“You're lying,” Damen says. “You walked into Akielos and stole something from me.”

Damen visits Vere, Laurent prepares to leave it, and declarations are made before witnesses.

Notes

Warning: this story is so damn fluffy you could fall onto it from a great height and do nothing but bounce. Highly off-brand for me! But the heart wants what it wants, etc.

See the end of the work for more notes.
They pause half an hour's ride from the city gates, under a clutch of trees whose leaves are edged with the brown of early autumn. There is a clear view down to where Arles lies sprawled over the land like a handful of pebbles and painted dice, dotted densely with spires and gilding and the sheen of sunlight off stone.

"Would you like riders sent on ahead, sir?"

"Thank you, Irenaeus, no." Damen shakes his head. "We're not stopping here. Let's press on."

"Very different to home, isn't it?"

There's almost a wistful note in his captain's voice. Damen smiles. It took him a good month on the road to stop his men from calling him Exalted, which under the circumstances was unnecessarily attention-drawing. It only took a week after that for Irenaeus to confide in his king as he would in any other drinking-mate or brother in arms, and wax lyrical about his hometown (on the Thracian coast), his children (four), and his beautiful wife (pregnant, again).

"Would you rather be in Ios under the tender care of Nikandros?" Damen asks.

Irenaeus winces. As well as promising to safeguard his capital, Damen's oldest friend and kyros made some enthusiastic remarks about overhauling the training regimes of the palace guard and the greater Akielon army. Damen half expects to return home to find either that the palace barracks have emptied in revolt, or that they have accidentally conquered Patras as part of an overzealous training exercise.

"No, sir."

It's late afternoon when they reach the royal palace, and the king's steward takes great pleasure in directing Damen's large, saddle-sore and road-dusty retinue towards various corners of the palace where the dirt can be washed off and they can make themselves presentable. It's odd to be on the other side of this for once. To be the visitor, one of a party wearing clothes that stand out in a sea of foreign garb. Having travelled a long way to stand twinned: both oneself, and one's kingdom.

"All this makes my eyes hurt," Irenaeus mutters to Damen as they advance at the head of the party, led by a self-important herald wearing more clothing than the both of them put together, down the last of many corridors and through a tall set of doors.

The large space is not a dedicated throne room, nor is it set up as it would be for a similar formal event in Akielos. The walls drip with hangings and tapestries. There is a clear space in the centre, down which the Akielon delegation walks, but three sides of the room are deep in couches and ornate tasselled cushions; here and there is a low chair, with a pet sprawled at their master's feet, but the whole arrangement is both more relaxed and more ornate than anyone in Damen's party will be used to. Damen, walking a half-step in front of the others, doesn't bother to glance back and see how many of his people are gawking at the famous Veretian splendour. Neither does Damen look anywhere but straight ahead, at the royal family, seated as they are on chairs more solid and more raised than any of the other furniture in the room.

The herald clears his throat and steps hurriedly forward as Damen halts.

"His Exalted Majesty King Damianos of Akielos," he says. Damen's full Akielon title, flung out ponderously, at least matches the richness of everything else in this room.
It's been many years since Damen saw Auguste. The King of Vere has hair a darker shade than Laurent's, a richer gold. His trim beard is darker again, almost reddish-brown. His mouth is easy with humour. The effect, seeing the two brothers seated side-by-side, is striking, as though Auguste's warmth and Laurent's cool beauty are displayed to best advantage by the contrast.

"Our royal brother of Akielos," Auguste says, standing and extending his hand. "Our royal brother of Vere."

They are speaking Veretian. They grip one another's wrists, a firm and friendly clasp, held long enough to give the moment weight.

"My wife, Queen Helene," Auguste says, stepping back. "My son, the Crown Prince Alaire. And of course you know my brother."

Damen allows himself to look fully, and lingeringly. Laurent's outfit is severe and plain compared to many of those on display here; for Laurent, it's practically ornate. The cloth is a rich blue, with panels of subtle patterning that show when angled into the light. The laces at his wrists and ankles and neck are the same pale gold as the circlet that glimmers on his brow; they gleam against the inky fabric. Laurent sits with an insolent curve to his spine, one leg extended and one hand draped over the chair's arm. He looks like a dream, and a winter lake, and everything that Damen wants.

Laurent looks back at Damen and gives a slow blink of his icy eyes.

"Hello, Laurent."

"Hello, Damen."

A murmur runs through the nearby courtiers at the familiar name. Damen meets Laurent's impeccable smile, accepting his own feeling of rueful admiration as an old friend. Laurent has made a public statement of intimacy while keeping their most personal intimacies entirely shielded. Of course he has.

"We are sorry that we have not offered to receive you at our court before now," Auguste says. With no small effort, Damen drags his gaze away from Laurent. "And we in Akielos were sorry to hear of your uncle's recent death." It might sound like a non sequitur. It isn't.

A shadow of sorrow passes over Auguste's brow. Damen, directly in front of him, sees the anger there as well.

"Thank you. We were deceived in his nature, but he was still our uncle, and had long been a support to us. He did not deserve to die in that way."

Damen bows his head. It will pass as agreement. Laurent and Auguste's uncle was under armed escort to his property in Marches, all that remained to him after Auguste had stripped him of every other title, when the group was ambushed by raiders trying for the supply wagon containing his household's belongings. It was a stray arrow, Damen heard. Bad luck.

Laurent trusts Damen as much as he trusts anyone, and yet Damen doesn't know whether or not Laurent would lie to him, if asked the question directly.

"As a token of the ever-growing friendship between our nations," Damen says, lifting a hand to signal to a slave in his retinue, "I have brought a gift."
The slave kneels beautifully and releases the lid of the long, polished wooden box. Damen lifts out the scroll with careful hands and unfurls just enough of it to display the splash of colour, the illustration that winds through the text. Damen commissioned this from the finest artisans and scribes in Ios, half a year ago now. A member of his guard was nearly reduced to tears by Irenaeus's high-volume ire when the box came perilously close to a dunking, during a difficult river crossing on their journey here. It is one of the most expensive things Damen has ever held in his hands.

Another murmur runs through the room. Damen knows exactly what this looks like. He could have brought for the warrior-king of Vere a horse from the best stables in Akielon, or a ceremonial sword, or some lovely piece of glassware to grace the Queen's table. He has brought a book. As statements go, it could not be much clearer.

"A superb addition to our library," says Auguste. Laughter is struggling behind his eyes. "I am sure Vere's scholars would wish to thank you in person."

Damen replaces the scroll in its box. "It is one of the treasured myths of my homeland," he says. He senses, rather than sees, Laurent's attention sharpen to a dagger-point.

"The story may be familiar to you," Damen continues politely. "In Akielos we celebrate the turn of the season with tales of the goddess's daughter, Kora, who went to a strange land, ate the seeds of a fruit and so could not leave, but who fell in love. And spent half of every year thereafter with her lover."

Auguste says, smiling widely, "What fruit was our brother so rash as to eat in Akielos?"

A louder murmur, now, of laughter as well as hissed remark.

"Figs," says Damen, holding his face absolutely straight. He doesn't dare look at Laurent. In fact, he would be happy to drop this line of talk, but Auguste turns his whole head in a motion that must be obvious even to those people at the back of the room, and gives Laurent a considering look. Then Auguste directs that same look back at Damen.

"We would only part with our beloved brother for a truly worthy reason. What assurance can you give us of your intentions?"

This time, what runs around the court is much more than a murmur.

It looks like they're doing this now, then.

At least, Damen thinks, finally darting a look at where Laurent is sitting--still composed, but for the slight widening of his eyes and the rigid angle of his wrist over the arm of his chair--Damen will be able to claim that Auguste started it. But Damen is more than willing to finish it. Veretians might think their Akielon neighbours prudish, but there are more intimate things than the writhing of body against body. There is more than one way to bare oneself, unflinching, in public.

Laurent meets Damen's eyes. Damen lets his face settle in anticipation, relaxing as he would before a clash of swords, and looks back to Auguste.

"Your brother has a brilliant mind and a strong will," Damen says. "He is stubborn, and slippery, and perhaps the most loyal person I have ever met. There isn't a man in the world whose opinion I value more."

Auguste raises a mild eyebrow. "Not a word about his looks?"
"All the food in your palace would be cold before I finished," Damen says, "if you were to let me begin."

The smallest hint of a sound from Laurent's direction; Damen is under no illusions that it was anything sweet, or pleased. He wonders if it will be himself or Auguste who will weather the lion's share of Laurent's revenge for this. It doesn't matter. Damen's been asked a question, and he's going to give his answer.

"Let there be no mistaking my intentions towards Prince Laurent of Vere," he says, letting emotion flow into his voice, and raising it with all the practice of military command. He searches for and finds each word like a firm handhold on the side of a mountain. "I would lay siege to the gates of ten kingdoms for his hand, and would count it the highest honour of my life to deserve a fraction of his heart. I am Damianos, King of Akielos, and I lay myself at his feet."

