A year before what would have been the events of Marlas, Prince Auguste of Vere survives an assassination attempt on the border, returns to the capital, enters his brother's room - and immediately murders his uncle. Refusing to explain the reason for the attack, Auguste is stripped of his inheritance and banished by the Council. When the circumstances of his exile lead him, against his will, to Akielos, he strikes up a friendship with Prince Damianos that changes the fate of both nations.

I chose not to use Archive Warnings because there should be no troubling content in this AU that isn't there in the canon, but if you do need content warnings, specific ones will be given in the end notes of each chapter.
No Instinct for Deception

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just outside the southern wall of the palace complex was an alleyway containing a brothel where Auguste - seventeen, desperate, and surrounded by gorgeous, untouchable women and available, untempting men - had gone once to discover what he was missing. He had never gone back (the older he had gotten, the more cognizant he'd been of the risk, and the kind of sex he wanted removed from the kind of relationship he wanted was not enough to be worth it), but he remembered the way over the wall and out of the palace, and, more importantly, the way back in. He was not quite as nimble as he had been as a boy, but there was greater strength in his arms and his fingers, and he could support his weight with the shallowest divots in the smooth face of the wall until he reached the carvings and decorative elements that allowed him to pull himself onto the roof. Then over to the courtyard of the training area in his own quarters, a quick scramble down the collapsed pillar that served him as a ladder, straighten up, set his shoulders, and set off, hoping that his borrowed guard's uniform and two weeks' growth of beard would be enough to conceal his identity. He slipped into a nearby arms room to grab a steel practice blade to complete his disguise, then strode into the corridors like he belonged there and made for his brother's room.

Around him, the normal sounds of palace life were muffled - the customary entertainments would be suspended, and the jewel-bright pets would be wearing subdued shades of black and gray, like their masters, as the nation mourned its young prince who had been thrown from his horse in battle with Vaskian raiders and flung into a ravine. They had just, Auguste had learned as he entered the city, given up hopes of finding his body, as repeated searches up and down the river that had cut the ravine into the mountains had failed. Not finding a body had not given anyone serious hopes that the prince might be still alive after all this time - if he was, surely he would have announced himself and come home by now. Tomorrow, they would bury an empty coffin, and carry Auguste's standard through the streets for public mourning.

Auguste wished that it had been Vaskian raiders, up on that ridge. Then he either would have met an honorable death in fair combat, or he would be home by now, telling his father and brother about the campaign, perhaps exaggerating the dangers a little for the sake of Laurent's wide eyes. Instead, the attack had come from his own men. He remembered the shock of it: Vaskian weapons coming out of concealment; his loyal friends being cut down; the sickening realization of betrayal. There had been too many to fight through, and no way to clear a safe path down. Auguste had fought, cutting down men whom an hour ago he would have shed blood to protect, already resigned to dying on this hillside - then a glimpse of rushing water below as his horse reared and brought him crashing down on his opponent; the last of his friends being cut down; the shying of his horse as it tried to avoid the body flung beneath its hooves; and Auguste's sudden decision to use the momentum to fling himself as far out over the ravine as he could. It had not been easy to launch from a seated position like that, and there was fire in every pull of his muscles as he threw himself from the saddle. But when he had plummeted through the open air, he found he had made it far enough to land in deep water. Then Auguste had only to figure out what to do next.

The prince of the morning would have gone to the nearest keep and demanded aid. But Auguste had been betrayed, and had no notion of who could have been behind it. Auguste was an honest man who trusted others to be straightforward with him, and as far as he knew, he had no open enemies. The thought that someone was out there who secretly wished him ill had made him paranoid, and he trusted no one outside his own family. So instead of making for his father's
nearest vassal, he had sought help from the nearest peasants, reasoning that they were too far below him to have any motive to move against him. The starburst meant something here on the border, and when he had shown them his regalia and explained the bare bones of the situation, the family had given him their promise of secrecy, spare clothes to disguise him, food for the journey, and (with glowing pride) the family donkey, to carry him back to the city. Wrapped in the love and generosity of his people, Auguste had felt something broken in him begin to heal again.

The donkey had carried him no more swiftly than he could have walked, but it hid his soldier's gait and completed his disguise. Letting himself slump upon it like a sack of potatoes, he had only been recognized once, during his fortnight's slow journey back to the capital. Just inside the city gates, woman passing him on the street had looked into his face, gasped, and then motioned for him to follow her, taking him back to her townhouse. She, too, had been a blessing: giving him more food, letting him use her bath, promising to hold the donkey until he could arrange for its safe return, and presenting him with the spare uniform of her son, who, she had told him proudly, was a member of the king's guard. ("That's how I knew your face; we always watch for him on the parades.") The loyalty and honor of those who had never met him had brought him safely back to his own home, and now he was prepared to deal with the betrayal of whoever it was who lacked those qualities.

