilting it slightly
downwards. The pressure of the skull on Nikandros’s nape followed right after, a smooth glide of white bone on skin and hair. Nikandros closed his eyes. When he opened them again, just two seconds after, Damen had tilted his chin back up and was adjusting the skull’s jaw to match the curve of Nikandros’s face.

As a young man, Nikandros had been terrified that when the moment would come for him to wear a skull it would not fit his head — too big or too small, and overall embarrassing — but of course that never came to be. The skulls would always fit, and that was meant to be — the Elders said that.

They fitted Damianos as well, when Nikandros proceeded to return the favour, and that felt larger than life because they hadn’t thought of bringing the skulls of the Ios clan up north — but for Nikandros’s half, the skulls fell into place all the same.

“Why are you looking at me like this?” Damen asked, shaking Nikandros off his thoughts.

“Like what?”

“Like a sprouted a second head and you’re about to chop it off.”

Damen’s voice always sound deeper when the skull was on — constrained by the pressure of an additional jaw against his own, rolled around the fang that raised at the two sides of his chin. He had always been a portentous man, since the first time Nikandros had met him — tall, broad and strong, with a surprisingly wide smile and fire in his eyes. The skull hardened his softest features and highlighted the most stark ones, and the Delpha clan had made sure that the mane at the top of the skull had fur and wool dyed in red, in recognition of the traditional colours of Ios. Damianos was truly a sight to behold.

“We could say that you did,” Nikandros tilted his chin, gesturing to the skull itself. “But I’m not about to behead you for it.”

Damen laughed and the sound lifted the darkest side of Nikandros’s mood. “Are you worried,” Damen went on, more somber, “that this is all a game?”

“Jokaste made sure to have her say,” he replied. “So of course it is a game.”

“You’re too distrustful,” it was an old argument, but Damen would never shy from bringing it up again. “I think you’re underestimating how much Jokaste wants the clans to succeed, united as we brought them.”

“And you’re too trusting, especially if you think that Jokaste doesn’t want the clan to succeed in her ways, and in a way that benefits her.”

Damen tilted his head in a little half-circle, and Nikandros knew he would have ran a hand through his hair, if not for the skull that trapped them. “Do you want to call this off? We get a bigger delegation and we deal with the Veretians as the trespasser they are.”

Nikandros would have lied if he said the idea didn’t appeal to him at all.

And yet.

He shook his head. “They’re donning the white shells. We didn’t spend years praising and fighting for the true Akielon roots of harmony between the clans to then spit in the face of the tradition when some Veretians decided honour it.” He trailed off on the same thought, before concluding. “Assuming they really understand what they are doing, of course.”
“If they don’t, we can spit on their face in the most traditional way.”

At that, Nikandros couldn’t help but laugh.

With that sentiment high in his heart, it was a little easier to listen to Pallas’s recollection when he came back shortly thereafter, even if it was made apparent that the foreigners were indeed performing all the steps needed. No calling for backup and unleashing a charge onto them with the excuse of blatant deception and soiling of the Akielon customs, then — not for now.

Nikandros and Damianos rode into the clearing side by side, the horses familiar with each other and staying perfectly in line. If this had been a leisured stroll in the forest, Nikandros would have let their legs brush and their words flow teasingly. Instead, it was a dangerous game and the best that he could do was trust that they will have each other’s side. Pallas and Alexon were several meters on their left, while Makedon was entrusted alone to their right.

A peace gathering left no room for ambushing, but neither they would be caught off guard if things got overly bloody.

Beyond the last line of trees, the glade opened at the very top of the hill, surrounded by gentle slopes that their horses had climbed without effort. The highest point was marked by a flat white stone, untouched by the patches of wildflowers and moss that grew freely throughout the rest of the forest. It was a good sign, for a meeting point that hadn’t been used for so long, but Nikandros didn’t really know what to make of it nor whose favour was this to be interpreted in.

There was, indeed, a group of five people already waiting for them.

The rearguard was formed by three people, all riding common war horses and doing a relatively poor job in not looking like the foreigner they were. They wore too many clothes, coloured too lightly, and their faces were half-covered in a way no Akielon nor border person would ever choose for themselves. All of them were marked with a blue starburst, the same symbol that flashed on the banner that the central person in the rearguard kept up.

The two people in the vanguard were a totally different matter.

They wouldn’t be unassuming not even if they tried, and everything about them was so stereotypically Veretian that Nikandros could almost hear the echo of some old songs from the clans at the border. The mane of both of their horses was white enough to almost merge with the string of white seashells around their necks, in the mutable light of the afternoon. Blond and fair, with eyes as clear and bright as the coat of arms their men sported, the two men resembled each other very much, at the fact itself made them ever more dazzling. One was evidently much younger than the other, but their noses had the same straight line and the cut of their cheekbones made it almost easy for them to share an expression. Brothers, probably.

“We take the sky as witness and greet you.”

If taking in the men appearance didn’t help Nikandros overcome the weirdness of their presence, being greeted in the old ways of the Akielons did not count as a clarification. The language itself was archaic, more than just heavily accented, and not even a fellow kyros would be expected to address Nikandros like this, if they were to engage in a peace meeting.

Nikandros glanced at Damen, fleetingly, and yet it was sufficient for him to take charge — as the Ios dialect was the closest to the old forms.

“Under the sky that faces the earth, we greet you back.”
There was some fascination in Damen as he looked at the two foreigners, taking in the absurdity of the situation, and Nikandros could only hope his personal acknowledgment of it was due to his deep familiarity with Damianos. For as much as Nikandros prized his half’s honesty, leaving his emotions for these strangers to read could be a liability. One Nikandros could only hope not to contribute in his own right, because he could sense the familiar prickle of curiosity down his nape as they looked at them across the peak of the hill.

“We’re Auguste and Laurent of the Royal family of Vere,” the younger, who had also spoken in greeting and Nikandros assumed to be of lower ranking from his possible brother, continued with the same surprising fluency in Akielon. “We’ve come to open the peace talks.”

There had been just half a second of hesitation, between the first sentence and the second. Enough, when combined with the less ritualistic wording, for Nikandros to ascertain that the young man’s knowledge of what he was doing was good, but not perfect.

He might know, but he didn’t necessarily understand.

Meeting Damen’s eyes was even quicker, now.

With one sharp tug and a strong grip on their horses’ sides, Damen and Nikandros charged.

The distance between them and the foreigners closed fast, and beyond the clamour of the hooves Nikandros distinguished a snapping word coming from the elder, unknown in the meaning but undoubtedly a curse from the tone of it.

They unsheathed their swords before the foreigners could.

In normal circumstances, Nikandros’s weapon of choice on horseback would have been a bow, and he knew perfectly well how deadly Damen could be with a javelin. This, however, was a meeting sealed by seashells — and as such, only the purity of blades was allowed. That would have worried him more, but the split second of hesitation from the strangers seemed to suggest that they would get the upper hand very soon — and any tribulation about games and tradition will be beyond them.

The first hit would always be the most decisive for a fight.

Nikandros felt it within reach and then abruptly lost it, as the two horses in front of them stepped back, remarkably under control even under the sudden threat.

With an impressive use of the downward slope of the hill, they both steered around and opened to Nikandros and Damen’s sides.

After years of fighting side by side, Nikandros had deemed himself and Damen to be perfectly synchronised — and yet, this was something else.

With the older — Auguste — to his left, Nikandros found himself slowed down of those critical two seconds that allowed the foreigner to surpass him. There was a sharp hit, a resonating clanging noise. If this had been a war, his horse would be dead and he himself would get at least another scar. This was at the very least a skirmish, but the horse just reared up with an outraged noise, as if in response of a brutal hit to his buttocks.

As he struggled to hold own and avoid a clash with Damen’s horse on his right, Nikandros could not help but appreciate the fact that his mount had been spared. It had the aftertaste of a weird surprise.
That feeling, too, was short lived.

Another metallic sound rang through the crisp air and Nikandros turned around just in time to see the sword of the younger blond man — Laurent — flying up, stripped out of his grip by Damen’s formidable countering. The strength of Damen’s grip and the quick of his wit in battle were no news. His horse knew him well enough, too, to have absolute trust in Damen leaning sideways to run his blade over the strap that bound the Veretian saddle.

The foreigner was falling. Whatever opening Nikandros had missed, bringing his horse forcibly under control, Damen had took it.

But then there was a furious kicking of legs, pressing against the sliding saddle for a precarious leverage, and Laurent had enough momentum to tackle Damen’s sides bodily.

Fights were not fought this way. Ever, but even less so among Veretians.

And yet here there were, with Damen being dragged down the side of his horse as the Veretian animal in close proximity funneled a fit of equine panic.

Nikandros didn’t have time to see them crashing on the floor, nor to worry about hooves crushing skulls.

It was just two seconds, every point of the action bursting like a flame in the span of two heartbeats.

The brief neigh of a horse forced to a stressful maneuver piped up briefly behind him. Auguste had not waited to have a proper recovery ground to stir his mount around. His features were sharp and almost cruelly in focus as the distance between disappeared, and the blade of the sword shone clean between the Veretian’s hands, rather than point-first towards Nikandros.

The pommel hit him in the shoulder with unprecedented violence.

The ground welcomed Nikandros too, with no gentleness and a clear edge of anguish.

Training and hard-won habit moved his limbs more than real purpose, and Damen glimpsed at him just feebly, enough for Nikandros to know he wasn’t the only one startled.

A foot cladded in a tall boot and all too many laces flashed beside Nikandros’s hand just as he reached desperately for the Veretian sword that lied on the thick grass. Laurent didn’t step directly on Nikandros’s wrist, but he might as had for the quality of his blue eyes as he stared down at him. He wasn’t as tall as his brother — whose horse danced around two steps, smoothly back under his control as all other animals had scattered downhill — but he still manage to look imposing, with his chin slightly tilted upwards in a blatant display of smugness.

“I do believe this is our win,” the young man enunciated clearly, the archaic twinge of his Akielon only serving to worsen the haughtiness. “And now we should talk.”

Nikandros had no intention to talk, but having touched the sacred ground with no weapon in his hands and Damianos unable to back him up meant, indeed, that they had lost. So he hesitated — but Damen did not. He felt in his bones as he tensed, and then a second later he went to pounce forward as if to return Laurent his tackling favour.

The impetus was enough to send the Veretian stumbling back, hitting the ground hard with his rear. It was not enough to tip the balance of their current predicament, however, and a blade came up behind Nikandros’s neck before he could move to aid. Likewise, a pair of violent hand came to
tackle Damen down and back on the grass.

Laurent muttered something hostile in Veretian, and scrambled back up with as much grace as he could muster.

Auguste swung down his horse with one grateful movement, full of all the mastership they just witnessed and suffered first-hand. His glare seemed to make Laurent’s scowl look like the worst offense that could ever be provoked.

“Are you not going to follow your own traditions?” Laurent challenged, quickly recomposed.

Nikandros sighed — there was only one answer, if he was to come back to the Elders at some point. “We are.”

And they were.

Still, having Auguste walking close to him where he knelt on the ground, with the subtle threat of the sword of a Veretian man lingering behind his back to remind him to behave, was disconcerting. Uneasiness pooled in Nikandros’s stomach as he felt two hands at the side of his head, pulling away the skull and leaving his head exposed to the foreigners.

It felt like a defeat, because it was one.

He knelt there stiffly, a defiant tilt of his chin looking up the two men in front of them. Damen was not that composed, lunging forward Laurent the second he was done getting the helmet out of his head — he only got pushed back down, more firmly from one of their guards.

Nikandros didn’t dare looking for their own men — for the Akielons that had just witnessed this unprecedented twist in events.

“Now, we talk,” Auguste said, in a stilted and unrefined Akielon. “Are you going to be our guests?”

High in the sky, clouds came and went in an idle dance across the sun, as a gentle wind blew from the hinterlands. The world was going on around them, careless and unperturbed by their distressed.

Nikandros sighed through clenched teeth.

To this, too, there was only one answer.
Smell was the first sense to mark stepping inside an unknown place, for Damen.

They had been blindfolded for the journey into Vere, even though they had agreed to it, and settled into a small, closed carriage. Damen and Nikandros’s horses would come with them, a concession
that sounded too much of a small comfort and that required a strict order to the rest of their retinue not to follow into Vere — or face the border patrol like any transpassing Akielon, if they did.