The silence is that of an appreciative audience, glutted with satisfaction at the spectacle taking place front of their eyes. Damen can only imagine how this story will grow in the telling.

"Well," Auguste says finally, spreading his hands. "After such a declaration, we can only wish you joy. Are you sure you won't take him for more than half a year?"

"It will have to be the cooler half," says Laurent. There is high colour in his cheeks, but his voice is pristine, and it carries. "I'm not going to put up with an Akielon summer."

The tension in the room breaks into laughter. Auguste steps forward again, grinning, and this time he wraps an arm around Damen's shoulders and thumps him like a soldier before leading him to a seat that has been left empty at Auguste's right hand. Damen is between the King and Queen of Vere; Laurent is seated on Auguste's other side, which is probably for the best, because Damen isn't sure if he'd be more likely to be eviscerated or stared into speechlessness if he had to sit next to Laurent right now. All the heat of his honesty is eddying through his chest, his mouth aching and sharp with the words he's spoken.

"Eat. Drink," Auguste commands of the room at large, and noise surges to fill the space.

Helene is a petite woman with a face consumed by dimples when she smiles. Prince Alaire, old enough to toddle and to carry on a conversation of very small words, is a plump and sunny child with his mother's dark hair, and eyes the exact, piercing blue of his uncle Laurent's.

Glancing across Auguste to confirm this comparison, Damen finds himself frozen in his seat. Laurent--Laurent, who has told Damen about the game of motionless control he played with himself as a boy, when he would lie down in the long summer grass for a count of five hundred and let insects crawl over his face and sensitive limbs--has one idle hand raised to his neck. Two of Laurent's crooked fingers disappear beneath the high collar of his jacket, touching a spot there. Laurent's eyelids have fallen closed, as if in boredom, or contemplation.

Blood skims and surges in Damen's cheeks. He is assaulted by a memory: the last time Laurent was in Akielos? No. The time before that. Sunlight streaming through the window and mixing cream from Laurent's bare skin, as Damen laid Laurent out on his bed and they played their own version of that game. Laurent with his palms held flat, determined. The shivering arch of his spine. Damen's mouth finding the places which rendered Laurent boneless and mutely pleading.

One such place was on the side of his neck, just beneath the elegant slash of muscle from ear to throat.

Damen pulls his eyes away before Laurent can have the satisfaction of catching them upon him.
"I didn't think it was worth displaying every one of our dirty rags in public," Auguste says, catching his attention, "but I'm sorry about your brother, too, Damianos."

Damen swallows. "There's nothing to be sorry about. He did die as he deserved. Or at least as the law demanded."

"I think Laurent enjoyed himself, there," Auguste says. Which might be what he's apologising for.

"I think part of him did," Damen says, thoughtful. "But he always knew what his victory would mean."

"Do you regret his assistance?"

Damen's asked himself that. Many times. The answer is always, thankfully, "No."

Auguste gives a faint smile. "Laurent thinks the way to conquer a snake is to step back and trick it into tying itself in knots."

"You don't agree?"

"I am a simple man, Damianos. It seems to me that the easiest way to rid yourself of a snake is to cut off its head."

A thin fissure runs through the world, then mends itself in the next instant. Their heads are close together, their voices far too low to be overheard.

"It was you," Damen says. "You ordered the ambush."

King Auguste of Vere regards Damen steadily. For the first time, Damen sees the clear stamp of Laurent in his brother's face.

"Laurent told me everything," he says; yes, Damen had known that. "And Laurent managed to draw him out, but not far enough. Once I was certain of his guilt, of the extent of his treachery… it was the only way to keep the rest of my family safe."

Auguste leans back, bestowing his attention on a courtier now approaching the royal party. Damen feels the staggering weight of Auguste's trust just as he'd felt Laurent's, when it was first placed in his hands.

Distracted, Damen accepts a delicate wafer, studded with fragrant black seeds, from a proffered plate. This is not a structured feast, with one course appearing after another. Instead trays of food and drink circle the room, a seemingly endless stream of variety, sweets and savouries and spices served all at once. A number of Auguste's courtiers are moving and mingling as well. Here and there, gorgeously dressed pets stop the palace servers to fill plates with choice morsels, then bring them back to their masters. Lacking such personal service, and having brought a bare minimum of slaves with his retinue, Damen is being served with promptness and delicacy by the palace servers themselves. As are the Veretian royal family. He'd known that Laurent employed no personal pets; he hadn't guessed the same about the King of Vere. But he's seen at least one of the warm glances exchanged by Auguste and his wife, and isn't at all surprised.

Damen rewards the server carrying the wafer-tray with a nod of thanks.

"Exalted," says the server, managing the unfamiliar word smoothly. The tray is deftly rotated, presenting Damen with a silver bowl filled with a thick, golden-yellow substance that hangs in a curl from the side of the wafer when Damen pulls it through.
Damen catches a strand of the syrup with his finger and tries it. His pulse, as the sweet taste spreads over his tongue, speeds up. He shifts his legs restlessly.

"This is a breakfast dish," Damen says.

Unlike a slave would, the server meets his eyes fully, and with cheerful admiration. "That's right, Exalted."

Damen waves him away without commenting further, or asking why a dish usually eaten in the morning has been included among those being served tonight. The last time he licked demere syrup from fingers, those fingers weren't his own.

Again, as if on a string, his gaze slides over to Laurent.

Laurent is sitting upright and composed in his chair, listening with an expression of mild amusement to a story being loudly told by a young man his own age, who is using his wine cup to gesture with one hand while stroking his pet's shoulder with another.

It's only because Damen's head is full of Laurent's long fingers that he notices. Laurent's hands are folded in his lap, obscured by a slightly raised thigh. One of those hands is idly, minutely picking at the laced cuff of the other wrist. Presently Laurent breaks into a full smile and his posture relaxes, his arms coming out to rest on the chair, as the story is punctuated by a swig of wine. Through the loosened blue fabric of the cuff can be seen a glimpse of undershirt and, beneath that, a sliver of pale skin. To the rest of the room it might look as though the gold lacing caught on something and Laurent has yet to notice.

Laurent gives another of those languid blinks and glances towards Damen. There is a very, very small tightening of Laurent's throat muscles when their eyes meet.

Damen's breath is hot in his chest and he is halfway hard, his attention in a thousand pieces. It is absurd, and pointed, and masterful. Laurent, without laying so much as a finger on him, has in a very short space of time delivered Damen into a state of near-blind arousal.

He's barely adjusted to this realisation before Laurent delivers the finishing blow in his flurry. The loud young man's pet rises from his knees, makes a pretty obeisance to his Prince, and disappears only for a few seconds. When he returns he is pulling a large, flat cushion behind him by one corner; it is almost the size of a small bed. This he sets down in the clear space in front of the chairs, exactly where Damen and his people stood to be greeted.

Around them, conversations start to hush. The pet--a fair-haired, slender youth, wearing only a brief cloth and a golden chain looped three times around his neck, matched to another that hangs on his brow--lowers himself gracefully to the cushion. He is joined by another man, more plainly but no less scantily dressed. The point of this is immediately apparent. Their bodies glide elegantly together, hands and lips moving without urgent purpose, in the kind of lazy embrace that could go on for hours.

Damen expected, and told the Akielon delegation to expect, something along these lines. But this is--this is not an impersonal, decorative erotic display. The tall man running his palms down the blond pet's sides and biting hungrily at the pink lips has olive skin and black hair, a faintly Vaskian cast to his features, and the kind of musculature that bespeaks real military training instead of mere sport. He may not be a pet at all, Damen realises.

"Laurent," Auguste says mildly.
"As a token," Laurent says, in limpid tones, "of the ever-growing friendship between our nations."

Damen manages not to laugh, mostly because he is already bracing himself for this to escalate. He carefully avoids the eyes of any of the other Akielons in the room.

Laurent leans back in his chair. His gaze is keen on the performance, but he looks entirely unaffected, a cool stream of water between sun-baked banks. Even so, Auguste's court is lively with approval for their tightly-laced prince, who is finally showing them a hint of mischief and sexual taste. Clearly taking the choreography of this display as echo of reality, the approving looks land on Damen as well.

Why waste an arrow on one bird if he can take down three, Damen thinks in exasperation.

The performance progresses faster than Damen expected. The two men are soon naked, stroking one another to hardness, the blond uncurling himself like a prize under the other's sure caresses. Then he is on all fours, his head bowed between shoulders. The other is behind him, kneeling. Damen finds his fingers like a rigid cage around his own knee and has to consciously relax the hand. His skin is like a ball of glass being blown, hot and supple, into some strange shape.

But the pace has slowed, the performers seemingly aware of something beyond their own pleasure. They are watching Laurent. And Laurent, after a moment, lifts one hand.