He would go to his uncle. Auguste had no instinct for deception, and found it difficult to recognize in others. He would never be able to discover his enemy on his own. But Uncle was a fine man - straightforward and honorable in his own dealings, yet possessed of a twisty mind, capable of understanding and anticipating deceit. Uncle would know who would benefit from seeing Auguste dead at the border and who had the power and influence to turn Auguste's own soldiers against him. Together, they could figure out who this unseen enemy was and develop a plan. They would lay their trap and bait the hounds, and bring the fight into the open, where Auguste could defeat them with honest skill and good steel. It was paramount that Auguste reach his uncle in private before he was recognized and word of his survival became known.

But first - first, he had to see Laurent. Not one unnecessary moment could pass with his brother believing him to be dead, especially not with the news that Auguste had heard on the road: that their father, the king, had been so grieved at his eldest son's death that he had suffered a stroke, and now lay abed, his mind wandering and recovery unsure. (And wasn't that suspicious too, said the new voice in his head that tried to make sense of his betrayal, The King and the Crown Prince felled with one swoop? And while hardly a young man, surely their father was not so old that a stroke seemed a natural response to a grief?) He had to see Laurent, to halve his brother's double-grief and share with him the pain and worry about their father, and make sure that Laurent himself had not been hurt in whatever scheme embroiled them. Then he could go to his uncle and make their plans.

There were two of the Prince's Guard standing at the entrance to the corridor that contained his brother's chambers. Both were young and new to him, and one of them very slight: Auguste thought he could take them, but perhaps not without rousing more of the household, and he did not want to risk hurting innocent men. "Message for the prince from the king's healers," he said when they halted him, and he must have sounded believable enough, for they waved him through without further challenge. There were no guards in the corridor itself, not even outside his brother's room - not an unusual thing, in peacetime, and he was grateful that the attack on him had not resulted in increased security even as he planned words on irresponsibility with the head of the palace guard. He was half-way to the door when it started to open, and Auguste ducked out of sight into one of the framed alcoves that lined the hall at regular distances just in time to be unseen as he watched his uncle step out.

He almost called out to him. Almost stepped from his hiding place. Almost rushed to his side and
embraced him. But he knew what his uncle was - the whole court did, it was an open secret, and, love his uncle though he did, Auguste already planned to let his uncle know when he was king that he would not tolerate it blindly the way his father did - and a sudden, sick suspicion of what would a man like that would be doing coming out of a twelve-year-old boy's bedchamber at this hour of the night cramped his guts and stayed his hand. No. It was impossible. Surely not - he couldn't - not family. After all, even when he was young, his uncle had never touched him. And his uncle did not move like a man sneaking about on some shameful errand, no furtive glances up and down the hall, but walking straight and sure as a righteous man. Surely he was wrong. Surely their uncle had simply been comforting Laurent, grieving their mutual loss, innocently, in the long hours of the night. What could be more natural? But still ... who would benefit the most, from the king sick and unfit, the grown prince dead, the heir a child who would need a Regent ruling for him for many years still (likely his uncle had already been so named.) And his brother, left alone with no other family than a man of such appetites - his sweet, smart, shy, affectionate, bookish younger brother, who was such a beautiful little boy ...

He did not believe it. He would not believe it. All honor cried against it. He could not be the man he knew himself to be and suspect such things about his family. So he would not suspect it. And yet he would wait until his uncle had made it down the hall and out of sight before he would steal quietly into Laurent's rooms. There he would find the boy asleep, still in his clothes, perhaps on top of the covers, cheeks smeared with tears shed for Auguste's loss, not his own hurt. And, sleeping but fitfully as he always did, he would spring awake easily when Auguste put his hand on Laurent's sleeping shoulder, cry out "You're alive!" with uncomplicated joy, throw himself into his brother's arms and explain, joyfully, that they must let the rest of the family know, Auguste must have just missed their uncle, who sat with him kindly while he wept and must have only left after Laurent finally cried himself to sleep. And then they would go together to their uncle - or better yet, Laurent would send for him, having invented some excuse, he was so clever with those - and the three of them would plan out what to do next to draw out their secret enemy and how to give their father the news without the shock of it making him worse, Laurent clinging to him all the while as though afraid Auguste would disappear if he let go. That was the only thing could possibly happen.

There was a dimly burning oil lamp placed just inside the doorway of Laurent's rooms, leaving the recess to his inner bedchamber deep in shadow but providing enough light for him to move about if he needed something during the night. Auguste picked this up carefully, mindful of the spluttering flame, and carried it steadily through the arched doorway to the bedchamber where he had often carried a much smaller Laurent, worn out from a long day of play. He remembered the pride of being the big brother, strong enough to bear Laurent's weight easily. He'd felt like a giant with that tiny figure in his arms.