Damen had not thought it was a real deterrent, nor as much as a clever arrangement as the young Prince Laurent seemed to think it was. The Veretians had understood Akielon traditions well enough to use them properly, but not deeply enough to understand the ramifications. Their clansmen would not follow because Nikandros and Damianos were bound to these two foreigners by combat. The rules that had bound them were the only ones that can freed them, any external intervention would cause them their honour. It was not a taint any of their loyal men would subject their chieftains to.

Still, it was difficult to fault the two princes for their prudence.

The journey had taken some hours, as the inside of the carriage grew to a more comfortable warmth under the sun. With one shoulder pressed against Nikandros’s, skin to skin, it was easier to not let darkness trick him into perceiving the enclosed space as larger. The shaking and bumping of the road told Damen they must have passed the border hills, and as the wood on one side grew warmer than the other he knew they must have turned west. Outside, the horses galloped steadily, but the sound didn’t morph and the carriage didn’t properly stabilised, meaning that the princes must have chosen to avoid the more neatly paved Veretian roads that on especially clear days were visible from the peak of the highest hill in Delpha.

Prudence, again. And more still when they slowed and halted, but no one called to acknowledge them, in the quiet of what felt like a secluded entrance, interspersed by the fluttering and cackling of chickens.

All of that — the road and the wood, the grounds and the horses — Damen was familiar with.

Then they stepped inside and the air was fresher.

One turn, some carefully placed steps on remarkably even steps made of stones, another turn. A door opened and that was where Damen knew, truly, that he had stepped into an unknown world.

Smoke lingered like an aftertaste, rather than the main sensation, and something subtle and aromatic like flowers past the peak of their bloom substituted it. There was beeswax, also, and warmed fabric. Nothing of people, of a lived space shared as any hall of a clan settlement should be, as if Damen had stepped into an oversized crate of an artisan rather than into a place meant for living.

When the blindfold was removed, the impression only intensified, and mingled with surprise.

The room was huge, with tall ceilings that curved high in a different stone than the one of the Artesian ruins, equally tall windows framed in cast iron. The walls were probably stoney as well, but they were covered in complex scenarios waved in coloured wool, a work fine enough that a person should wear it rather than a place. Too much furniture, arranged as if it were a public spectacle rather than something of any use, and curtains and fabrics that didn’t serve any practical purpose. Beyond the closed doors framed in gold on two of the walls, there were probably other equally pointless, empty rooms.

There was something performative about it, like the gaudy feathers on a peacock’s tail stretching out. Something morbidly deranged, as well, which the curl in Nikandros’s lips conveyed perfectly when Damen glanced over to him.

“You should sit,” Laurent’s voice cut through what was too close to stupor. “We should talk.”
His refined, outdated Akielon reminded Damen of the old priestesses that had croaked many stories during his childhood, accompanied only by the furious sloshing of water against the white cliffs. She was rumored to have seen over a hundred and ten springs, by the time Damen became a man, and her mentor before her had seen just as many. That voice had carried memory, and as such authority. Damen had remembered each and every on her teaching, the day he accepted to follow Nikandros in his fate and his project. There was something at the back of his mind that commanded him to listen even now, for wise words hid the true meaning of destiny. Yet this Veretian was barely a man, cunning and full of tricks, and Damen’s shoulder still ached from hitting the ground too hard. For as much as he tended to trust his instinct, in this specific case it might be deceiving.

They sat, the thread of the embroidery of the couches rasping at their bare thighs.

Damen witnessed the exchange of stares between the two brothers as clearly as they must have seen the one between himself and Nikandros. There was an hilarity in it that brought Damen to consider what picture they could paint, amidst the room’s foreign and pointless display of weird colours and weirder shapes, in their clean cut chieftain clothing. Likely, the contrast was the same the two Veretian would have offered in the middle of the Delphian clan settlement.

“War is coming for our kingdom,” the younger prince said. “We evoked the tradition to seek alliance.”

The two Royals both had the posture, the attitude, but Damen was left with the impression that this was the first time Prince Laurent got to single-handedly conduct a discussion. There was a subtle alert in Auguste — the elder — in a mixture of doubt towards his shaky command of Akielon and apprehensiveness towards his younger brother. Damen thought the feeling was misplaced — stating the issue directly was appropriate, a recognition of their reciprocal status, and Nikandros’s expression might appear bland for strangers but markedly attentive for Damen — but seeing them sitting side by side, rather than against the sun on exceptional horses, made their differences more pronounced than their similarities. Laurent was shorter and slimmer, the type of man Damen would have never sent charging on a horse even though the acrobatic spectacle that he pulled sent Damen himself to the ground. None of this mattered against the evidence that the two brothers were born at least ten years apart.

“The clans don’t care about foreign drama, they’ve never had,” Nikandros countered. “Having evoked the tradition doesn’t give you the right to make us care.”

“It does give me that right, why would I speak without trying to convince you of something?”

A smiled pulled at Damen’s lips, exactly because of how readily the personality friction between this blond young man and Nikandros had become evident. Auguste, even through his lack of language understanding, had an educatedly perplexed curve in his eyebrow. Damen looked forward to how entertaining this whole conversation promised to be, with these two deeply attractive strangers trying to get through Nikandros’s prodigious steadfastness. As such, he was more than willing to watch in silence at the moment.

“Would you like me to tell you why our problems are your problems also?” Laurent asked, with the same adrenalinic mirth that Damen had often seen in young men at their first okton.

“You’re going to, and I have to listen,” Nikandros conceded, after a second of annoyed silence.

“Truthfully,” Laurent carried on, as if Nikandros’s interjection had been weightless, “the key to my point is that any war coming to us, this time, will slander you too. Starting from the Delphian lands.”
Damen tensed at the progression, standing up from his seat. The foreigner’s words might equally be a statement, a promise or a threat. For someone who had lived the last few years on the edge of constant conflict with the other clans of his people, Damen felt still unaccustomed to uncertainty.

Nikandros was a silent and menacing presence behind his back, still on that ridiculous couch. On the other hand, Auguste rose up at the mere suggestion of someone towering over his little brother.

Against the background of his own palace, of his own land, Auguste’s features appeared different than what they had been on the sacred hill just a few hours before. He had clear eyes, clearer than his brother’s while his hair was a darker shade of golden, and a jaw set by something that tasted like extensive sorrow. While he was shorter than Damen, and even more slender, there was a persistence in his stance that made Damen want to check personally who managed to curtail Nikandros on a horse.

There was a low murmur of slippery vowels as Laurent spoke to Auguste in Veretian.

Damen bore the sharpness of his glare before he clipped out a “Very well” in a stiled Akielon, and walked off to a weirdly complex table, full of apparently hidden cases.

“Sit down, Damianos,” Nikandros added. He didn’t need to voice anything more, for Damen to know that Nikandros didn’t trust these Princes.

Auguste came back with extensive rolls parchment — only it was not parchment but something thinner and crispier. When he spread them over between them, the lines of ink seemed to dip deeper onto the surface than they would have had on a scroll, but the substance was recognisable all the same. It was a map, tracing the borders and geographical markers of Vere, Akielos, Patras and Vask.

There was a light exchange of stares, once again, between the two Veretians. They were well coordinated in a way that any Akielon would have appreciated, but there was an uncertainty in the dynamic as if knowing each other and showing each other to Damen and Nikandros was different. It was weird to see mistrust in something that was undoubtedly a strength.

Damen sat back down. “What are we looking at?”

“Those are the most probable routes that a joint Vaskian and Patran force would take to attack Vere.”

Nikandros looked over to Damen with too many possible questions to fit the non-verbal and Damen leaned over with elbows on his knees to analyse the map more carefully.

In Akielos, the most important maps always depicted internal landmarks, old Artesian roads and water paths carved on stone rather than on parchment to be preserved for longer. Anything else was sensibly drawn in black lines on smooth animal skin. The Veretians, unsurprisingly, seemed dead-set on putting down as many details as possible, on a large scale that covered multiple countries. The work was strategically amazing, but remarkably confusing for the multitude of coloured inks that marked the paper, and for the unfamiliar symbols and writings that complemented it.

“You’ll have to provide some specifics on this,” Damen said, carefully. And yet he could already see the northern mountains, and the suggestion of routes he knew too well cutting through them, towards the core of the Delpha clan territory.

Laurent stretched a hand over, tracing over the mountains that separated Vere from Vask. “The cliffs are steep, here, and right after we have hills and planes rather than forest. The Vaskian
navigate the rocks well, but they can’t invade easily.” He had slender hands, soft-looking like the most pampered of women, and yet Damen could catch the calluses from the sword and the ones from the horse reins. When he flickered his gaze up, Laurent was not looking at him, but Auguste was, his blue eyes like the sky before a storm.

“These mountains must stretch for at least two days riding,” Nikandros pointed out — he was looking at Damen, as Damen had been looking at Laurent, and that was more flustering than the elder brother catching him. “They might not pass in numbers, but they can pass in many places.”

There was a brief pause for Laurent to murmur a translation to Auguste, the fact itself that it was deemed necessary a sign that they were in the heat of the conversation now. Auguste looked over to Nikandros with equal part recognition and concern — the only option in recognising wit from a counterpart that was not exactly an ally.

“Absolutely correct,” Laurent conceded with ease — with a smile, even, but it didn’t spread to his eyes. “Normally it wouldn’t be a concern, history has proved to us that we can counter it. But if Patras were to move with them, and not pass through the mountains to do it, then our strategic concerns become more of a conundrum.”

His fingers returned to the map, skirting away from the peaks painted in dark brown and grey that they have been talking about. He lingered on the gentle hills of the Akielos and Vere border where the four of them must be roughly located now, and then went on towards the great woods in Akielon territory.

“The deep forest of Foloi is ancient,” Damen interjected, before Laurent could express his point further. “The way is not clear.”

“But if you were to move in numbers from Patras to come to Vere, which would be your shortest route?” Laurent pressed on.

Surely not through the Cliffs of Aristhes, where the borders of Vere, Akielos, Vask and Patras met. Not even further to the west, joining the Vaskians in their territory just to end up further clogged in funnels of barren rock and landslide-prone passages.

Damen looked over to Nikandros once again, and found him already glancing back, without subterfuge, his lips pressed in a thin line of disdain.

“So you evoked the tradition to inform us that we will have to fight a war that we didn’t start.”

Laurent’s glare was like an icicle dropping through tense air. “I evoked the tradition to seek an alliance,” he repeated, as if Damen and Nikandros were being purposefully slow. “So that neither of us has to fight and no one has to shoulder the loss and the uncertainty.”

Silence lingered between them for so long that it almost looked like a fifth party in the conversation, someone else who was supposed to have a say but steadfastly refused to do so.

“We have stories about Vere and the deals that might come with your people,” Damen cut through the chase at some indistinct point, as the sun began to set in some indefinite point outside the castle. “It’s said that Veretians are as fickle as water spirits, full of compelling words that hold no substance. It’s said that any knot they tie with one hand they will readily undo with the other and nothing will ever be delivered.”

Laurent leaned back against the couch, a rising chuckle shaking his shoulders as mirth expanded to his eyes. “Well, isn’t that uncharitable.”
“Not unfounded, though,” Nikandros pointed out, as if suspicious of Laurent’s hilarity. “Any clansman would have fought this offense to their honour and you’re there laughing, so you must love the sound of your own words more than you love the solid ground of a good deal.”

The smile morphed into a snarl and Damen had a wave of unsteady reproachfulness towards his half. Maybe, he thought, they were being uncharitable — the rights granted from the tradition had been evoked to talk, and Laurent was talking. Drawing a sword would have been a violation as well. That, and there was a certain light in Laurent’s stunning features that could only be glimpsed when he laughed.

Laurent did not deign to reply to Nikandros straight away, and turned towards his brother into a flurry of foreign sentences, to put him up to speed with the conversation and the friction probably. The pitch of his voice was slightly different when he spoke in Veretian, as if his throat was less constricted with the effort, and words flew in a way that made Damen long to understand him in a language in which Laurent would very likely not sound as a rehearsed performance of Artesian dialectic.