The act pauses at once. Apart from the fine shiver of the blond's legs and the small motions of the soothing, commanding hand in the shallow valley of his back, the two men are obediently still.

Laurent looks at Damen, brows raised.

A smattering of applause runs around the room. Its target is twofold: admiration of the control being shown by the blond pet and the man so close to taking him, but also in recognition of their Prince's exquisite tact, in pausing the spectacle right on the edge of Akielon propriety. In offering Damen the chance to refuse the gift with no loss of face, if his cultural mores demand it.

The room stares, expectant, at Damen.

Damen stares at Laurent. The upraised hand is the one with the loosened fastenings at the wrist. The golden ends of the laces dangle, somehow more obscene to Damen's eyes than the heavy breathing and bared flesh.

"You don't have to let him push you," Auguste murmurs.

Incredulous fire skips beneath Damen's skin. He still wants, badly, to laugh. He doesn't trust himself to speak, and in any case can't think of the glib jewel of a rejoinder that Laurent would no doubt give in his place. He simply inclines his head and lets his gaze, like a blessing, move back to the cushion. In his periphery, Laurent's hand falls in sharp signal.

The room exhales, gathers itself, and settles in.

Without further prevarication, the darker man lines up and, with a single smooth push, slides easily home. He sets a rhythm, wrenching soft, showy cries from the blond that quickly grow louder and less rehearsed.

Damen lets his eyes unfocus: a compromise with himself. The noise alone is almost too much. The sheer weight of attention in the room is a tangible thing, torn as it is between the straining men on the floor and the unspoken mirror that is Damen and Laurent, even set as they are on either side of Auguste's indulgent presence.
With a hoarse cry, the Vaskian shoves forward, presses his companion flat, and picks up speed. The blond now has one cheek buried in the cushion, his face crumpled with need, his hands reaching back to draw the other even deeper. And then, less than a minute later, either in true unison or an artful approximation of it, climax is reached.

Damen has to close his eyes entirely. He hopes it looks more overcome than rude.

When he opens them, the blond pet is climbing with unsteady but cheerful grace to his feet, basking in the applause. Laurent tosses the pet a gift, something small and shining that vanishes into the receptive clasp of the pale hands. Then the young man who is the pet's master has come forward, pride all over his amiable, drink-sackened face. He is talking to the Vaskian. Others are joining in, laughing. Someone discreetly removes the now-stained cushion. It is, it seems, over.

Damen takes three very slow, very deep breaths. Before he can feel them begin to work on the blood-rich tension of his limbs, he sees Laurent, who stood up when bestowing his approval, step away from his seat and walk behind Auguste's. In a second he will be close enough to touch.

It's Laurent who does the touching, however. He does not pause, he does not glance down, but he rests a fleeting hand on Damen's shoulder as he passes. The simple touch of his skin is like the burn of a whip. There are hundreds of eager eyes upon them, and there will be talk for days, for years, if Damen accepts the final part of this, Laurent's performative gift.

Damen stands and follows as though pulled by a chain.

If there were room in his head for real thought, Damen would expect Laurent to lead them to a safely private chamber, perhaps even Laurent's own suite in the palace. But they do not go far at all: out of the hall by a side door, round one corner, and two steps through a half-pulled curtain into a space that is little more than an alcove. The noise of the court, the celebration of his own arrival from which Damen has just walked bare-facedly away, can still be easily heard. Members of his guard, of Laurent's guard, might be arranging themselves close by. Nothing about this feels safe.

Damen, who somewhere in this short journey has lost control of his body, finds himself shoving Laurent, Prince of Vere, his high-born affianced consort in all but name, roughly back against the wall. Laurent moves to step forward; Damen slams him back again. Damen crowds in close, his whole self resonant with something too large to name.

This time Laurent stays where he's put. He lifts his face squarely to Damen's. Suddenly Damen recognises the speed of Laurent's breath, the drowning darkness of his eyes, where the pupils are so wide as to devour the blue. Far from being as unaffected as his posture suggests, Laurent has been playing this game on himself as well.

"I'm waiting," Laurent says.

Damen falls onto him, a ravenous man presented with a feast. With a hand at Laurent's jaw he delivers hard, insistent kisses, which Laurent opens to like a nut neatly cracked in a palm, and then begins to return. A quiet noise that could be either triumph or sheer need escapes from Laurent's wonderful mouth and dies, is dissected, is spun and devoured between them. The idea of slowing down enough to undress seems ludicrous. Damen runs his hands over Laurent through his beautifully tailored feast-day clothes: down his ribcage, tight at his waist, not breaking the kiss for long enough to take a full breath. He will never be used to this, never stop finding it intoxicating, not for as long as he lives.

Laurent draws Damen's lip between his own and sucks. Damen rubs his knuckles, not at all carefully, against the laced front of Laurent's trousers.
It's Laurent who spits a precise and appalling curse and attacks the laces there, fumbling and tugging, until Laurent is springing hot against Damen's fingers. It's Laurent who then pushes his trousers down further, so Damen can move his other hand to roam in urgent possession over the thrillingly bare line of Laurent's hip, the base of his spine, the firm horseman's muscle of his buttock beneath skin like sun-warmed silk.

Laurent's own hands land on Damen's upper arms and grip him like a siege ladder. His fingertips are ten points of painful force that betray the effort it must be taking for him not to move either forward or back. Damen's own cock twitches in sympathy where it's pushing against Laurent's stomach, hot and sensitive even though three layers of fabric, the friction sending tight lines of heat back into his body, where they bury themselves in a stranglehold around his nerves.

And then, with a stab of incredulous arousal, Damen's mind is corrupted by a double image: the blond pet, fucked quickly and easily, his body prepared. And Laurent, swaying against him as Damen's seeking fingers encounter the slick evidence that Laurent's plans for tonight were set long before the Akielons set foot in the hall, and included much more than just a word to the kitchens about demere syrup.

Both of them have gone still. Their breathing is ragged, quiet, filling the same small space of air. Damen struggles with his familiar mingled pleasure and irritation at being superbly anticipated; he's aware that this is a turning point. For all the filthy fluency of his calm tongue, this is the most sexually forward that Laurent has ever been. How Damen reacts now is going to matter.

He doesn't move either of his hands. He kisses Laurent's temple and then leaves his mouth there, open and hot in the tangle of Laurent's bright hair.

"You are wasted in peacetime," Damen says. He keeps his voice teasing and low. "I think an army intending to invade by stealth would find you at the border with ten thousand men and banners welcoming them individually by name."

Laurent pulls away slightly. He has to swallow twice before he speaks, but his face is relaxed, with faint lines of relief around his brilliant eyes.

"You should know by now, Damianos," he says, "I'm always prepared."

"Next time," Damen says, tracing a deliberate circle with his finger and then pressing in, enough to be felt, "you should let me watch you do it."

Laurent's eyes fly very wide. Damen takes swift advantage of his surprise, and turns him, directing Laurent's momentarily limp arms to rest above his head on the wall, where Damen traps them with a hand of his own. The other hand, the hand with oil-coated fingertips, he uses to lift the folds of his own clothing and spread Laurent gently, so that Damen's hard and desperate cock can nudge and stroke over the oil-slick place that's been left for him, that is waiting, for him.

"Laurent," he says, and it cracks into a groan.

A visible shudder runs through Laurent's fully-clothed shoulders as Damen, forcing himself to move slowly, fits only the head of his cock into the incredible pressure of that tight ring of muscle. He pauses. His breath keeps catching like knots on a string. He can feel, somewhere, through one of the places where they are joined, Laurent's pulse racing just out of step with his own.

Outside the curtain comes a muffled sound, like someone's feet on the floor, and another sound that is not even a sound. The soldier in Damen recognises it, even without seeing it, as a conversation taking place in glances and gestures. Damen is frozen, blood heavy in his throat, trying to convince
himself that he cares enough to stop.

He doesn't.

"Laurent," a soft query this time. Almost a plea.

"I am not, as it turns out," Laurent says, impatient and muffled against the wall, "above begging."

The last filament of Damen's self-control snaps. It's like being blinded in the midst of a bout by a shield cunningly angled into full sunlight; his body is reacting even as his awareness flees to a brief safe darkness. When he comes back into himself, a few endless moments later, he's fucking all the way into Laurent: hard and fast and almost wild, selfish in his pleasure, but also undone by the way Laurent moves against him, both giving and unyielding.

Never before has Damen let himself be this unbridled in his need, never used so much of his greater bulk and strength. Part of him is monitoring the tension of Laurent's muscles, ready to summon all his self-control and pull back on the pace, give distance, if needed.

But Laurent, having teased the both of them into this state of abandonment, shows no sign of wanting such a drawing-back. There's something thrilling about the urgency of it. Before today they've always had time and space and privacy, all of which Damen was accustomed to, all of which he thought Laurent needed. And perhaps he did, while he was discovering his own desires. Damen remembers shaking hands with Laurent, before he ever knew him properly; he remembers feeling the sword-callus which he would only learn later was earned through hidden practice, private repetition. Laurent, constructing himself in secret.