Auguste was sitting with perfect posture, apparently unfazed by being the only one in the room that required a translator. He listened to Laurent but kept his eyes on Damen and Nikandros the whole time. There was a rising frown on his forehead, barely there but sufficient to make evident that he was considering the issue at play, and he spared no laughter on it. When he talked back to Laurent, his voice was low, as if following a habit of whispering with his brother even when it was not necessary. He had a deep twist that fit both his age and the span of his shoulders, and whatever he said must have ignited a rapid-fire back and forth with Laurent.

The ununderstandable murmuring ceased only when Auguste gave a last definitive nod, and Laurent took a deep breath but turned around to relay whatever was the outcome.

“Our deals and traditional arrangements are not *fickle*,” Laurent made sure to point out, with a sideways tilt of his head that matched the claustrophobic refinery of the room. “But trying to argue on it would prove your point, wouldn’t it? So what about we rely on *your* traditions and bind an alliance by the tying of halves?”

It was Nikandos’s turn to spit out a disbelieving laugh, before the shock of the proposal could even settle properly into Damen’s mind. “And who would tie his fate with us? You?”

“My brother Auguste, obviously,” Laurent replied flatly, immune to sarcasm. “As he is the eldest and the one with the authority to bring forth Veretian armies.”

There was yet another bout of silence, a prolonged exchange of stares that for once excluded Laurent completely.

Everything in Auguste spoke of a man born and raised in authority and comfortable in wielding it — more by pragmatism than by words, but that might be an impression falsified by the language barrier. He donned the historic sigils of the Royal Family of Vere, the same colours the old tales sang about. His credibility as the holder of an alliance following the traditional requisites of the Akielon clans was not in question.

“And what would make us think that he would honour our traditions?” Nikandros gritted out, his teeth clenched.

“We are here honouring your tradition to begin with, so I would say you have more proof than our word already. Which can’t be said for your ways, Chief Nikandros, because you didn’t build a reputation with us in Vere,” Laurent talked back, with enough virulence that something came
through, again, from the composure of his character. His words were more slippery like this, his accent less forced in its obvious imperfection. “Moreover...are you denying that the ways the Akielon tie their fates together is rather difficult to fake?”

Nikandros blistered at the mischievous undertone and Damen felt himself stiffening on his seat. While their was honour in the binding, it was difficult to deny that if someone explained the mechanics to this young man there was little to sugarcoat around.

“Very well, this is enough,” Damen resolved, after a sharp inhaling. “What does he speak?”

“What speaks what?” Laurent batted his eyes, trying to catch up with the abrupt turn of conversation.

“What languages does your brother speak?” Damen elaborated further. “If we are to go forward in any way and put any trust in this arrangement we will have to speak with him directly.”

“Actually, we should speak with the two of you separately,” Nikandros added.

It was Damen’s turn to agree with Laurent’s dubious expression, for he did not particularly wish to be separated from Nikandros in foreign and unknown territory with two strangers that already proved to be a pair of trickster. He did not oppose outrightly, however, because offering a conflicting front was even more unfavourable.

Laurent hesitated, on the verge of denying the request immediately, but then leaned against Auguste, as if among any exchange this one required more privacy than then one already granted by speaking Veretian. Auguste's brow furrowed, worry seemed to invade his expression easily. There was a quick back and forth of interrogative tones, and then some resolute statements.

"I am familiar," Auguste pronounced carefully. "With a dialect the people of the border speak. Would it fit a conversation?"

It was peculiar to hear him in a language that was roughly understandable for Damen. Like his brother's, his voice changed pitch when he did, and the tinge of recklessness that accompanied this move was a welcome interruption to the silent and composed statue the older man had been since the beginning.

"Only if we talk about the weather, cows and hunting, in my case" Damen replied with some irony. It did manage to crack a smile on Auguste's face, which was a weird satisfaction.

"I was born and raised in the borders, I speak it plenty." Nikandros interjected, serious "We can talk, and leave your brother with Damianos."

The second part was such a blatant displeasure for Auguste that for a second Damen was sure he would refuse. But then he inhaled and exhaled slowly and raised. "Very well, we'll go next door. Briefly."

"Briefly," repeated Nikandros, with an undertone of double warning for every part involved.

Keeping each other at an arm and a half of distance, Auguste and Nikandros crossed the door that opened to the left of the room.
With the door closed behind them, it was immediately clear that Nikandros had no intention of sitting down again. Auguste, who had been feeling restless since the first moment their retinue had entered Acquitart with two barbarians in tow, could definitely appreciate the feeling — even when it came with the aftertaste of being in close contact with a predatory beast.

Nikandros, Chieftain of the Delphan Clan and joint leader of all Akielons, was tall and broad in a way that exuded a raw but measured power. He seemed to lack most of the good nature that came easy to Damianos, at least towards people that had yet to win his trust, and while it soured the negotiations Auguste appreciated the steadiness that it communicated.

“It is unheard of, for a foreigner, to be tied to an Akielon.”

Nikandros opened like this, without hesitation or further refineries. To get to the same point, Auguste’s council would have taken a week.

“Is there something explicitly against it?” Auguste asked — because for as much as Laurent claimed to have every detail covered, this was not their culture to play with.

Nikandros batted his eyes slowly, as if he didn’t forecast a question like this. “There isn’t,” he admitted, after a second, “but our ways are meant to be kept among our people. Do you wish to partake just because you think it will win our trust?”

Anything in Auguste screamed about five possible twists he should give to this conversation to layer his intention and muddle the waters. It was an effort, to let go and just speak, with the inherent sense of panic that had accompanied him since their expedition this morning.

“I do want your trust, because I want you as allies. I understand no deal would have any weight if I weren’t to be willing to meet you halfway.”

“Is this halfway for you?” Nikandros insistent. He wasn’t aggressive, but he had a kind of relentless persistence that seemed to fight against any attempt to deescalate a conversation away from an argument. “You join me and Damianos as our half, we become part of your fate and your duty as you become ours, and it’s...an acceptable exchange?”

Auguste felt his brow furrowing, which he consistently tried to suppress the Court at Arles, but here it seemed to happen at an alarming frequency. “This is my responsibility, Chieftain Nikandros, and you seem to be very attached to the idea that your tradition is asking for too much for me to understand. Marriage alliances are a routine for every country that surrounds Akielos, and beyond. I understand the concept, I can appreciate the straightforwardness, at least I know what to expect...even though you consistently imply that I don’t.”

It was a fit of irritation. Auguste recognised it as such only when his words had stopped. He had tried so hard to train it out of Laurent — he thought he managed, though Laurent often replaced it with a scathing wit — and their mother had worked at length to dull this edge out of Auguste himself before.

Instinctually, he braced for issues — retaliation, failure, more concessions to make.

Instead, Nikandros just hummed low, with a nod that was almost appreciative.

“I was starting to fear your character could only be apparent on a horse,” Nikandros said. His lips tilted, almost a smirk. “I don’t expect foreigners to know our traditions, let alone actually trying to
evoke them. You must understand the surprise, even more so when the Veretian are famous for deception.”

“You might have gathered from my brother that we love to talk,” Auguste conceded, dryly, and was pleasantly surprised by Nikandros’s laughter of assent. “But before talking, we informed ourselves. And I agree we wouldn’t have tried something like this, with you, in other circumstances, but the situation called for it. This is not a deception, though I can’t deny the necessity behind the commitment.”

A primordial part of Auguste, lodged in the same place he got all his courtly manners and his understanding of the duty of a King, rebelled against each and every syllable he pronounced. It felt too raw, too open, too honest in the attempt to be in clear contrast with the deceitfulness he had been accused off.

A king that begs, his father’s voice reminded him, can’t hold a crown on his head.

In Arles, this would have been interpreted as begging. In Arles, Auguste would have paid for it. But he had chosen to leave Arles and chase the stars in Laurent’s eyes and his hope for this last plan.

If I don’t hold this kingdom together, Auguste caught himself thinking, egotistical for once, there will be no point to a crown, nor a head to hold it.

Nikandros took a couple of steps around him, at a careful but respectful distance. Mixed with the dialect they were speaking to each other it gave Auguste the stark impression of a lynx on the mountain cliffs, assessing its prey.

“Setting up an alliance like this often takes several months, even years if the parts haven’t fought next to each other beforehand.” Nikandros broke the silence only after having made sure that Auguste would let it settle without trying to talk it out further.

“I don’t have months, let alone years,” Auguste admitted, smoothing the tension from his voice. “If my sources are correct, and they have been reliable so far, we would end up fighting side by side all too quickly. But for this reason exactly I need our fates tied before I let you go back to your clans.”

Nikandros snarled, displeased but not dismissive. With a glance at the door, he ran a hand through his hair as if giving up on holding a part of himself together.

“I imagined that much,” he admitted. “Very well, Auguste of Vere. I’m willing to really discuss this.”

The undertones of that really rang through the room, much deeper than such a simple word.

Nikandros turned on his flat sandals and went back to the main room.

Laurent of the royal house of Vere did not fill the room in the same way, without his brother at his
left side. There was an uncertainty that painted his confidence now, conveyed at every time his clear blue eyes flashed towards the closed door. This whole plan must be his, Damen thought, or his enough that he liked it better within the boundaries of what he had designed than spun out of order by private conversations. Yet, he remained seated, crossing his legs stubbornly, even as Damen stood up and took a couple of considerate steps around the room.

“Should I take this whole ordeal as a signal that your half doesn’t like me?” Laurent asked, quite strategically before Damen could get too close to the windows in the boredom of silence. “Or is Chief Nikandros fundamentally opposed to the whole picture?”

“Nikandros is fundamentally opposed to very few things, a bold arrangement is not one of them.”

Laurent glanced dubiously to the door. “It doesn’t look like so.”

To that, Damen could only laugh. There had been many times where people like Pallas had told him that Nikandros was very serious and too uncompromising.

“I do suppose it requires some flexibility to do what Nikandros initiated with the Akielon clans,” Laurent considered, training his eyes on Damen again as Damen walked back towards the couches.

“You’re very well informed of Akielos and of our ways. Unusually well informed,” Damen considered, looking down at him.

The lift of Laurent’s eyebrow reminded Damen of a cat unappealed by a treat that was being offered to him. “Would you prefer I stumbled onto you two, unaware, and still managed to drag you into all of this?”

Damen laughed again, and Laurent’s eyes skirted on his face, before averting. The tingle of interest Damen felt along his back was undeniable.

“You dragged me and my half into this and yet you still talk in circles and shuffle your secrets around,” Damen pointed out, circling the couch onto which Laurent still seated.

“I’m Veretian,” Laurent replied flatly, making a great scene of relaxing back against the couch.

“Then why should I trust you to not have manufactured this whole story of conflict with Patras and Vask for some bigger, hidden scope?”

Damen stopped in his stance behind the backrest of the couch, looming over Laurent. The young man just lifted his head, looking up at him defiantly as his blond hair cascaded over the pillow — a purer form of elegance in contrast with the heavy embroidery.

“I’m Veretian,” Laurent repeated. “I don’t deal with trust easily and I don’t count on trust to trick you. But would you tell me, Damianos, that none of these movements I described has been known to you, one way or another? That your scouts from the border didn’t report anything back to you, that everything is calm and flat and our efforts to be prepared are akin to a child fretting after a nightmare?”

At this, Damen could only be silent.

Laurent of Vere was Veretian, it filtered through every ounce of his being and Damen knew there must be a very specific way he was so informed about what happened among the clans. But being Veretian could not manipulate the reports from the northern kyroi, the increasing signs of movements through the Foloi forest. They had thought of hunters at first, of Patran people thinking they could just venture a little further. In the light that Laurent of Vere casted, it all morphed quite
“My brother doesn’t know your language, but he doesn’t decide on things on a whim,” Laurent kept talking, as if Damen’s silence had been an answer in itself. “His proposition is truthful and I wish you and Chief Nikandros to consider it as such.”

There was a pressure in it that Damen could recognise as necessity, which was not unlike what had drawn him and Nikandros together, many years ago, then their clans struggled and the childhood bond they shared appeared as the only stable surface to lean against.

“I know your people call us the barbarians,” Damen replied, but with a smile. “You have mine and Nikandros’s consideration, given how keen you are on our fates to be bound.”

Laurent lounged more fully on his seat, his neck craned and a very analytic gaze on Damen’s whole figure, running along his body to reach his face. His lips parted lightly when their eyes met. He was young and beautiful, light as an early morning at the sea on the cliffs of Ios.

“I’m sure I’m not the only one that is keen,” Laurent drawl out, with a little smile that was incongruous with the outdated formalities of his speech.

Damen snickered. “The fact that I would readily bed you has very little to do with how we can strike an alliance.”

This, among all things, seemed to surprise Laurent — as if hinting at it had a fundamentally different meaning from voicing it directly. Very Veretian indeed, if the songs were to be taken accountable.

Laurent opened his mouth, closed it again, and then straightened from his lassitude when Damen’s eyes lingered for two second longer on the exposed line of his white, elegant neck. “Well, obviously, I’m not even part of the tying.”

“I disagree with that, you’re the voice of your brothers in too many ways.”

“Wooing me is not going to change the situation in that regard or any other.”

“I don’t see what bedding you would have to do with changing a situation.”

“It was my understanding that bedding will be involved in a change of situation, but not mine.”

There was something close to a flush creeping up at the side of Laurent’s neck. He knew how to play the game, Damen thought suddenly, but not how to conclude it.

“Not yours,” Damen confirmed, giving in to the temptation to reach over and brush two fingers along Laurent’s jaw, towards that defiantly raised chin. His skin was as smooth and warm as it looked. Damen knew from experience it would be warmer still, in other places, but possibly softer than he could fathom, if he always wore so many clothes. Maybe his older brother would be similar, but surely not the same.

Laurent was still, but reluctant in his stiffness — unsure rather than conflicted. When Damen pressed to fingers at the tip of his chin, he swallowed against the most subtle jump of his breathing.

Damen wondered, silently, if he had ever been kissed.

From his right, the sound of a lock broke the silence that seeped through the room, and Damen brought the hand back to his side just as the door opened.
Auguste and Nikandros joined them again, a different resolution painted on their faces. Both of their eyes stopped on Laurent — seated and turned towards the back of the couch — and Damen — standing right behind them, in a suspicious line of sight. Nikandros raised his eyebrows, hard-suffering in a way that Damen was all too acquainted with. Auguste’s expression went perfectly flat in a way that was probably displeasure.

Snatched away from their moment, Laurent stood up, impeccably composed and looking much less young than he had a second before. There was something stubbornly questioning in the way he tilted his head to his brother.

“I believe we can find an agreement,” Auguste said, after two seconds of poignant silence, in the hesitant border dialect Damen was never quite sure he understood fully. “Why don’t we move this conversation to something more pleasant, like some food?”

Among all the propositions he had listened to today, this one was the less oddly foreign one. The convivial setting was, after all, the only one where peace after a battle could be properly assessed.

That, and Damen was absolutely starving.

As the light in the sky painted of the softer hue of afternoon, he and Nikandros ended up facing yet another shift of scenario.

Having the two Veretian arranging dinner at the far side of the room — conversing with servants that stood outside of yet another door and firmly away from a proper field of view — was the only moment Nikandros got to talk with Damen in as much as a relative privacy as he thought they would be granted at the moment. It was probably by design, as everything the brothers had set into motion so far had been, but Nikandros was still glad of the opportunity.

“Tell me you weren’t just flirting with the young one and that you actually have an impression on this whole mess,” Nikandros spoke lowly, using the dialect variation typical of the Ios clan — because the opportunity might be courtesy, but he was not an idiot.

“There was barely any flirting.” Damen had at least the good sense of not denying the thing altogether. “I don’t know how he knows so many details of Akielos, but the movement in the forest is compatible to what they said.”

“And he couldn’t have been them to begin with? Or them with the Patrans?”

“Not without us seeing them moving contingents around at other border posts. And I don’t see what they would have to gain from this if the Patrans are actually on their side.”

It was a strategically sensible point, an aspect Nikandros tended to trust Damianos on wholeheartedly. He might not have a good look for deceits that didn’t pass through a straightforward confrontation, but warfare was his speciality. Nothing he deemed as nonsense had ever worked out in the field, and the clans were united now exactly because he was capable of pointing out the most likely way forward.

“I think the elder is serious about this too,” Nikandros considered after a moment. “I’m not sure
they understand the traditions, but they are working along that. And I think there is...a story, in this whole plan.”

“A need,” provided Damen.

“A need, yes. Here’s to hoping we won’t get the lashing out of animals in a trap out of this.”

Damen looked at him curiously, with something Nikandros recognised as entertainment. “So we’re gonna do it? Tying our fate to the elder?”

Several feet away, in a room that remained stubbornly nonsensical in its luxury, Auguste and Laurent were busying themselves with bundles of linen, probably full of food smuggled into the room from unknown places in the house. Auguste stood more than a head taller than his brother, the resolute span of his shoulders perfectly straight and in command of himself — but Nikandros had seen his stance stiffening, under the weight of responsibility. Beside him, Laurent was a difficult presence to pin — perfectly complementary, and yet almost obsessive in the dedication he evidently poured into this whole ordeal. Too young and not so young anymore.

Maybe Damianos was not the only one with a spark of curiosity to drive him forward.

“I’m inclined to, unless the meal makes us change our mind. And unless you are against it, of course,” Nikandros said, working hard not to lower his voice in a telling way.

Damen batter his eyes rather than shaking his head. “I’m not against it. And maybe they will give us more detailed plans once we actually join the cause. The younger sure seems to have a plan for everything.”

“Making his big brother our half is not going to bring him in your bed, I hope you know this,” Nikandros hinted before he could help himself.

At this, Damen actually smiled — a dimple on his cheek, familiar and known. “No, that’s going to be a whole other piece of work.”

Nikandros rolled his eyes. Even the ceiling was somewhat decorated to look like the covering of a forest. He groaned.

“Don’t make me regret this.”

Damen sighed, less facetious. “If we end up regretting this, we’ll regret it together.”

The dinner had been a convoluted business — funnier than Laurent had predicted, less tactically proactive than he had imagined it in his head.

He tried to gauge some of his guest’s preferences, to better define their characters before launching in detailed propositions that might fall into blind spots of disgruntlement, but Damianos didn’t know the kind of cheese they had put on the table. With much perplexity, Laurent realised he didn’t know barely enough words in Akielon that involved food, unless they had been coopted for some military analogy. Similarly, the dialect that they all spoke was mostly focused on geography
and practicalities, and while its application in hunting helped covering some of the meat on the table everything else remained coated in a fog of misunderstandings.

A good half hour spiralled in increasingly outrageous comparisons that turned the whole conversation into a joke rather than filling the linguistic gaps.

Nikandros apparently found the taste of Veretian cereal bread puzzling, but could not elaborate on the reason. When he gave up on expressing himself properly, an exasperated eyeroll was the marker of the transition.

“It feels like my tongue had been pressed out on a freshly chopped piece of wood and rubbed for good reason, does that satisfy your curiosity?” He snapped towards Auguste, pointing at pieces of himself, pieces of furniture and resolving to gestures to convey the meaning.

The whole ensemble looked like something else entirely, to the point that even Damianos blinked at him.

Laurent realised only after the commotion that he hadn’t heard his brother laugh so openly in several months, and certainly not at a table with strangers.

It wasn’t a luxurious banquet as the one they would reserve to foreign dignitaries in Arles, but at the same time it was impossible to imagine the high table of the Royal Palace fitting the two Chieftains. They sat spread-legged on the chairs, fastidious against the backrests, and ate with their hands in a way that Laurent correlated immediately to Jokaste. Their traditional garments left an outrageous amount of skin into display — be it not for the leather fixtures on their shoulders and chest, and the straps that connected them, Laurent’s mind could have easily tricked him into believing that they were naked beyond the corner of the table.

By the time they got to the sweetmeats, Nikandros and Damianos had exhausted their technical curiosities. Still, Laurent caught himself expressing some of his own attachment to the region, and made more than some effort to translate whatever Auguste didn’t manage to express satisfactorily in the border dialect. As it turned out, Nikandros had a clear mental map of where every ruin of the old empire laid in the land of his clans, and Damianos enjoyed what he called *the old songs* as much as Laurent was enamoured with the library books.

Chaotic and unstructured as it was, the whole ordeal made Laurent’s chest tingle as if a string was being pulled to tangle him forward into the plan he himself had designed.

*Maybe*, a dangerously hopeful voice whispered in his mind, *maybe this can actually work.*

Beyond every doubt that he never allowed his brother to see, there were two people similar and different to the way Jokaste had described to him. Apart from all of Laurent’s scheming, there was Damianos’s gaze, quietly fixated on Laurent every time he spoke for too long.

There was a lazy moment, as the Akielons tied the fabric of the bundles they got from the kitchens back around the leftovers — sorting them quickly away from utensils as if they would put them away themselves any minute. Laurent could have missed the glance they exchanged, except he didn’t because they were in the line of sight over Auguste’s shoulders and seeing the same tentative hope in his brother made Laurent hyperfocus on each and every detail.

It still caught him by surprise, when Nikandros spoke, using the border dialect.

“We will have to return to our settlement by dawn. The tradition grants you a day and a night, and our men will be on the lookout for our return.”
Auguste rose from his seat, leaving no doubt that he understood every key point of what was being said.

“Can we expect your reply before your departure?” Auguste said, even and balanced as he was on the throne of Arles during public audiences — regal.

“You don’t have time on your side,” Damianos said, looking at Auguste with a different intent than the one he reserved to Laurent — or so Laurent caught himself considering.

“We will tie our fate with yours tonight, preparing a war to build peace as the Artesian Emperors taught us.”

The jump of surprise of Auguste’s shoulders reverberated against Laurent’s sternum — a flutter of emotion, waiting to be set free.

Auguste took the same deep breath Laurent had heard him draw over and over again in the last years — before too many funerals, before his coronations, before so many councils — and yet this time it sounded more like he used to, galloping in the fields out of Acquitart, free and bold.

His hands reached forward, and he clasped on Nikandros and Damianos’s shoulders, standing solid like a tripod — like the triumvirate history whispered them about.

“It would be my honour.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Kudos, comments, and general appreciation is love, as always.

The next and final section is coming by the end of the weekend!

Remember that you can always find me on Tumblr!
Chapter Notes

Second and last part of the story, very explicit and very extensive sexual content for which specific content tags have been added to the story.

One more artwork (NSFW) from Momo (linecrosser) is embedded within the chapter.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The chambers of Acquitart Auguste used as his night quarters haven’t changed much from the way they looked in his childhood memories. The curtains on the bed had been changed some years prior, some paintings had been swapped to fresher looking ones more reflecting Auguste’s personal taste, but the room was the same. Some of his attendants insisted he should remodel it — make it reflect the King’s status, if he wished to keep spending so much time in this remote fort — but part of Acquitart’s appeal was exactly how it reflected Auguste, rather than the King of Vere.

As most thing that reflected Auguste, Laurent often came tangled with everything the palace had to offer of familiar.

His brother poured him a glass of wine with the same fastidiousness he reserved to ritualistic tasks like preparing his writing supplies or adjusting the laces of Auguste’s ceremonial jackets.

He was nervous.

Auguste downed half the glass in one go.

They were both nervous.

Across the bedchambers, in the separate corner that was reserved for the bathtub, Nikandros and Damianos haven’t even bothered to rearrange the séparé. No divider shielded the view of their impressive body, dotted with foam and steaming lightly from the hot water. Their lack of clothing generally left little to imagination, and yet their blasé attitude towards nakedness focused attention to an almost disturbing degree.

Or maybe Auguste was just getting obsessive.

He emptied the glass.

“There are still other plans,” Laurent murmured in Veretian, private and calm as if talking about the weather. “If this one doesn’t go as planned, we’ll find another way.”

“Another way, with me tied to the two of them?” Auguste suppressed the irrational urge of laughing that tickled down his throat.
Laurent raised an eyebrow at him, unimpressed in a way that seemed to ask, *do you want me to be crass and ruthless?* The words that followed, unvaried in tone, did not disappoint in meaning. “A tie to two barbarians, in the privacy of my own Royal estate? If it works, you will fear no judgment. If it only works in the measure that allows you to win a war without fighting it, I’m sure you will still get your Patran princess...I’m fairly sure it’s allowed, even.”