But Laurent is no longer the wary virgin that he was the first night they had together, frustrated at his own struggles for control. He has, perhaps, mastered himself and his desires to his satisfaction. And for all his reserve and care, Laurent is Veretian; Damen has just seen with his own eyes the kind of spectacle that Laurent has grown up with.

You don't have to let him push you.

No. But neither of them knows how to quit a field, while a game might still be won.

Given the difference in their heights, the angle isn't ideal; Damen's thrusts are shallow, and force Laurent onto his toes. It is still better than almost anything Damen has ever done. Laurent is near-silent but pliant, gasping in air, sweat darkening the hair above his jacket collar, a pink flush on all his exposed places except for the small rings of pure white around each of Damen's fingertips where they dig in.

It doesn't take long, and Damen has no desire to draw it out. Having been brought so close to the edge already by Laurent's expert game, the tight, sweet surrender of Laurent's body drags him roughly across it. Warmth builds to a roar inside him and he forgets the half-open curtain, forgets everything but the smell of Laurent's hair as he buries his face in it and rides out the perfect agony of release.

When Damen finally pulls out, releases his grip and turns Laurent so that his back is against the wall, Laurent is shaking, his mouth loose, almost incoherent. Still recovering from the heart-rattle of his own pleasure, Damen drinks in the sight of him with a new kind of hunger. Up until now Damen has been holding Laurent's wrists in one hand and Laurent's hip with the other; Laurent is untouched, dripping and hard.

There is an incredible, wrenching moment as they stare at one another. It's clear that iron-willed
Laurent is close to seizing control of himself again.

Without another word, Damen drops to his knees on the marble and takes Laurent into his mouth. He sucks, greedy and deep, with no time for more than a single satisfied groan around the weight on his tongue before Laurent gives a short, sharp cry, like a young bird of prey, and spills into his mouth.

Laurent's fingers are in his hair, his touch light and almost hesitant. Damen pulls his mouth gently away; he leans his forehead in the soft hollow of Laurent's thigh and closes his eyes for a brief moment. Then stands up, still swallowing down the last of the salty taste.

"You did that the first time," Laurent says. "The very first time."

"Yes." Damen smiles with the memory.

Laurent smiles back, small and real. He always looks younger, less shielded, in the aftermath. He's still breathing hard. Damen's heart glows embers just to look at him.

"I had no idea, then," Laurent says. About this, his eyes say; about us.

"Neither did I," Damen says, but he knows what Laurent means. For Laurent, always three steps ahead and with another five plans in his pocket, this is a serious admission.

Laurent's mouth moves, working to bring something to the surface. Damen waits.

"You threw everything into disarray," Laurent says at last. He sounds irritated. His eyes are shining like summer lakes.

Damen kisses him again, just once, instead of replying.

And then there's the laborious process of lacing Laurent back into the trousers, which Damen insists on doing even though he's still twice as slow as Laurent when it comes to Veretian clothing. Whenever his fingers brush Laurent's softening and over-sensitive cock, the muscles of Laurent's stomach contract. Laurent, letting the wall support him, keeps a gentle hold of Damen's forearm during this process. The touch is barely directing; instead it has the air of unthinking reassurance, for one or perhaps for both of them, that Damen is not about to disappear. Damen's heart shivers, exultant. This time, unlike every other, there is no need to anticipate the long separation ahead.

"There," Damen says, when the lacing is complete. His own process of re-dressing has required nothing more than letting the folds of his chiton fall back down.

"Wait," Laurent says.

He reaches up and drags his fingers back and forth through Damen's hair, mussing it thoroughly. He then taps a finger in silent command against the golden lacings at his neck, which are still neatly tied. Damen, after a moment, takes hold of one knotted end and tugs. Laurent holds his chin high; he's banished both the wrecked expression and the unguarded one, now. His face is full of nothing but mild and self-satisfied approval. Damen has the wild urge to dig his nails right into the front of this lovely garment and just rip, to ruin it utterly, to lay Laurent's pale chest bare and bury his face in Laurent's neck.

He does not. Slowly, the first few inches of gold come loose from their loops.

"That's enough, I think," Laurent says. "No need to overdo it."

Damen drops his hand. "And what am I doing, exactly?"
Laurent's smile is like lightning.

"Helping me win a wager," he says.
Chapter 2

By the time they re-enter the hall, the chairs have been rearranged.

There is nobody to see them as they make their way back from the alcove, though Damen looks around with awkward suspicion. The absence of visible people means nothing. Both of them are royal by blood and by upbringing, and Laurent at least has played games of escape and hiding with his personal guard since he was old enough to walk, with the result that they have a grimly keen sense of his whereabouts.

Similarly, once in the hall, there is a valiant pretence that their disappearance and reappearance has gone unnoticed. Laurent smiles at Lady Cateline, who has been a fraction of a second too slow in averting her gaze. He grabs hold of Damen's hand just as Damen is lifting it to his head, no doubt to fix his hair.

"We should eat," Laurent says.

Damen looks down at their joined hands as if at a smouldering arrow buried in dry hay.

"Are you sure," he murmurs, "or would you like to trot me around the room some more?"

"I'm hungry."

"Perhaps you could wince as you sit down," Damen suggests.

Laurent feels himself go a brilliant pink. He does, he supposes, deserve that.

"I'm hungry," he says again, and pulls Damen towards their chairs. Which are now, Laurent notes, standing cosily next to one another.

Auguste is deep in conversation with Councillor Herode, and Helene is busy kissing Alaire goodnight, the boy's expression cranky and chafing with fatigue. Damen allows Laurent to steer him into their seats and to summon food for the both of them with a pointed look at the nearest server.

Laurent keeps hold of Damen's hand, letting them rest together on the arm of Damen's chair. After a moment Damen strokes over Laurent's knuckles with his thumb, a reassurance that Laurent was only half aware of craving, and Laurent looks out over the room, satisfied. There's something liberating about it, to be parading the proof of them in front of the same Veretian nobility for whom Laurent has been playing the quiet scholar all these years. It's something that would have been impossible while his uncle was alive. That makes it precious. And this relationship started with sneaking into Damen's rooms, unseen; it wouldn't be right for Damen to believe that Laurent is ashamed, or has a drop of regret in him.

There's another reason, too, which Laurent doesn't let rise to the surface too often, but which throbs like a banked fire in the knobs of his spine. A dark, ferocious part of him would have his crest emblazoned on Damen's skin, to have Damen's on his. To have their ownership of one another flaunted so vividly and absolutely that nobody will ever dare dispute their claim.

Damen's already taken steps in that direction tonight, of course. When Laurent allows himself to dwell on the memory, it takes most of his considerable control not to fumble his own gestures, or to let his mouth fall slack around his food. There seems no room inside him for anything but the way Damen looked at him, proud and handsome and regal; the way Damen's voice warmed his words like a flame. I would lay siege to the gates of ten kingdoms for his hand, and would count it the
highest honour of my life to deserve a fraction of his heart.

It might have looked like tradition or bargaining, like Auguste was naming himself the arbiter of his brother's affections, but it was theatre. Good theatre. Laurent didn't know Auguste had that much of a flair for targeted spectacle.

And Damen… Damen stood before the entire court of Vere and declared himself claimed, in words. Laurent chose to do it in actions.

"It seems we are to congratulate you, Your Highness."

Eudes, standing in front of and addressing Laurent, lets his gaze drag over Damen like a hand over a horse's flesh as he straightens from his bow. It renders the suggestive note in his voice redundant.

"It seems I cannot stop you from doing so," Laurent says, so politely that the point flies over Eudes's sleek head.

"It's gratifying to see such athleticism among our youth. Perhaps next time, you could dispense with the need for a stand-in."

He blinks at Laurent. Laurent blinks back. Beneath the surface he is a wineskin of satisfaction and remembered desire, still shivering at odd moments with the memory of Damen inside him.

"I defer to his Exalted Majesty the King of Akielos," Laurent says, lowering his eyes.

Eudes, who has been insulated by both wealth and an overprotective mother from developing any real instinct for survival, actually takes Laurent at his word. He directs at Damen a paternal heartiness that he's two decades too young to manage.

"Play by Veretian rules in Vere," Eudes says, in formal but appalling Akielon. "No man in this kingdom could resist the temptation to display such a prize."

"What a kind suggestion," says the Exalted Majesty in question, in somewhat strained tones.

Laurent bites down on his own lip for less than a heartbeat, and then masters it and raises his head. His control is threatened again a moment later, when Eudes declaims a Veretian proverb about early winter ice covering the fastest-flowing rivers.

Laurent digs one of his fingernails into the flesh of Damen's hand: Don't laugh.

"I'm not familiar with that one," Damen says with a straight face.

Even Eudes isn't stupid enough to push on into vulgarity. He raises a delicate eyebrow, bows at a point between the two of them, murmurs benign congratulations and respect, and retreats.

"That was fascinating," Laurent says.

"Nobody missed the meaning of that little display you staged," Damen says. "In case you were worried about that."

"I wondered if you'd be angry."

Damen's eyes move to the retreating back of Eudes. "Considering the alternatives…"

Laurent needs to stop being surprised when Damen sees a little further than expected.
He says, "Did you think I would strip you and show you off like a prize bull?"

After a moment, Damen says, "Did you think I would renounce you over a bit of embarrassment?"

Laurent pulls his fingers out of Damen's and holds himself very still. He looks at the tapestry at the back of the hall: it was a favourite of his father's, this one, a grand hunting scene, depicting various of his ancestors in lively chase of a deer that has just vanished outside the tapestry's frame.

"You are a king," he says. "Your choices matter."

"Yes," Damen says.

"I thought," Laurent says, "you should know what you were getting."

Damen says nothing for a long time. The richly textured fabric of the tapestry is beginning to fade and curl at one lower corner, where a shaft of sunlight from the west-facing windows strikes it in the afternoons. There are five hounds portrayed: two black, three grey. There are eleven horses. Laurent's great-grandmother, Queen Marguerite, has her head turned back over her shoulder, her arm raised in joyful shout to the other members of the party. The plait of her hair is like a ribbon of wheat.

When Laurent finally glances at Damen it feels, ridiculously, like one of the more difficult feats of strength in his life to date. There is so much in Damen's face that Laurent tightens his grip on the arm of his chair else he, too, begins to curl helplessly beneath the warmth of it.

"I did say stubborn and slippery," Damen says. "Laurent, I want all of you. The games as well."

Helene lays a hand on Laurent's arm to catch his attention. Her son has now been dispatched in the arms of a nursemaid, and Auguste is behind her shoulder.

"Under the circumstances, I don't think anyone will begrudge you an early retiring," says the Queen of Vere, dimples springing to life in her cheeks. "But for the sake of politics I must insist on taking the King of Akielos for a walk around the room."

"My wife will tell you everyone's names," Auguste says to Damen. "She has a knack for doing it without even moving her lips." He steps forward and leans down to kiss those lips. Helene's body leans briefly into his and her eyes fall shut, a portrait of intimate ease. There is a small, cautious flutter, like tiny wings, in Laurent's chest.

Helene tucks a hand through Damen's arm as he stands up. She is tiny beside him. They look well together, with their dark heads and dark eyes.

"Trot on," Laurent says.

Damen gives him a level look, and allows Helene to sweep him towards the nearest Councillor.

Laurent, who was not lying about being hungry, eats two apples and then pulls pieces off a warm, crusty loaf of bread as he watches and catalogues their progress around the room. By the time he finishes the bread, Damen is exchanging greetings with Jerome, whose pet Marciel was so enthusiastically involved in the earlier display. Damen's face is the face of a friendly king making the acquaintance of a minor noble, but he still can't dissemble well enough for this court. Laurent watches the line of Damen's mouth and wonders how close he is to bursting out laughing.

"Tell me," Auguste says, settling himself beside Laurent.

"What?"
"You know you always enjoy it more when you let yourself tell someone. And it's not going to be me that you tell things to for much longer. Call it nostalgia, Laurent. Indulge me."

Perhaps Laurent, too, is not as opaque as he'd wish this evening. He can't bring himself to care.

He counts his players off on his fingers: one, two, three. "Jerome has always wanted to prove he's a close enough friend of your family that he might be invited to join in such a scheme. It will give him a boost in status, which he needs at the moment, because he's trying to persuade Marcien to renew contract with him instead of accepting a better offer. Marcien's already decided to stay with Jerome; he's smart enough to appreciate the way he's treated. But a high profile performance like that will mean he can leverage the attention into at least a set of emeralds and a promise of accompanying Jerome to his family's properties in Chasteigne."

"And Bassan?"

Bassan was sent to Arles by his Vaskian mother at fourteen. For someone whose legitimacy is still poisonously contested--there is some disagreement amongst Veretian lawyers on the subject of what constitutes wedlock across the border--he's done a solid job up until now of keeping himself out of intrigue and concentrating on his work. He's one of the most dedicated members of Auguste's guard.

"You know as well as I do that he could never afford someone like Marcien on a soldier's salary."

Auguste's voice is rueful. "And now three people owe you a favour for doing something that was to your advantage anyway."

"Do they?" Laurent says. "I hadn't thought of that."

"And what does Damianos owe you, I wonder?"

Laurent's cheeks tingle. "Are you going to scold me?"

"You usually know what you're doing," Auguste says. "Though I did see at least one dangerous coughing fit among the other Akielons. The poor man had to leave the room."

"Cultural exchange?" Laurent offers.

Auguste smiles, but doesn't rise to it. "Actually," he says, "I was just glad to see you engaged in something so unserious."

Laurent closes his mouth on What do you mean? He's not disingenuous with his brother when it counts, but sometimes the first instinct still has to be quashed.

"Don't take offense," Auguste adds. "A year ago, I had to work hard to see you smile."

"A year ago, our uncle wanted nothing better than to see you dead."

"Laurent."

Laurent says, delicately, "It seems I am being marched towards a point."

"I think he makes you happy."

Laurent looks at his brother. He thinks of the light in Damen's eyes as Damen unpicked the laces at his throat. He forgets sometimes, with his own affinity for hidden things, for obscured and complicated and difficult facts, that Auguste will wield truth like a sword.
"Yes," Laurent says.

Auguste leans forward and kisses his forehead, brief. "Good. I have never wanted anything else for you."

"I wanted to keep you safe," Laurent blurts.

"And so you have," Auguste says. "And so you shall. I may not read as many books as you, little brother, but I'm not so stupid that I don't realise that."

Laurent moves a dry tongue around his mouth. He feels like his bones are ancient but the rest of him is six years old and trailing in his brother's wake, wide-eyed and adoring.

Auguste grins and gives him a push in the shoulder. "Go on," he says. "Your Akielon would probably wait fifty summers for you if he had to. But it's not polite to make him prove it."

Laurent flicks his eyes to the front. Damen is standing there, alone now, looking at him.

Laurent glances around until he catches the gaze of Bassan. The soldier has escaped the amused attention of the courtiers and is hovering at the side of the room, looking ill at ease without his uniform and weapons. He is, at least, now wearing clothes. Laurent beckons him near.

"His Majesty's gift belongs in the library," Laurent says, indicating the box where it was stowed beside Auguste's chair. "We shall take it there."

"Of course, Your Highness," Bassan says. He lifts the box easily.

"I can--" Damen starts, but Laurent moves his eyes again and Damen subsides.

Damen's tension is obvious as they make their way through the palace, and he doesn't start conversation. In Akielos, Damen is happy to speak in front of slaves, even when Laurent's sense of discretion would rather he didn't. But Bassan is not a slave. And there's something about the way Damen keeps glancing at Bassan that suggests he is having trouble banishing the performance from his mind.

The library is dark, though the air has a lingering warmth from where the sun has poured through the windows all afternoon. Bassan lowers the box to a table as Laurent lights two lamps, which throw gentle pools of flickering yellow into the room.

"Bassan," Laurent says. "The King my brother can't be trusted around the spiced quince cake. Keep an eye on him for me."

Bassan kneels, briefly but fully, where a bow would be sufficient for such an order. He meets Laurent's eyes as he rises. "I will, Your Highness."

Damen watches him leave the room.

"That man is entirely yours," he says, amused, when they're alone once more.

"He's Auguste's guard."

"That's not what I meant."

"You're still wrong," Laurent says. "Jord and Orlant, they're mine. But Bassan's first loyalty is to his king."
Laurent wouldn't have chosen him if it were otherwise. He could have bought any number of spies for the price of a fuck with someone of Marcien's skill. Bassan is one of the few who Laurent trusts not to turn if someone tries to outbid him, because the man's priority will always be Auguste's safety. Which suits Laurent perfectly.

"All right." Damen smiles. "Loyalty's one thing. But I'll wager half my kingdom he was thinking of you when he was having that pet."

Laurent hides his startlement by turning to the box and lifting the scroll out. Just as the slave did, he unrolls the first section, and holds it so that the gilding of the border catches the lamplight. The symbols of Akroleon script are beautifully rendered, but so stylised that it takes Laurent a few moments for reading and translation to become simultaneous. The paper is thick, the wooden rod carved into cage-like twists at either end. It is so lovely that it sends calm ripples through Laurent, from his eyes and his fingers, all the way to his centre.

"I can fetch someone to declaim it for you," Damen says presently, in dry tones.