The only option not listed was for the whole plant to not work altogether. Auguste knew the reply — *they’ll find another way,* for that too — and it was probably pointless to delve into that discussion in more detail as their current plan stood some feet away, washing the day off their dark skins.

He angled his glass towards Laurent, with the intent of having it refilled with wine, and got it snatched out of his hands.

“Raise your chin,” Laurent murmured, and proceeded to undo the laces that held Auguste’s riding jacket — the one he had worn under the garments while riding to the hill, just half a day away even though it felt like half a life. His fingers were nimble and fast, matching the steadiness of his gaze.

Laurent wanted this to work and had spoken an impossibility into existence. The least Auguste could do, at this point, was to see it through as it deserved.

He left his jacket to Laurent, and stepped carefully away from his leather boots, setting them aside before turning away from his brother.

Beyond the folded room divider, Nikandros and Damianos were following the proceedings even though Auguste had assumed they wouldn’t be. He swallowed something too close to flustering and walked forward, barefeet, beckoned by a tilt of Nikandros’s head.

“Is there a specific reason to dress with more ties than a fishing net?” Nikandros asked, once Auguste was right beside the two of them.

“That’s very exaggerated,” Auguste protested, but stopped midway through over the grasp of Damianos’s hands, pulling Auguste’s shirt away from his chest.

“He’s right, a fishing net would not have this much fabric,” Damianos argued.

Nikandros laughed in a way that only Damianos seemed to be able to elicit, and worked on the laces at Auguste’s wrist with more capability than Auguste would have ever given him credit for.

“The winters are cold, deeper into Vere. Even the springs, to be honest,” Auguste said, as his shirt fell open at the sides of his chest.

“Why don’t you cover yourself only then?” Nikandros reached at the back of Auguste’s neck and pulled his shirt away, rough and efficient in his movements. Some thread might have strained in the gesture.

“Why do you have to go around with shirts long less than two handspans?” Auguste flashed back, feeling a bit like he did when bantering with Laurent.

It was Damianos’s turn to laugh, now, while undoing the laces of Auguste’s breeches.

Further witty additions withered off in Auguste’s mouth, and Damianos seemed to take it as an invitation to drag the fabric away from Auguste’s legs, guiding him to step away from it almost in a daze.
An abrupt clarity shone on how naked they were, now that Auguste was naked as well. Steam was
dancing away from the water in the tub in lazy swirls and it clogged humid in Auguste’s mouth
when he inhaled through it.

“You’re ahead of me,” Auguste murmured, in the tentative and coarse border dialect that made his
sudden nervousness cut so much sharper than Veretian would have had.

He didn’t even know fully how far the statement extended.

He only knew that water flattened Damianos’s curls behind his head, lengthening the hair enough
to make it touch his shoulders, and like this the matching undercut at the side of his and
Nikandros’s head alike were more evident. He knew that standing between them only increased the
heat, as if their own skins radiated it, and that their bodies were broad enough to enclose Auguste
completely when they both stood at his sides.

“The water is certainly not lacking,” Nikandros commented, accompanied by a low sloshing sound
as he wet a sponge into the bathtub as if it were a basin. “Isn’t it excessive?”

“You’re...to step inside it.” Auguste’s own words felt careful and overcalculated, since explaining
such an obvious concept might easily be interpreted as condescending. Not even lifting his hands to
undo the knot that tied his hair behind his head truly dissimulated the feeling.

He was a grown man, his pets had often accompanied him in the baths of Arles, his lovers through
the years — much more abundant, before Kingship riddled every relationship with paranoia — had
indulged him in his rooms. This wasn’t different.

The sponge ran along his back, the touch unannounced, and the slow trickle of soapy water found
its way all the way down Auguste’s legs. Auguste’s shoulders jumped, against his better judgment.

“Where my clan is,” Damianos said, tentative and lacking Nikandros’s fluency in the dialect, “the
old Empire left many baths. Rooms, with running water, hot from the ground.”

Through the spires of yet another one of Damianos’s anecdotes, Auguste felt more ground in his
skin when Damianos picked up another sponge. The contact was less of a surprise, announced by
an intense eye contact that Damianos maintained as he rubbed along Auguste’s chest. In the light of
the candles, his eyes appeared less dark — an intense golden-brown, as rich as the old blood that
ran through Damianos’s veins.

“We have a copy, in the palace I grew up in,” Auguste replied, slow. “The marble is slippery with
all that steam, in summer.”

Nikandros snorted softly, stopping the path of the sponge down Auguste’s left arm, walking
behind his back to pick up the other. At Damianos’s puzzled expression, Nikandros provided a
quick translation, the ups and downs of Akielon brushing close to Auguste’s head as he frictioned
along the other arm. Understanding lit up Damianos’s face, and he laughed again, a pleasant and
lightweight sound.

The sensation of cleanliness after a long day sunk into Auguste’s bones — his body lighter without
the sweat and clammy constriction of exertion, easier to relax. And yet his skin tingled under eyes
and touch. There had never been a time in which he was attended like this — analysed and
catalogued rather than serviced.

He grabbed a towel from the edge of the pool just because Nikandros had moved the sponge to his
sides, and Damianos was running it closer to his hips, and stillness was more of a torment than
initiative. Flinging it across Damianos’s shoulders, Auguste brought it back up and dug his fingers in, frictioning the dark curl towards dryness.

It was easy to lose himself for a moment in the agreeable tilt of Damianos’s head, the slow smile that pulled on his lips and the little dimple that accompanied it, a beacon for the fleeting shadows of the candles.

Less easy — impossible — not to look down when Nikandros kneeled with the efficiency of a seasoned soldier testing the ground for tracks. Nikandros’s eyebrows flashed up, almost humorous, when he caught Auguste staring. He signalled him to keep going with the towel through the subtlest canting of his head, and waited until Auguste had complied before brushing the sponge up Auguste’s legs.

The muscle in Auguste’s thighs twitched. He couldn’t help it.

Damianos leaned forward, letting the towel fall back around his shoulders, slow but relentless in invading Auguste’s space.

It was an invite and an announcement, and yet when their lips touched it was unconstructed — not for lack of finesse but for lack of layering of intentions, of politics, of status considerations. It was a kiss for the purpose of a kiss — for the slow slide of their lips against each other’s, for finding the right angle that locked them best together. It was for Damianos’s surprise at the openness of Auguste’s mouth, as if he hadn’t been expecting a tongue along his lips, sliding into his mouth.

Maybe he hadn’t — Auguste should have asked how Akielons kiss, if not with tongue.

Maybe he had, though, because a second later Damianos’s kiss was just as deep, and yet still carefree as if this went through nothing more than finding out each other’s taste.

The sponge in Nikandros’s hand slid between Auguste’s legs, light on his inner thigh and then pressing along between them, a suddenly intense friction climbing back along the line of his buttocks. Water dripped between them, refreshing and indecent.

Auguste broke the kiss.

Damianos’s smile pressed humid against his cheek as Auguste turned to face Nikandros — who stood again, right beside him, and rubbed lightly on the small of his back. The goosebumps that rose on Auguste’s arms had very little to do with cold.

His cock felt heavy between his legs.

“Would you like to wash your hair?” Nikandros asked, low, with his free hand brushing over a lock that fell on Auguste’s nape.

Each reply that Auguste wanted fell short on his language capabilities. Maybe Laurent’s obsession with learning Akielon had yet another positive point that should have been considered sooner.

“I would like to lay with you,” he resolved to say.

It was crass and inelegant, but the two Chieftains smirked all the same, catching the tone and the meaning with something that bordered satisfaction. They didn’t even elaborate on a reply. The sponges were dropped casually on the floor and they walked back towards the main area of the night quarters, unapologetic in their nakedness. The twin grips on Auguste’s forearms were solid and grounding, a guide rather than a demand, and their steps lefts parallel wet paths on the floor.
Damianos sat on the bed first, the mattress sinking under his weight, but didn’t let Auguste go and made to drag him forward. Auguste was more than ready to get back in contact with him and his body — impressively muscular, a dark contrast against the unassuming creamy colour of the bedsheets, already stripped of the duvet. But Damianos stopped in his tracks, blinking as if spooked towards his right.

Following his gaze, Auguste landed on the armchair close to the alcove of the window. The position was a perfect reading spot, in plain view of the valley, but the velvet curtains were closed and the armchair only faced the bed, diagonally. Laurent was lounging on it, indulgently silent with a full glass of wine, and relaxingly informal with no boots and no jacket, still tightly laced up in his shirt and trousers. He raised his glass to Auguste, who caught himself smiling too widely at all the wicked undertones in his brother’s expression.

There was a small, tense cough. Nikandros appeared even more puzzled than Damianos, who was still frozen like a teenager caught meddling in an inappropriate situation.

“What is he doing here?” Damianos asked, or that was at least Auguste’s approximated understanding of the sentence in Akielos, easy as it was.

Laurent took a sip of wine, unperturbed, but when he replied he was using the border dialect, a clear concession for Auguste even though he was in the minority.

“In Vere, you can’t...join...royalty without someone to witness it. It’s very bad taste,”

Nikandros made a disbelieving sound. “So you’re going to be here the whole time?”

“As long as it might take you...if you ever get on with it,” Laurent teased. Regardless of his composure, Auguste could see his eyes wandering off, surveying the three of them at the edge of the bed. The nakedness was surely catching in its unprecedented bluntness.

“That’s crazy,” Damianos hissed out, made tense by something that didn’t look quite like shyness. However, he hadn’t let go of Auguste, nor he properly brought himself out of reach when Auguste bent a knee next to his body, climbing more properly onto the bed.

“It’s Veretian,” Auguste himself countered.

“That’s crazy,” Damianos hissed out, made tense by something that didn’t look quite like shyness. However, he hadn’t let go of Auguste, nor he properly brought himself out of reach when Auguste bent a knee next to his body, climbing more properly onto the bed.

“It’s Veretian,” Auguste himself countered.

“Right,” Laurent echoed from a couple of feet away. “We’re honouring your tradition, but this is our tradition in the same matter.”

A soft, frustrated sound hummed up from Damianos’s throat, but he barged again towards Auguste’s lips rather than trying to argue over something that was evidently non-negotiable.

For the sake of intellectual curiosity, a part of Auguste wanted to ask him what was so disconcerting of having his little brother witness this act of physical bonding, if standing in front of him completely naked didn’t seem to raise any qualms. Nevertheless, the nervous nibbling along his lips called for another type of attention altogether. Auguste let himself fall onto the bed on Damianos’s side to kiss him appropriately, eyes closed and breath wavering.
Damen had been Nikandros’s first kiss. At least the first proper one, less a peck on the lips, more a prolonged indulgence under the shade of a massive orange tree, heavy with ripe fruits. Nikandros had been fifteen to Damen’s almost-thirteen years old, and after that moment he had felt truly at home in the land of the Ios clan, who had hosted Nikandros, his mother and his sisters as the region of Delpha shook with violent internal conflict.

To this day, Damen was still the person Nikandros preferred to kiss over everyone else.

That wasn’t to say he didn’t appreciate Damen kissing other people, if only for the fact that it gave Nikandros an opportunity to look at the act from the outside.

His half was an enthusiastic kisser, dedicated to the act as some people were to worship. He drew out great pleasure from the act, his forehead going lax and his fingers tightening with possession on his companion’s body at every swirl of tongue Nikandros could catch from their cheeks.

Damen’s kiss with Auguste of Vere was no different, and yet there was a novelty in it that tingled along Nikandros’s skin. Not that the sensation would be much different for Damen, given the way he crowded the Veretian against the pillows, one hand wrapping on Auguste’s nape over the curl of his loose hair to tilt his head further into the contact. There was a tension almost like the one of a challenge that crossed the span of Damen’s naked shoulders at times. Of all the people Damen had kissed in the last fifteen years they had known each other, Auguste must have an excellence that made him stand out of the crowd.

Curiosity burnt mingled with excitement in Nikandros’s stomach.

It wasn’t difficult to think of Auguste as an exceptional kisser. Makedon had one joked that Nikandros had a type and that type was Damianos — even in women — and Nikandros had a hard time denying it as a pointless mockery because it was often truthful. But there was something about this Veretian royal that made Nikandros’s hands crave a touch. The looks of him were more than satisfactory, tall and lean of constitution but trained to perfection, so much that the lines of his muscles could be traced over his smooth, unblemished pale skin. But if Nikandros tried to focus on what attracted him of Auguste of Vere he would have said, perhaps sappily, that it was his eyes. His blue eyes tainted with grief and heavy with duty, and that obstinate curve that his jaw took when he clenched his teeth against a resolution.

Nikandros didn’t want him to clench his teeth at all, now, but he wanted nonetheless.

A good auspices over the tying of their fates, undoubtedly.

He laid against Auguste’s other side, turning his back very pointedly to the little brother that definitely shouldn’t be watching this but was. Laurent didn’t elicit strong opinions out of him — only that he was too smart not to be smug, and that the way the brothers looked at each other told him more about how seriously Auguste could take his commitments than any glazed word and flowery sentence Laurent could provide. That didn’t mean he wanted to keep the amount of awareness of his presence that Damen would instead surely cherish, in his own way.

Giving in to the temptation of tracing Auguste’s left leg with a finger, as he leant against his neck, was a good idea. Auguste twitched, eyelids fluttering in surprise as Nikandros kneaded against his knee, and then let his leg drop open when Nikandros pushed further, offering the inner part of his thigh to Nikandros’s touch. He had wanted a direct contact with it from the first second he had stripped Auguste of his trousers.

Aware of his closeness, Damen let his hand slide away from Auguste’s neck, trailing down the collarbones towards Auguste’s chest. Nikandros hummed his approval, both to the gesture and the
span of Auguste’s neck. With a hand combing up through Auguste’s hair to keep it out of the way, Nikandros tilted his head and kissed along the warm skin — it was as soft as it looked, and yet not as yielding as the inside of Auguste’s thighs where Nikandros was gladly digging his fingers.

The wet gasp that followed was a clear sign that Damen had broken their kiss, leaving Auguste to breathe heavily against nothing. Through heavy lidded eyes, Nikandros got a glimpse of Damen’s head right at the other side of Auguste’s neck, following Nikandros’s suit. Damen smirked when he caught Nikandros’s gaze, and Nikandros bit down lightly on Auguste’s skin before pressing his head to the side, closer enough to kiss Damen directly.

Auguste’s breath jumped, but the hum that followed spoke of satisfaction at the scene that unraveled in front of him. His hips spasmed when Nikandros dragged his fingers blindly upwards, at the very top of Auguste’s legs — his cock was surely be hard, if Nikandros were to touch, but he kept his touch teasing and kissed Damen some more, fully aware that his mouth was so hot because Auguste had been sucking on his tongue a second earlier.

When Damen slid away, the warmth had spread throughout Nikandros too.

They were definitely doing this, no further doubts involved.

“Is it true,” Nikandros whispered right into Auguste’s ear, “that Veretians only lay with people of the same sex?”

“Yes…” Auguste started to say, and then stopped on a half jump. Damen had trailed his tongue all the way down Auguste’s nipple, and was brushing his fingers in the middle of his abs. It looked like a sweet torment. The words that followed were late and a bit strained, “It’s for the lineage.”

“Odd,” Nikandros considered, biting down again, this time on Auguste’s earlobe.

Auguste was grasping on Damen’s shoulders as Damen kissed his way down his body, making himself known and well acquainted with the sensitive bent and ridges of it. Nikandros reached over to pinch the nipple that Damen had left perked and humid with spit and Auguste’s other hand flashed to hold onto Nikandros as well.

It was a good match for both of them — a rare concordance to find. It promised to be enjoyable.

On the line of his same thought, following the wavering inhale of Auguste under their combined touches, Nikandros wrapped his hand again over Auguste’s nape and met his lips as soon as he gave in against the touch.

His mouth was truly always open, as if Auguste didn’t really consider the possibility of a kiss that didn’t turn wet and deep. At the moment, Nikandros was far for wanting to wind down the situation. He licked along the roof of Auguste’s mouth and Auguste flickered their tongues together and then the contact was full, vibrant.

Auguste was, indeed, an excellent kisser.

Nikandros tilted his head more properly and gave into the contact, stroking his fingers along the line of Auguste’s hip bones at the pace of their tongues meeting.

He liked the slow twitches of shook Auguste when a touch found him particularly sensitive and agreeable.

He liked it even more when Auguste moaned sudden and intense in his mouth, and a single glance with eyes half opened gave Nikandros the view of Damen circling a finger on the tip of Auguste’s
erecting.

“You should suck it,” Nikandros murmured, in Akielon.

The lack of language understanding did not prevent Auguste shivering in anticipation. Pleasure, as it turned out, was an experience that went beyond words.

A soft, slick sound marked Damen welcoming Auguste into his open mouth.

“Ah!” Auguste moaned, and Nikandros could sympathise — Damen’s kisses were enthusiastic regardless of where he applied them — so he turned Auguste’s head and went to lick into his mouth some more.

The contact was more charged, nervous, just as Auguste’s body under the increased stimulation. The movements were only subtle — a grown man, familiar with the rising tide of sensations — but Nikandros enjoyed them even more so because of that. He chased them, with one hand caressing him slowly. He cherish them, noticing how Auguste was laying open on his back, available to them in any way they might want him.

Auguste turned away from the kiss with a choked sound, gasping for breath as his fingers curled through Damen’s hair, gently ecstatic. He murmured something Nikandros did not understand, but the vowels of it shook like his body, encouraging. Damen’s answer was simply to spread Auguste’s legs wider, incidentally showcasing the tensing and releasing of his muscles even more to Nikandros’s gaze.

“You have men often, then?” Nikandros asked again, switching back to the border dialect, even though they were very far from having a steady and linear conversation.

“No, I…” He moaned again, letting Damen drag one of his leg away to turn him completely to his side. Auguste’s hips twitched in an aborted thrust towards the heat that engulfed him. “It’s just difficult.”

“You don’t enjoy it much?” It wouldn’t be so unheard of, Auguste might prefer women even more so because apparently he didn’t have a choice in the matter.

It didn’t look like it was the case, though.

“No, I…” He moaned again, letting Damen drag one of his leg away to turn him completely to his side. Auguste’s hips twitched in an aborted thrust towards the heat that engulfed him. “It’s just difficult.”

“Really?” Nikandros spoke while dragging his teeth along the bumps of Auguste’s ribs. He had the musculature of a swordsman, not only the posture. “I think it’s quite simple.”

Auguste made an incoherent sound, his back arching with pleasure and with a steady, almost mindless canting towards Damen’s mouth. He stilled with a shiver, however, when Nikandros ran a palm over his buttocks and then grasped hard, spreading him.

“Wait…” Auguste sighed, but didn’t even try to move away from the touch as Nikandros mouthed down his spine. “Just…”

Nikandros did wait, so to speak, running the blunt of his teeth just at the top of Auguste’s ass, where his tailbone dipped into a little circle. But Auguste didn’t elaborate further, suddenly very
still even though Nikandros was very familiar with the wet sounds of Damen’s mouth and the nature of what he must be doing right across him.

It counted as an invitation, as far Nikandros was concerned.

He opened his mouth and flickered his tongue along the crack of Auguste’s ass, licking back up more slowly against his own spit. He did it slow, but with the persistence that the act deserved — sliding deeper as he made the way wetter for himself, keeping Auguste’s spread so he could reach the only obvious target of this. It was difficult not to knead Auguste’s ass in the process — it was firm, and muscular, and he already showed Nikandros what exceptional horseman he was.

Auguste spasmed just once — no, twice — when Nikandros started to lick circles on his hole, the muscle of his whole legs contracting and his entrance puckering close, before releasing and waiting for more.

“Mnhr…”

The moment Auguste gave himself into it was clear, the tension of his back abated and he sunk deeper into the mattress, but also he spread his legs wider on his volition, sending one in the bent of Damen’s arm — eagerly waiting just for this, to hook Auguste up and adjusting him for Nikandros’s ease. He reached back, also — his hand hovering blindly until he caught Nikandros’s hair and grasped on the short tail that bound some of it.

It was a nice instinct, paced by Auguste’s heavy breaths.

The twist of warmth in Nikandros’s belly seemed to point out just how much he liked the fact that Auguste was very much not a virgin and definitely did not react as one. He must be used to this — and it made Nikandros competitive.

Not that he was the only one.

Damen must share a consistent part of his appreciation and his eagerness — he had always enjoyed novelty in bed, be it act or people or both. Nikandros felt the upward stroke of Damen’s hand on Auguste’s thigh, rather than seeing it, and smiled against Auguste’s skin when Damen moved the caress along Nikandros neck, brushing against his spit-slick chin and finally pressing on Auguste’s ass, right below his entrance and Nikandros’s tongue.

There was another itched murmur — cursing, most likely, it had the tone of one — and Auguste writhed a bit more, contained and instinctual at the same time.

Eased by the wetness and by the relaxation Nikandros had coaxed onto Auguste, Damen curled his middle finger and pressed it inside in one smooth movement. It helped the stretch, definitely enough that Nikandros could slid his tongue past the wet rim.

Veretians must have some creative swearing, Auguste had never used the same combination twice and he was getting more heartfelt.

“Damianos…”

That name, hissed almost as a complain, Nikandros recognised plenty. He would have been disgruntled to not be the first one addressed, but the wet sound that followed gave him the clear feeling that Auguste must have pushed Damen off his cock — pulled him upward, also, if the rustle of sheet was anything to go by. It must have been pretty hot to watch, and Nikandros would have also been sorry to have missed it, but Damen hadn’t removed his finger and Auguste’s hand was clenching as much as his hole at the back of Nikandros’s hair. He could get a clue of how
much his efforts were appreciated at the moment.

“It’s Damen.”

The gentle correction came accompanied by a less gentle addition of a second finger. Auguste failed to reply as his back arched, with Nikandros tongued him even deeper. Damen snickered, bringing Auguste’s leg higher, more steadily against his side so that Nikandros might have all the room he needed.

There was a moan, muffled into a kiss, but a persistent shiver ran along Auguste’s skin, rising goosebumps even through the increasing warmth.

The edge was just there, evidently within reach. A part of Nikandros wanted to see Auguste topple through it like a green boy that he evidently wasn’t. Another part, much stronger, demanded to see how far he could push him — to quiver, surely, to scream, ideally.

He bit on the tense flesh of Auguste’s buttocks and slid back up towards the pillows Auguste and Damen were laying against. Not that he could stop touching between Auguste’s legs — not in general and even less with Damen slowly pulling out and pushing in with two fingers. He rubbed the tip of his index finger along the rim of Auguste’s hole — the friction was intense, when he wiggled it in a bit more. Nevertheless, Auguste stopped kissing Damen just to toss his head back, bewildered, on Nikandros’s shoulder, with a deep groan. Everything seemed to suggest that he could take it, and Nikandros had all the intention of giving it to him.

Something flew over, hitting Auguste’s arm and bounced off on Damen’s chest.

A vial of oil.

Auguste laughed breathlessly, twisting around without dislodging the two of them, and Nikandros could not help but glancing backwards, even though he knew he would regret it.

Laurent was still on the same armchair, but the glass of wine that had been abundantly full was now empty and his posture was less self-contained, more in disarray in a way that bordered slouching. Overall, he looked like many young men of his age would while watching mundane theatre performance, not sexual acts. It was rather disturbing, enough to make Nikandros frown.

“Thank you,” Auguste said, or at least Nikandros assumed from the tone, in Veretian. He was still laughing softly, apparently finding the situation hilarious.

Laurent murmured something back, his tone equally humorous, but raised both eyebrows very pointedly at Nikandros, as if to challenge him to even try and not be compliant with this. The overall effect was only slightly compromised by how young he looked, even in the shadows, and the way Laurent’s eyes got ahead of him, glancing past both Nikandros and his brother, towards Damen.

Nikandros shook his head and turned back towards Auguste — who had a very nice neck and looked even better with a bit of heated perspiration plastering his hair in lazy golden curls between his shoulders. He nosed it away, sucking on the skin as he drew his hand away. When he brought it back, oil smeared over Auguste’s tailbone, following the same path of Nikandros’s tongue and slipping further into his hole where Damen was more than ready to push out and in, slickly.