"I've already heard it declaimed," Laurent says. He resists the urge to keep unfurling, and places the scroll back in its box. His fingertips linger on the lid. "Thank you, Damianos."

"We can take it back with us," Damen offers. "But I think Timon may actually cry if we have to risk it crossing the Augia at the height of autumn flood."

"No. It's a gift from Akroleos to Vere. It belongs here." Laurent picks up the lamp and carries over to his favourite window seat, which is wide and cushioned. He sits. It's very quiet; he has to strain to hear the sounds filtering through from the rest of the palace. "I spent a lot of time in this room, when I was younger."

Not that much younger. But the Laurent of two years ago would find it difficult to believe where he is now, and where he's going, and with whom.

Damen accepts the silent invitation and comes to sit in the other corner of the seat. Laurent sets the glass-sided lamp on the wooden ledge, where it glows between them, flirting with its own reflection in the glass.

The cushion of the seat is a map. The embroidery depicting the northern regions of both Vere and Vask, where Laurent sits, is worn and dulled from many hours of pressure and scuffing. Laurent traces with his finger a path from Delpha east to Bazal, then directly south through Patras and across the border, sticking close to the eastern Akroleon coast before finally ducking west to Ios. The space between Laurent's feet, tucked up and resting on the cushion, and Damen's thigh, represents a journey of many weeks.

He glances inquiringly at Damen, confirming his memory of the planned route.

"Don't tell me now that you'd have preferred to sail," Damen says. "I promised Torgeir that we'd be in Bazal for the anniversary of the peace treaty."

Laurent has less than fond memories of making the return trip between Arles and Ios by ship. Sea travel does not agree with him.

"By all means, let's take the leisurely route."

Damen uses a finger of his own to tap at a point in the green area that represents Kesus, just above the red stitched line dividing it from Ellium.
"There's a royal holding, around here. It's a beautiful region, and by the time we get there the trees will have turned. They look like towers of flame on either side of the river. I thought we could stay there a while, if you like it."

"Your court will be missing you by then."

"Most of them will meet us there. It's a large compound, and there's good hunting in the forest. I need to look over the lands anyway." He glances away. "It used to be Kastor's estate. It's reverted to me while I decide what to do with it."

"Good lands?" Laurent asks.

Damen nods. "Some of the best orchards in the country."

"Don't rush into promising it to anyone."

"Actually," Damen says, "I have made a point of not promising it to a number of people."

Laurent feels his gaze sharpen.

Damen says mildly, "I do listen, you know. When you talk."

Laurent's mouth is dry. It's ridiculous. He swallows and says, "We may make a politician of you yet."

"I already know what I'm doing with the estate," Damen says. "I haven't told anyone."

"Good. Keep it that way as long as you can," Laurent says. "You can get a lot done, with hope."

"Phintias approached me about it the day after Kastor died." Distaste sharpens Damen's features. "He managed to imply that there were at least a few advantages to having to execute one's family members for treason."

"I know it was difficult," Laurent says carefully. "For you."

"Difficult, to stand there and watch?" Damen leans his head back against the polished wood with a soft thump. He is looking out the window, into darkness. "Tell me," Damen says.

Laurent doesn't jerk, but a sensation like a jerk happens inside him, at the sudden echo of Auguste.

Laurent says, "Tell you what?"

"Tell me how you destroyed Kastor."

"I thought we agreed you didn't need to know the details," Laurent says. "Your brother is dead, Damen."

Damen silently absorbs the blow of the word, and the unspoken latter half of the sentence. Your brother is dead and I killed him. They are both clever enough to know that this is not, actually, true. The law of Akielos killed Kastor. Kastor's own actions killed Kastor. Laurent was simply the edge of the blade.

But there's truth, and there's emotion.

"I'm not going to let you carry it around alone," Damen says.
You enjoy it more when you can tell someone. But Damen is not offering a chance to boast. He's offering to set his shoulder against Laurent's and feel the weight of what they have done.

"I offered him what he wanted," Laurent says. "It's usually that simple."

"Nothing you do is simple." A pause. "The throne."

"Yes. Though it was a bit more complicated than that."

Damen gives him a patient look.

"He wanted what he'd always wanted," Laurent says. "What you had."

The patient look vanishes; an expression of mingled doubt, anger and sheer affront does battle for Damen's face. It's flattering, if hilarious.

"Not that," Laurent says. "He didn't even like men."

"Well," Damen says, sweeping his eyes down Laurent and back up again.


"You must have wanted something, in this bargain."

"Delpha," Laurent says simply. "Perhaps even Sicyon; he'd never have agreed, but I had to look eager. In the hope that Auguste would then add them to my own holdings, out of fraternal gratitude. Giving me a solid base of power in the south, out of Marlas."

"He really believed you were setting yourself up against Auguste?"

"I'm the Veretian snake in your bed, Damen." Laurent smiles, not nicely. "Kastor wanted someone to justify his ambition. He wanted to believe that we were the same, or similar. That I wanted power, and I wasn't getting anywhere with my current... manipulations." He lifts one foot and presses it briefly against Damen's groin.

Damen watches him, something complicated in his face. He doesn't move. Laurent removes his foot again.

"I led him on. I led him all the way out into the open, I made him overplay his hand, and then I withdrew my support. I left him hanging, accused of treason and conspiracy against his King."

Damen was there for what came after. The trial, the evidence, and the death.

"It was the only way," Laurent says.

You can get a lot done, with hope.

"Don't be sorry," Damen says.

Laurent actually flinches.

"I think I was only half a prince," Damen goes on, quietly, "before I met you." He reaches, deliberately, for Laurent's foot. He wraps his hand around the ankle of Laurent's boot as if it were bare skin.
"I'm not sorry," Laurent says. Now that he's started talking, the words are there, crowded at the back of his throat, scrambling to escape. He knows this feeling. Usually he swallows them down, like an unpleasant taste. Like a handful of pins. But Damen's gaze is steady, and he can feel Damen's hand, barely, through the leather. "I needed the conspiracy, or the hint of it. I let just enough of it slip to be bait for my uncle."

"He believed--"

"I told you," Laurent says, bitter. "He doesn't--he didn't know you. And he didn't know me, as it turns out. He was running out of time. He built the trap around me and I kicked down the wall." Laurent shakes his head. His failure is howling in his chest. "But he wasn't Kastor. He was too good at the game. Auguste had an excuse to seize his lands and have him banished to Marches, but not enough evidence for anything more than that. I don't know if I could have--I don't know."

"You did everything you could," Damen says.

Laurent remembers the feeling of lightness, of a fist releasing its grip on his lungs, when he heard. When he knew that Auguste was--not perfectly safe, because no king ever is, but at least no longer threatened by their uncle's venomous ambition.

"The arrow that killed my uncle," Laurent says. "You haven't asked me."

"I could call it fate," Damen says. "A just reward for his actions."

"I don't believe in fate," Laurent says. "A man nocked that arrow and pulled that string."

"Fate uses men's hands." Damen is unflinching. The shadow of Kastor passes over the conversation again.

Laurent says, "If it were my hands, it would have been slower."

The words come off his tongue like sour wine and sit between them, heavy and dangerous. After a moment, Damen shifts closer. Laurent shifts his legs further to cede the space, until his arms are looped around his knees and Damen is sitting almost on Laurent's toes. Damen reaches out without speaking and brushes back a piece of Laurent's hair--his fingers touch the gold of Laurent's circlet in passing--then rests that hand lightly at the side of Laurent's neck, where the tendons spring taut at once. Laurent battles with himself, as he hasn't needed to in months, to tolerate the touch.

"I should know what I'm getting," Damen says. "Is that the point? I already told you that I do know."

"I am not," Laurent says stiffly, "easy."

"Then I don't want easy."

All Laurent's defences give way at once, with a frightening violence like being chopped off at the knees. He allows his head to sag to the side, into the cradle of Damen's hand, and rests it there.

Damen strokes his thumb over Laurent's cheek, then pulls his hand away. He shifts position again, and guides Damen to do the same, lifting Damen's legs and straightening them to lie across his own thighs. It's a silly position, one for young lovers huddled giggling in a corner, sharing confidences. The lamplight finds new angles in Damen's face, each more attractive than the last. All this laden talk about Kora, but it's Damen who looks like he belongs to the age of myths and heroes.

"Pyrphoros." Laurent says, nudging the lamp with a knuckle. "Did I pronounce that right? I've only ever read it."
"Yes."

"He stole fire from the gods."

"That's your game," Damen says. "Walk into a place and steal something."

"I haven't played it in years," Laurent says.

"Really?" Damen takes hold of Laurent's hand and looks at it critically, rubs his thumb at the wrist. Laurent's mind give a ludicrous hiccup. What he comes out with is: "In Patras they brand thieves."


Laurent's voice is very calm. "I haven't played that game in years."

"You're lying," Damen says. "You walked into Akielos and stole something from me."