When Nikandros slid his index along Damen’s fingers, it was slippery and almost effortlessly, gathering the rest of the oil to push more into Auguste. The give was intensely satisfactory, warm and tight and clenched around his and Damen’s fingers alike. It was even better to see Auguste’s
back arch from up close, his head dropping on the pillow as if luxuriating in the sensation. In a moment like this, the refined curve of his cheekbones made Auguste look decadent, as if the world around him was indulging his whims — even though Nikandros and Damen were definitely taking anything he would be willing to give.

Candlelight danced over the line of Auguste’s perfect white teeth as he nibbled along Damen’s jaw, and Nikandros returned the favour along Auguste’s neck — repeatedly.

For a second, they lost themselves in the same rhythm — lips and teeth and fingers and then the whole length of their bodies rocking against each other. Auguste shivered, clenching and stilling with a bubbly hitch that rumbled deep in his throat. Teasing him for hours, right at the verge of orgasm, was a fantasy that Nikandros found himself looking forward to — but that would have to be another day, another night.

“Damen,” Nikandros murmured, his voice rough as he lifted his head from that pale skin full of novelty.

Damen’s lips crashed against his own, over Auguste’s shoulders, before he could say anything more. That contact was as familiar as his own body, an extension of himself that Nikandros would not ever let go — but Auguste’s body, his heated stare on both of them, was a more than valid addition.

Yes, Nikandros though, it would be nice to keep him.
In Damen’s past experience, Nikandros often went along with courting and bedding people together because he enjoyed sharing Damen’s interests. When they were very young, obviously, being insatiable was a factor that helped, but as they tried most things and found others that interested them Damen had come to realise that Nikandros would probably be content in just sticking to the two of them, at some point. There had been a lovely young woman from the Mellos clan, Kashel, that had kept them both occupied for the best part of a week earlier in the year, and Damen had thought about proposing a formal joining of both the Delpha and the Ios clan — she might even be the mother of their children — but that peaceful future didn’t chase him as a priority enough to work and make it a reality. Beside, Nikandros was his half — any other commitment would always come behind him.

At least that’s what Damen thought, before they ended up tangled with one — two, really —
Veretian royals in the span of a day.

Auguste, for once, seemed to perfectly align both Damen’s and Nikandros’s tastes. He had the colours and that slightly cunning edge that Damen favoured. His impeccable athletic body that was undeniably pleasant to look at, and would always appeal to the two of them, but Nikandros seemed to be particularly fixated with the leaner edge of it, with Auguste’s back and the way it slid in a narrowing curve from his shoulders to his waist. And then, of course, there was the way he seemed to embrace sex — unabashed and experienced, and yet not often touched to the point that they had to make themselves known to him, only for Auguste to bask in any stimulation they could provide.

The edge of Nikandros’s kiss now, crackling like thunder, was all Damen needed to know that Auguste might end up being more than a calculated risk.

Not that Damen was fundamentally opposed to it — not considering the additional pair of blue eyes that stared from further away, half-concealed to the shadows, seared on Damen’s skin even though he wasn’t sure to be the only focus of that attention.

It was all so entrancing, fresh like a new start, and Damen knew he always got a bit too intense when he felt like this. To remind him, this time, it was the desperately broken moan that Auguste gave, with his forehead pressing in the bent of Damen’s neck. As easily as he had been taking three — no, four — of their fingers, he was now pushing on Damen’s forearm to making stop, a gesture dotted with inintelligible curses and with the twitching of Auguste’s cock, pressed against Damen’s stomach and dripping as wet as his ass.

“Do it, just...Ah!”

Auguste’s demand was broken by a sudden bite by Nikandros, moving his mouth away from Damen only to bite down again on Auguste’s shoulders. He was going to have marks, maybe even before the night was over given his complexion. The thought burnt deep like a hot coil in Damen’s stomach.

He was almost sure, given everything, that Nikandros for once would want to fuck Auguste’s first. Instead, he slipped his hand way, nudging Auguste even more against Damen’s chest. Damen was very well acquainted with what that gaze meant.

The mere suggestion of a pull was enough to bring Auguste’s legs over Damen’s hips, still keeping him turned on his side between Nikandros at his back and Damen at his front. It was admittedly a pity that Veretians wore so many clothes usually — and yet a part of Damen’s mind lingered on how seeing this naked leg, this naked body, was a rarity.

Despite his impeccable composure outside of bed, Auguste evidently luxuriated in physical contact, rearranging himself with ease just in the way that made Damen feel him the most. The nudging of Damen’s cock against the residue of oil on Auguste’s inner thigh, slipping upwards between his buttocks, made both of them jump.

“You’ll be so open…” Nikandros rasped with his lips brushing against Auguste’s ear, “…when Damen is done with you.”

That was too much even for Damen to linger any longer in waiting. He barely had to press against Auguste’s hole — so wet and open — to thrust inside in one sharp move. Even with all the stretching of their fingers, his cock got only halfway inside at the first movement. Auguste’s mouth went lax with breathless stupor, as Damen slid barely out and then back in — once, and then once more, until Auguste clawed at Damen’s back, his head tossed mindlessly back against Nikandros’s shoulders, fully claimed.
The pressure of Auguste’s blunt nails in the middle of Damen’s shoulder blades, as his arm held onto him in a tighter embrace, did very little to dissuade Damen from his passion. His hips twitched with the need of moving and there was no reason not to.

The first thrust snatched a moan out of Auguste, so loud that he stared at Damen, almost startled, before breaking into a wheezing laughter.

“What?” Damen asked, snickering over his heavy breaths.

Auguste looked as if he did have a reply, but he lost track of it because Damen fucked into him again, and again, and again, building up to a rhythm.

“You’re huge,” Nikandros provided, helpfully, as if the laughter really spoke for itself. He was half hidden behind Auguste’s back and with his mouth evidently busy sucking a path of marks down his spine, but still plenty understandable.

“Yes,” Auguste agreed, thankful. He seemed to like how the word sounded in his mouth, a mixture between old Akielon and old Veretian that only survived in the borders. When he tested it again, it had a totally different vibration in it. “Yes...yes.”

“Yes?”

Damen fucked him harder.

“Yes.”

Fucking him was as easy as gulping down water in the quiet that followed a long battle, a hard victory. Better than that, even, seeing the persistent roaming of Nikandros’s hands on Auguste’s skin — the streaks they left when the press was too intense, a red path that highlighted all the sensitive spots from Auguste’s neck, to his nipples, to his pelvis, disappearing behind his back.

Auguste never squirmed away, only shivered more into it. He had a strong grip in his own right, nimble fingers that would be definitely worth exploring in another situation — the way he combed through Damen’s curls, scratching over the point at the sides of his head were the hair was cut short to his scalp, was thoroughly maddening. Pressed between their bodies, there was little room for movement, but that didn’t dissuade him from keeping an arm twisted backwards, touching Nikandros as well.

The commitment to enthusiastic participation was definitely worth rewarding. Damen made sure his appreciation was properly conveyed. The determination for it to last, however, was strained by how pleasantly tight Auguste felt around his cock — tighter, even, ever time Damen nudged against a good spot and Auguste clenched like a vice, his breath coming rougher and faster.

There was a low murmur, lost and foreign and interspersed between moans, and Auguste tossed his head back onto Nikandros’s shoulders again.

Nikandros’s hair had slipped off the string that tied them, softer around his head and more prone to fall messily over Auguste’s face when Nikandros tilted his head. With Nikandros’s cheek pressed against his forehead, Auguste looked lost and grounded at the same time, blinking dazely and nesting closer to the bent of Nikandros’s neck.

Damen was almost tempted to stop and contemplate the sight for a bit — familiar against novel, dark against light.

A thunderous light shone in Nikandros’s eyes, full with want and eagerness. He twisted his head
around and kissed Auguste’s mouth — harder and deeper than ever before. It was biting and almost affectionate at the same time.

From the way Auguste shivered over it, looping his leg more securely around Damen’s waist and rocking down his cock with more purpose, Damen was positive he would get to see him lost in pleasure in no time.

Then Auguste flinched, separating wetly from Nikandros’s mouth.

“Ah...uhrgh...” the moaning protest was a mix between frustration and surprise. “Come on...”

Nikandros’s hand was lodged deep between Auguste and Damen’s chest, his fingers a tight grip around Auguste’s trembling erection, bodily holding him away from release.

Damen smirked, but not without some sympathy — he knew Nikandros plenty, in bed and outside. He kissed Auguste’s face distractedly, grasping at his leg to slow the thrusting down to a deep, slow rocking.

“No, come on...” Auguste grumbled a bit, twisting between them from the first time.

Damen ignored him, staring at Nikandros. “You can take over,” he whispered, heated at the thought, “I don’t mind.”

Nikandros’s eyes flashed with uncontained want, and he pressed his lips against Damen’s — grateful and aroused, his mouth wet with more than his own spit.

Sliding his cock out of Auguste was definitely an effort, but the loss was worth Auguste’s shocked sound when for a second they both pressed at his entrance. Even that gasp broke into a wavering groan when Nikandros fucked into him — rough enough to go all the way in, all at once, and definitely not waiting at all to start moving.

After that, everything was a blur of movements. Mouths and hands and thrusts and wet sounds mingling with desperate moans as the wooden frame of the bed creaked at their pace, heavy as it was.

Being behind Auguste evidently gave Nikandros a better angle — one that made Auguste’s body jump at every thrust, one that Nikandros ravenously explored more by twisting Auguste around a bit to get additional leverage.

A low, broken keening sound escaped Auguste’s throat as he spread his knees wider on the bed to take it better. He clawed at Nikandros’s forearm but didn’t really put his whole strength to try and dislodge the grip around his cock, desperate to come as he was.

The twist of Damen’s breath was hot like fire in his lungs, his cock still desperately hard and glistening with oil. It didn’t matter, though, not so much, given the view he got to enjoy. It mattered even less went he made the mistake to look beyond them, in the penumbra of the room only vaguely pierced by the mutable light of interspersed candles.

In the window seat, Laurent’s figure was showered in the blue halo of the crescent moon, slouching against the armchair with all his weight. His glass was more full now that Damen remembered it being before, and there was a transfixed quality in his expression — more than controlled scheming, different from mischief, too young and not so young after all. He hadn’t been staring at Damen’s face, but he must have felt observed all of a sudden because he skirted up his body with intent, all the way up until he met Damen’s eyes.
Damen could not look away, reaching blindly to caress Auguste’s sweaty hair away from his face and sliding along the curve of his heated face. They looked very much alike and not alike at all. Laurent lifted his glass lazily, and then took a long sip, swallowing hard.

*Want* was a desperate creature clinging at Damen’s throat, sliding all the way to his cock and making it jump.

Then Auguste leaned more heavily against his hand, clinging with an arm around Damen’s waist and yanking him forward. There was little looking away from him, from the bed, when he panted hard against Damen’s hardness and swallowed it whole in one practiced motion.

The suction was hard, heavenly, and slide of Auguste’s mouth was barely controlled, mostly guided by Nikandros’s thrust.

Damen swore so filthily in Akielon that Nikandros lifted his head from the middle of Auguste’s shoulderblades just to laugh at him.

That, too, was an interesting sight admittedly. Nikandros had the stance of a wrestler when he fucked with so much abandon, one hand planted on the bed and the other one still on Auguste’s cock. Auguste was shamelessly chasing the angle that he preferred, keeping himself up with one hand against Nikandros’s arm and the other one around Damen — and the vibration of his moans reverberated through Damen’s cock at every well-aimed thrust.

If Damen had known before how enthusiastically Auguste could take it, and how liquid his clear eyes would be, looking up at Damen while swallowing around his whole length, the negotiations would have been significantly shortened.

“Nik,” Damen hissed, taking pity of his and Auguste’s overstimulated shivering alike “for the skies, please.”

Nikandros gave a long look in front of him — along Auguste’s body, Damen’s, the place where they joined — and pressed his whole chest along Auguste’s back. Finally, *finally*, his hand released the grip with which he kept hold of both Auguste’s orgasm and, possibly, his sanity. For good measure, he fucked him even harder — hard enough that Auguste snapped between one thrust and the next, his spine arching out of his control, and then bending in an overwhelming twitch. He must have clenched spasmodically, if Nikandros’s roar was anything to go by.