He still has hold of Laurent's hand. He lifts it, then flattens it under his own palm, on the left side of his chest.

Laurent feels his cheeks flood, painfully, with colour. He moves a single finger, side to side, unwilling to look up from his careful inspection of Damen's chiton. The fabric is white triangles glimpsed between his white fingers and Damen's brown ones. Laurent's mouth feels like the last stone fruit of summer, heavy and overripe. When Damen put his other hand to Laurent's jaw, lifting Laurent's face up to his, Laurent thinks for a hysterical moment: you can't. I'll burst. And it almost feels like he does, when Damen's lips touch his. Laurent lays himself open to it, thirsty. Despite all the other absurd and wonderful things bodies can be made to do, this is still the thing he enjoys most. He likes the gentle and overwhelming pressure of Damen's hand on his cheek, the way Damen makes tiny murmuring sounds of encouragement. He likes the way the kiss goes from gentle to lush to urgent and then back to gentle again; he likes the way his body starts to go liquid with pleasure and his fingers feel like hot iron on wax, like if this carried on much longer they'd pass through Damen's skin and ribs and sear their mark right onto the muscle of his heart.

Laurent pulls his mouth away with a sharp, involuntary breath. He can feel his own pulse in his swollen lips, in his fingers, in his chest, even in the backs of his knees tapping against Damen's legs. He is one great rhythm of blood.

He swings his legs clear and climbs out of the seat, taking the lamp with him. "Come on," he says.

Damen rises also, with half a smile on his mouth. "Where to now?"

Laurent takes him to the baths. No, he tells the attendants, they don't need any help. Yes, they would like to be left alone.

They don't need the lamp here; there are plenty set into the walls already. Laurent sets it down on the floor and looks around, trying to see the room with Damen's eyes, as if for the first time. The tiny inlaid patterns of the tiles, green and gold and blue. The fragrant steam rising from the water.

"This is where you say something rude about decadence," he says.

"No. It's perfect for you." Damen isn't looking at the tiles. "A jewel in its setting."

Laurent flushes again. It was careless of him to leave an opening like that, now that he knows what plain-speaking Damen can do with words when he sets his mind to it. This is King Damianos paying
court, even now, when anyone can see that Laurent has been fairly won.

He lifts an arm, wrist upmost, and extends it in Damen's direction.

Damen puts his fingers to the laces.

"I've been thinking about the retinue I should bring with me when we leave," Laurent says, conversational. "Do you think four body servants will be enough? I heard that Princess Tornilde included half her brother's menagerie in her dowry. Would Timon object to carrying a cage full of parrots?"

"You talk more when you're aroused, now," Damen says.

"I hope there is enough room on the back of your horse for all the chests full of my clothes."

"You used to go silent."

The cuffs undone, Damen is working on the already-loosened laces that run from collar to waist.

"I can hardly trust Akielon tailors to know how to make civilised garments. Twenty shirts might suffice. Ten pairs of boots. Ten jackets of various weights."

"Laurent."

"And of course it will be winter, so I'll need a heavy cloak. Perhaps two. Careful with that, it's my best--"

The sound of fabric ripping is as sudden and harsh as if someone had dropped an urn to smash on the tiles. Laurent blinks. Loose threads and mangled eyelets dangle from the torn sides of his jacket, one in each of Damen's fists.

"Fuck the jacket," Damen says. "I'll buy you a hundred more just like it."

Laurent stares at him, wiped clean of comment. Then he starts to laugh. He leans in against Damen's chest for a moment, and something flows out of him like the last dregs of poison from a wound. Damen's hands divest him of the ruined garment and his undershirt in short order, and then glide back up to cup his bare shoulders.

"No, please, continue," Laurent says. "You were demonstrating your comfort with obscenity."

"I've changed my mind," Damen says. His eyes are hot. "I'll buy you some proper clothes."

"Akielon clothes."

"You sound like I suggested flinging mud at your body."

"That might be more decent," Laurent says.

Damen raises his eyebrows and steps away. He unpins the solid gold clasp at one shoulder of his chiton, then the other, and removes the slender piece of belting. With a few slow tugs the fabric is unwound, falling to the floor. Laurent watches it fall. Laurent watches a corner of the chiton land in a small puddle of water spilled over from the sunken pool. It begins to darken as it soaks through.

Laurent lifts his gaze as slowly as he can manage. By the time he reaches Damen's face, Laurent's chest is rising urgently with each breath.
"A valid argument," Laurent says.

His hands itch. He puts them to work removing his boots and unlacing his own trousers. He can see the pale skin of his arms already pinking up with the steam. This, too, is one of his favourite places in the palace. Laurent has private massages to pound the knots from his shoulders after his even more private sword training, but he also relies on these baths to relax him at the end of a day. To find the subtler, tighter knots that come from holding himself still in the face of a thousand small provocations.

There is also the fact, which Laurent has been trying not to think about, that Damen's earlier enthusiasms this evening have left Laurent a little… *sticky*. He drops the trousers on top of the shreds of jacket and presses his lips together to keep in an odd mixture of desire and distaste.

Damen is already waist-deep in the water. Laurent pulls a cloth from the neatly folded pile nearby, and joins him. They wash without speaking, bending necks and offering help with gestures, ducking their heads so that their hair is soaked. The sounds of small splashes mingle with their breathing. The steam smells of white flowers and new wood. Laurent could float on his back and fall asleep, if it weren't for the fact that he is still so lazily aroused he could scream. Every time Damen touches him, his body lights up.

"This is new," he says presently. He presses two fingers to the ridge of young scar tissue that crosses Damen's sternum.

"Duel of honour," Damen says solemnly.

"Liar." He presses harder.

"Did you want one too?"

Laurent's breath catches sharply in his throat, and he drops his hand. He thinks of branding irons. He thinks of visible marks, and the animal desire to stake claim. He has been silent too long for the question. Damen's face has changed.

"You could start with something less permanent," Laurent says.

"That's not a no."

"No."

"Is it a request?"

Laurent struggles. "Yes," he says.

"Nobody will know," Damen says, amused. "Not with what you wear."

"Oh," Laurent says sweetly, "but in these *proper* clothes I've been promised…"

Damen looks down at him with pure affection and silent laughter: a surfeit of honest treasures right there on the surface where someone could just--scoop them up, let them run through their fingers. It's dangerous. It shouldn't be allowed.

"I'll know," Laurent says.

Damen's eyes darken. He lifts Laurent's arm without a word and sucks a hot red mark to the surface of Laurent's wrist.
They brand thieves, Laurent thinks.

Damen doesn't stop there. Unbidden, he noses below Laurent's ear and creates another mark, right over the most sensitive part of Laurent's neck; exactly where Laurent was teasing with his own fingers, at the start of the evening. It was entirely for show. Touching that place himself does nothing. There is some infuriating magic, as undeniable as the progress of winter into spring, in the way that Damen's mouth sends lightning in sweet and thought-obliterating waves through Laurent's body when applied to that spot. Laurent feels dizzy, and even more so when he imagines the mark that will be there tomorrow.

Damen is holding Laurent's head gently, tilting it at an angle. The tip of Damen's thumb is at the corner of Laurent's mouth. Laurent turns his head further and bites, then soothes with his tongue, then takes the two offered fingers and draws them all the way into his mouth, where he sucks, runs his tongue over and between. There is a faint taste, not unpleasant, from the scented water.

Damen swears, low and fervent. The water of the bath is perfectly warm where it surrounds Laurent's skin. The fresh mark on his neck throbs. Laurent pauses with Damen's fingers balanced between his teeth, breathless with the heaviness of them there, and meets Damen's wild eyes. Suddenly it's not enough.

He pulls away and puts a hand on the edge of the bath.

"Sit," he commands.

This room with its blue-green glow, its sweet smells, drags daring from Laurent's veins. He waits for Damen to lift himself out and sit, legs bent and dangling into the water, and then pushes Damen's knees apart. He is low in the water; it laps at his chest, his shoulders.

"Laurent--"

"I want to," Laurent says.

"I wasn't about to argue," Damen says, rough and rich.

This is not the first time Laurent has done this. That was in Ios, months ago, when he ordered Damen to hold onto something and took his time learning, patient and methodical as he always is with a new skill. But now his head is aching a little with the steam, he is brimming with need, and Damen's cock is hard and hot, as wet as the rest of him, but tasting different. It fills Laurent's mouth entirely and to spare.

Damen's hand threads through Laurent's hair, catching on wet tangles. There are tiny tugs of almost-pain on Laurent's scalp. He closes his eyes and uses his tongue in a way that made Damen shout, last time. This time it drags a groan like a lethal wound from his throat.

Laurent breathes, concentrates, sinks down another inch. At the same time he reaches down and strokes himself, once, ruthlessly. His throat closes around Damen's cock and Damen's breathing goes ragged and loud. In a smooth motion Damen lies back, knees still bent, but his back against the tiles. Laurent spreads one hand out over the wiry curls of black hair and, still driven by that dreamy sense of daring, uses the other to reach under and stroke firmly over Damen's entrance with one finger.