Auguste choked on Damen’s cock, emerging for a gasping breath that ended up sounding more like a symphony of “Ah...Ah...Ah!”

The last coherent thought Damen had was that Auguste was unfairly attractive, almost in a vulnerable way, with mindless tears running down his cheek and eyes made unfocused by pleasure.

A red-hot pain blossomed at the small of Damen’s back, where Auguste’s nail vented the intensity of his climax, and that — combined with the wet brush of Auguste’s lips, so close to his cock — was enough to break the last strand of Damen’s control.

A wet stripe crossed Auguste’s cheek, obscene and unapologetic.

Not that Auguste seemed to want an apology. Half out of it as he was, he just clung onto Damen, swallowing him back in and sucking off the rest of his release with a low rumbling moan of pure satisfaction. If Damen had been just five years younger he would have probably gotten hard again just for that.

The high was slow to come down, filling the whole room with the sound of their heavy breaths.
Damen collapsed fully onto the pillows, bearing the weight of Auguste flopping down on his chest, but also of Nikandros still plastered on Auguste’s back.

Nikandros was the first one to recover, lifting up and carefully sliding his cock out of Auguste with a wet, open sound.

“Mmhn…”

Auguste was probably as close as petulant as he would ever get, as if being pressed down was a perfectly acceptable position to finish one of the most intense sex Damen has had in a very long time.

“Thank you,” Nikandros murmured, his chest still rising and falling wildly as he brushed Auguste’s hair away from his forehead.

The official formulation in Akielon to mark the end of the first encounter with someone you just tied your fate with was more complex — all about trust and concessions and honesty — but Auguste would not understand it and neither Damen or Nikandros were probably lucid enough to translate it.

“My pleasure,” Auguste drawled out, mostly a moan and with an overwhelmingly Veretian pronunciation. Still, the choice of word and the twisted smile on his lips exuded more wit than anyone should possibly retain after being fucked so hard.

Nikandros gave a disbelieving laugh and stretched out towards the towel and basin next to the bed. Thinking about it carefully, Damen realised he didn’t remember that being there when they first entered these rooms — but they had been over the bathtub for a while and he knew, he still knew, that they weren’t alone in the room.

Wiping out the most sticky residue of their intercourse was a perfunctory action, in which Auguste was more than happy to be attended with barely any collaboration. Not that he was a particular effort to manhandle him around — again, and much more gently — for Nikandros to clean his back and then his front and then his face, and Damen had to admit he quite liked the weight of him in his arms.

“Thank you,” he said, too, laying him down on the mattress smoothly. Auguste only hummed, courting sleep already now that he was not shivering with the aftershocks anymore.

When he lifted his head, Nikandros was smirking at him with a freshly dampened towel. The two of them were much past cerimonial words, but surely not past wiping each other off.

“Let me rest a bit,” Nikandros didn’t quite ask, voice hoarse. He kissed Damen lazily, long and satisfied, before laying down too, leaving Auguste between curled on one side between them.

Their breath grew heavier, uncaring of the fact that the sheets were damp and this Veretian mattress was way too soft and that the whole room smelled like sex. Damen covered them both with one of the sheets that had been crumpled at the foot of the bed, fresh and untouched. The sight of them was more fulfilling than Damen would have expected, enough to make him linger two seconds more on their fast-asleep forms before he turned around.

Laurent was still there — predictably, obviously.

With a closer inspection away from the thorns of sexual distractions, he was more in disarray than Damen had initially realised — his shirt undone around the neck but also rolled up at the sleeves, flushed cheeks that matched the messy fall of his hair after too many passages of a nervous hand.
The glass was empty now, but the carafe of wine was at least three servings short in its content. Maybe Damen was too full of good feelings for the world, at the moment, but he found that sight endearing as well, a smile pulling at his lips even through the ever present attraction.

Laurent scoffed softly when he noticed Damen’s gaze, at that barely concealed the little startled twitch of his slender shoulders. He got up, careful enough as not to waver in his steps, and made a slow way around to put out the candles in the room. Outside, the night was still deep and in the silence of the room there were only Laurent’s soft steps on his naked feet and the occasional hoot of an owl filtering from the closed windows.

“Are you not staying?” Damen whispered, following him in his increasingly darkened path.

Stopping close the currently empty fireplace, next to the candle on dark frame of it, Laurent stared at him and then at Nikandros and, finally and very pointedly, at his older brother, before hissing back, “Are you not done?”

Damen’s chest jumped but he stifled the roaring laughter that begged to be released, in order not to wake his half — his halves. “We are, so come sleep,” Damen specified, without averting his gaze.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Laurent frowned, and the Akielon word sounded even more true to its meaning in his accent, fuelled by tiredness and wine. He extinguished the flame of yet another candle, and shuffled closer to the last ones, someplace close to Damen’s side of the table, almost skittish.

“Me? You plan to leave the room, like this?” He gestured to the bed, but also to Laurent, and he didn’t know what hid in the rest of this stone palace but it wasn’t strictly relevant to the point he was trying to make.

Laurent hesitated at that — maybe because he was tipsy and the world looked weird, maybe because he didn’t seem the type to leave his brother behind anywhere he was not absolutely in control of, from what Damen had seen.

“I’m staying away from the mess,” Laurent warned him, speaking after a long silence, and sent the room into darkness at last.

At the sole light of the moon filtering from the outside, Laurent closed the distance completely and came to next to the bed. He glanced against towards Auguste, perfectly unmoving under the sheet, and then back at Damen with something that felt like a protest over the fact that he couldn’t even be next to his brother, still clustered between two Akielons.

Unperturbed, Damen pressed his shoulder against Auguste’s naked back, leaving as much space to Laurent as he could without dislodging his bedmates, and lifted the sheet for Laurent to slide in.

“Quit it,” Laurent hissed. “Go to sleep.”

For all his apparent disgruntlement, there was something tense over Laurent’s shoulders when he sat at the edge of the bed and made a great show of lying down while keeping his back turned away from Damen. In the current darkness of the room, the colours of his hair and complexion appeared almost identical to Auguste’s, but he didn’t have his brother’s waves in his hair and his frame was much more lean, almost more delicate — especially without a jacket, and the perfect pose trained by royal upbringing.

The bone-deep satisfaction didn’t stop Damen from wanting, let alone from staring. He lowered the sheet over Laurent’s body and smoothed the fabric with a caress along his arm.
Delicate as he was, Laurent shivered nonetheless.

“Please go to sleep.”

Damen thought he knew that type of tightness that seemed to bubble in Laurent’s throat — he wondered where would the conversation lead them, if Damen were to continue it. But he was tired in his own right, and Auguste’s breath reverberated through his arm in a quite relaxing way, so he left Laurent his distance — two hand’s span at most — and closed his eyes with a sigh.

“Good night, Laurent of Vere.”

There was silence on the other side, long enough that Damen thought Laurent would simply not reply, but then he heard him swallow, a big effort just to whisper, “Good night.”

A rooster sang from the courtyard, a nervous sound shrill enough to cut through Laurent’s sleep, which was never particularly heavy in itself. Sunlight poured from the outside when he opened his eyes, but it had the greyish consistency of a point close to dawn. Early enough that the temptation to sag back into the pillow and give in to the exhaustion that tickled the side of his eyes was overwhelming.

He inhaled deeply, and upon exhaling a dissociated awareness hit him.

He was incredibly warm — warmer than he ever tended to be when sleeping in Acquitart — and the room had an unfamiliar smell.

Blinking his eyes open again was much more slower, almost careful.

Maybe it hadn’t been just the rooster that woke him. Maybe the fact that Damianos, Chieftain of Ios and Delpha and brand new ally of his brother, was looking at him while lounging on a pillow.

They were close, way too close. Laurent must have drifted in his sleep, and now there was an arm under his neck rather than a pillow. Laurent’s tongue plastered on the roof of his mouth, suddenly hyperfocused on Damianos’s extremely indulgent expression.

There should be a royal edict against being so attractive when Laurent’s mind was still sluggish and the air around them had the surreal consistency of a dream.

No one moved for so long that it almost felt natural — even though there were two more people beyond Damianos, even though there should be no space for the twist of want that coiled traitorously in Laurent’s stomach because Damianos just kept looking at him.

Damianos sighed low, seemingly unaware of Laurent’s internal turmoil. He bent his arm, with a warm touch at the side of Laurent’s shoulder, and there were three thousand reasons not to but Laurent still let himself curl delicately on his side, until his cheek was pressed on the Akielon’s naked skin.

A shiver cursed down Laurent’s spine, his body felt barely his own.
Announced by a subdued shuffle of fabric, Damianos craned his head and pressed a kiss on Laurent’s forehead.

His body was definitely not his own, not like this.

Laurent tilted his head up, swallowing dry, but Damianos didn’t move aside and the tips of their noses brushed against each other.

The temptation of pressing on, just a bit, was impossible to resist, no matter how thoroughly trained in restrain and denial Laurent’s duty had made him.

Their lips touched like a caress, so different from every kiss Laurent had witnessed the night before, and yet he wanted to scream. He wanted it to stop, or never stop. Damen kissed him again. Then a third time, just as softly.

A knock on the door sent Laurent flying half off his skin, certainly out of the bed, in a guilty stumble. His breath was unstable and his eyes felt comically wide, but that didn’t mean he wanted Damianos to smirk at him like that.

He rushed to the door before any servant might think about coming in. Nothing about him was much presentable at the moment, he surely looked exactly like someone who slept half-dressed in what were theoretically his brother’s room, and yet Damianos’s kiss felt like the most damning brand on him for everyone to see.

There wasn’t a servant waiting on the other side. It was Jord, perfectly dressed for his duties but with a somber look on his face — excessive even for him — that only partially cracked with stunned uncertainty as he took in Laurent’s appearance.

“Yes?” Laurent pressed on, still planted against a barely open door even though the bedchamber was markedly not in view.

“Your Highness…” Jord started.

What came after was like a cold shower, dispersing all the incoherent feelings that had grappled Laurent since the moment he woke up.

“Gather the retinue,” Laurent whispered, when Jord was done talking. “I will be in the drawing room in ten minutes.”

He closed the door without waiting for a reply, walking in a rigid silence back to the only place where he could recover not only his boots but also his King.

“What is it?” Auguste asked, voice low and coarse, from the bed where he had miraculously awakened.

“A Vaskian raid is crossing over the mountains, an hour ride to the east. The lookout across River Joane gave the alert, they must have outnumbered the border patrol. They will be already in Veretian territory by the time we reach them.”

Auguste was immediately more than aware, with a crude remark hissed between clenching teeth, and climbed over Nikandros — equally awake but as silent an observer as Damianos — to get out of bed with more efficiency than the stiffness of his movements would have suggested.

“What is it?” Nikandros asked, in Akielon, looking between the two of them but mostly towards Laurent.
Auguste stilled for a second, looked at the two barbarians he had thoroughly bedded into an alliance and then back at Laurent, before waving a hand in assent.

Filling them in Akielon — and add the necessary logistical reference when asked — while getting dressed and keeping track of tactical notes that Auguste was tossing to him in Veretian was more challenging than anyone in the room gave Laurent credit for. However, the very second he was done, Nikandros and Damianos barely had to glance at each other before going to recover their garments as well.

“Make our horses available,” Damianos told him. “Our men are close. By the time you reach the Vaskians, we’ll be ready to join you in battle.”

There was a story Laurent had translated a thousand times from old Artesian: a reckless girl and a vase full of horrors, unleashed upon the world once the vase was opened. Only the most marvellous and terrifying of horrors had clung to the bottom of the vase, reluctant to come and be experienced.

Of all the emotions that had shook his heart in the last turbulent years, in this clear morning Laurent finally thought he knew what hope felt like.

"Si vis pacem, para bellum" ~ "If you wish for peace, prepare for war"
[Epitoma rei militaris - Vegezio]

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is 10k of basically pure porn. When I say explicit I mean explicit, and no, I have no excuse for myself.

I hope you enjoyed, and if you did kudos, comments, recs, and tokens of your love make me happy and fulfilled!

Remember that you can always find me on Tumblr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!