Damen groans again and his hips give a single urgent push that drives him deep into Laurent's throat. Laurent's eyes water and he pulls off, coughing, sucking in air.

"I'm sorry," Damen says at once, struggling back to a sitting position.
Laurent steadies his breathing. "Don't be sorry."

Damen's eyes are black. He shifts his weight and says, like a man lost in a maze, "We could, I mean, do you want to--"

Laurent hadn't, but now he does. Though not now; not tonight. He is still aching deep with the feel of Damen inside him, and he wants that again, wants it until he's driven out of his busy mind.

"Another time, then," Damen says, accurately reading whatever it is that he's reading in Laurent's face and body.

Next to the pile of cloths is a row of jars and bottles, salves and soaps. Laurent plucks one from the array and puts it in Damen's hand. Damen slides back down into the water. He is all smooth brown skin over muscle, acres of skin; more skin than one person could possibly need, Laurent thinks through an irritable haze.

The pale unscented grease is one used for massages; it is thick in the jar, but warms and thins to oil when rubbed between the palms. Damen coats his fingers thickly enough that it won't dissolve in the water, and Laurent closes his eyes at the first touch. He's still sensitive there. Ropes of thought become crossed in his mind: Damen's fingers in his mouth, Damen's cock shoving into him, stretching him. Damen's other hand is in the centre of his back, holding him close.

"You said you would beg," Damen says, nearly against Laurent's mouth. "Did you mean it?"

"Yes," Laurent says. His whole body is a high note held in a singer's throat. He would do anything. He should find a way to distil this desperation into bottles, like scent, or wine. He could sell it. He could release it, and flatten armies. The world would fall. "Fuck me."

He can hear how imperious he sounds, so he's not surprised when Damen's mouth curves.

"Not very good at this, are you?"

"I didn't say it came naturally. I said I would do it."

There are big hands on his sides, soothing.

"Say it again."

"Damianos," Laurent says. "Fuck me."

It is tortuously slow, nothing like the frantic pace of earlier tonight. Damen gets his hands under Laurent's thighs and lifts. Even aided by the water, the act of holding up Laurent's whole body makes new grooves and shapes come to life in his shoulders and biceps. Laurent hangs his arms loosely around those shoulders, making no attempt to take any of his own weight, letting himself be suspended. Damen's lips are brushing his neck, missing the sensitive spot by a margin so narrow it has to be deliberate.

"Again," Damen says, thick as honey.

Laurent bites his lip. He can feel Damen's cock, gliding against him, not yet angled correctly. When he releases his lip from between his teeth, a word escapes with it.

"Please."

It's not what he meant to say. It doesn't matter. Damen's hands are firm, guiding Laurent down,
settling into him, slowly. So slowly. Damen takes his time, dropping more kisses over Laurent's throat and cheeks and mouth.

Laurent calls a halt with a warning squeeze of his knees on either side of Damen's hips.

"All right?" Damen says.


It's not painful; it's not too much. It is almost too much. Damen is solid, everywhere, from the strength of his supporting hands to the line of his jaw to the way he settles--slowly, slowly--all the way inside Laurent's body.

"Gods, you are a wonder," Damen says hoarsely.

Laurent exhales. Their foreheads are touching, now, just resting against one another, their wet hair hanging against their cheeks. He cannot tell where his body comes to an end and Damen's begins. Part of him tries to raise alarm at this fact, and fails. His tension has leached out of him along with the urgency he was feeling. The note of desperation is still there, but muted. He could hover here, in this warm dream, filled and surrounded, for a long time.

When Damen moves, it is Laurent that he moves. Lifting him up, then pulling him down. Laurent is a sword fighter, just as Damen is: he recognises the control that it takes to maintain a steady rhythm, even a leisurely one, forcing your muscles into compliance, when your nerves shout for speed. Laurent's cock pushes against the tensed span of Damen's stomach, striking up sparks that meet and combine with the sparks from where Damen is buried inside him.

He is clutching Damen's wet shoulders, now. He is making silent sounds into the slim space between their lips. Damen slides into him, the full and glorious length, again and again.

Say something clever, Laurent thinks. Go on. And his next breath is almost a laugh.

"Laurent," Damen says.

Laurent shudders. The only word in his mouth is, "Yes."

"Laurent," and oh, it was a warning.

Damen's fingertips dig into Laurent's buttocks as his rhythm breaks, finally, and he releases with a cry that rings in Laurent's ears and across the tiled room. There is no way Laurent can feel the pulse of liquid, really, but imagining it is enough. He tightens his arms and pulls himself closer, shoving their bodies tightly together. And then he's coming too, with a stealthy violence, like a bottle of sparkling wine has been fizzing in his spine and now chosen to explode entirely.

Afterwards, they wrap towels around themselves instead of bothering to re-dress, and make their way to Laurent's chambers. They leave wet footprints on the polished floor.

"This would be an ideal time for an assassination attempt," Laurent notes.

Damen smiles. "I am not entirely useless without a weapon."

"How nice for you," says Laurent. "I don't think I can lift my arms."

His legs, he manages to keep steady, until they are standing inside his bedchamber. Then he lets them buckle, just a fraction.
Now, of course, Damen's face crinkles at the sight of the bed.

"Oh?" Laurent says. "So much for my jewel-like self."

Damen breaks into tired laughter. "As long as it's soft," he says. Without further hesitation he tosses his towel aside and strides right across the room and throws himself face-down on Laurent's bed with its gorgeous curtains, elaborately carved wooden posts, and rich canopy.

Struck with the terrible urge to giggle, Laurent follows him. The covers of the bed are welcoming, and he lowers his shoulders into their embrace with a silent sigh. He and Damen lie side-by-side, comfortable and undressed and unmoving. Laurent's thoughts, which are never still, have become disordered, delightfully tangled, bumping into one another at random.

He says, "You lied to Auguste."

"Hmm?"

"I never did eat those candied figs."

"Then you are free to choose," Damen says lightly. "Come, go. Stay in Vere. Whatever you wish."

Laurent, on his back, looks at the embroidered canopy. His happiness is like a bruise between his ribs, catching him with every breath. "You know what I choose," he says.

Damen's face fills his vision. Damen leans down and kisses him, close-mouthed and lazy. Laurent shuts his eyes and carefully allows himself to believe that they're allowed this, Laurent is allowed this. It seems like too much. It seems like fate, and Laurent does not believe in fate. He prefers the alternative: that they've found one another, made their own lives, pieced this together themselves; and that whatever the game is, they've won.

Damen says, "When did you choose it?"

Laurent opens his eyes. "What?"

"I'm curious." Damen's lips scrape a path along the edge of Laurent's jaw. Then he pulls back, until they aren't touching at all.

The air, the space, wraps around Laurent. He sits up on his elbows to think. Steeling himself to look at the subject head-on, he's not sure it was a choice at all. There was no single deciding moment between first seeing Damen's smile and Damen's arms, bare and gleaming under the Akielon sun, and now. There have only been a series of small moments. Damen saying, Set your pace. His knuckles around a horse's rein, and around the hilt of an unstoppable sword. His eyes, tired and dark and soft, meeting Laurent's over a table strewn with trade documents as dawn light clamoured through the window. The way Damen spoke the ritual words at his coronation: powerful and careful of his power. The taste of his mouth, the heat of it.

A night, a series of nights, where Laurent lay awake with a leg dangling off the side of the bed and struggled to breathe through the knowledge that he wanted to set fire to every mile of land between Arles and Ios, to collapse it all into ashes, to close his hands around Damen's wrists and say, ask me to stay.

But that's a terrifying, fragile, uninteresting truth. Laurent looks at Damen and says, mustering his most haughty manner: "In the dust underneath my cousin's bed, if you must know."

"You win," Damen says. "For me it was the moment after. When you snapped my head off for
ruining your plan."

The next one of Laurent's ambushing thoughts says, "Would we have ever met, I wonder. If we had
different lives."

"Probably not," Damen says. Pauses. "You could have had a career as a guiterne player."

"I could have been good at all sort of things," Laurent says, sleepy. "I could have been a brilliant
historical scholar. Or a very successful merchant."

"Of course very successful," Damen murmurs, but Laurent ignores him.

"You could have been a display fighter. Or a bed slave. I hear some people's tastes run to that kind of
thing."

They hold one another's gaze. Damen's is rich and complex and not as readable as usual; Laurent can
feel his own joy glittering on his face like dust.

"Touched as I am," Damen says after a moment, "by your flattering comparison…"

Laurent falls back among the pillows and laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

End Notes

Thanks for the enthusiasm and feedback, everyone :) You can find me and my ongoing
Strong Feelings About Captive Prince on tumblr.

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