Laurent was lying on his side curled into a tight ball, a position he'd favored when he'd been much younger, and a peek of white shirt showed just above the blankets that covered him, with jacket and pants discarded on the floor for the servants to collect in the morning. Auguste deposited the lamp on the small end table by the bed, where was usually kept some water and whatever pile of books the young scholar was working his way through. Tonight it held an empty bottle and two goblets with the residue of dark red wine drying in the bottom. The lamp in its new position threw Laurent's face into sharp relief, and the insides of his lips were stained purple from the wine, as they would not be if it had been properly watered down in consideration of his age. His sleep was heavy with it, and he did not react to the light being cast over the closed lids of his eyes.

Still, a man aiming only to comfort a boy in grief might give him drink of adult strength. "Tonight we will drink to their memories, and mourn our loss in the way of men." A man might do that.
It took Auguste several minutes of heavy breathing to gather the courage to raise the coverings and see what he might find.

There was no blood upon the sheets, nor on the white cloth of the shirt that twisted itself around the boy's limbs. That the greatest of his unacknowledged fears had not occurred staggered his mind with such confused relief that for a moment he did not see the great smears on the sheets that Laurent's body had curled away from, some still glistening and wet, some dried into white streaks. More, he thought, than would come from a boy if he'd given in to some strange grief-stricken impulse to comfort himself with pleasure, or if an adolescent dream had come upon him while he slept. If either of those could have happened in the brief moments between their uncle leaving and Auguste coming in.

Auguste's first furious impulse - to shake his brother awake and demand to know exactly what had happened - he dismissed as causing only further harm, and he turned his face away from the sleeping child and heaved half-sobbing breaths as he struggled to master the combined urges to alternately scream or weep or vomit back what was left of the in his stomach. But he did none of these things, and when he had finally mastered himself, all that remained in the roiling chaos of his mind was, I'm going to kill him.

The thought calmed him at once.

Auguste, steady with purpose and wearing the livery of the King's Guard, walked through the palace corridors as if on an errand of great importance, and no one challenged him. He was less worried about them doing so now than he had been when sneaking from the outer walls to his brother's rooms - he felt the rightness of what he was doing so completely that it shone out of his every feature, and, if stopped, he was sure he could react in no other way than with the precise combination of impatience and slight outrage of any honest man needlessly interrupted in the course of his duties. He was no longer a man deceived and betrayed, not knowing where to turn, but was once again the Golden Prince of his people, undertaking the greatest task he had ever performed for honor and the crown.

With that confidence, he made it easily to uncle's room, giving the red-liveried guards outside the same excuse he had used before:

"Message from the King's physicians to the King's brother," he said, one soldier reporting to another. "A private one," he added, as a shot in the dark, and they both nodded and moved down the hall, apparently already under standing orders to take themselves out of earshot if such a message should arrive. The confirmation of this new suspicion did not surprise or disappoint him. He was learning.

When the guards were out of sight, he conjured a look of worry and fear on his face (it was easy to act, he discovered, when you were feeling all emotions at once; you just allowed yourself to show the one you wanted and suppressed all the rest), and knocked.

"Uncle," he cried when the door swung open (suppress the disgust at the sight of his face, allow the relief that the plan is working), "Uncle. You must help me."

"Auguste! I- We thought you- Inside. Quickly."

As soon as the door was closed, his uncle pulled him into strong hug, just as he had done after his first victory on the sawdust, and when he had brought his troops home from his first successful command, and at a dozen other little triumphs of young manhood. Auguste stiffened in his arms, trembling with the effort of allowing the embrace. His uncle seemed to take it for stress.
"We thought you had been taken from us too soon. But you are alive, and safe here. All will be well now."

He withdrew, and Auguste allowed himself to be ushered into a chair. His uncle poured two goblets of wine, handing one to Auguste and leaning with the other against the opposite wall, his keen eyes on Auguste's face.

"Now," he said, "Tell me how you came here, in disguise, when all the kingdom believes you to be dead."

"I didn't know what else to do," Auguste answered, placing the cup down at his feet and bowing his head, "I-I landed in the river when I fell. The deep part, where I could swim a little. I made my way to the bank, but I didn't dare ask for help. It wasn't Vaskian raiders up on that ridge uncle. It was my own men. They - they turned on me. Someone must have hired them, someone powerful. I can't think who it could be."

"Your own troops?" His uncle's brow wrinkled in surprise. "That is a heavy blow. So you found a way to make your way home in secret?"

"Yes. I thought whoever is behind all this would be more likely to give themselves away if they thought their plan had succeeded."

His uncle nodded. "It was well thought of. Your reputation for honesty and disinclination towards deceit is well known. I would not have expected this from you, and if it surprises even your family, you can be sure it takes our enemy unawares. We will ferret him out, together. You did right coming to me first."

"Well, almost first," said Auguste, raising his eyes, "I went to Laurent first, to tell him I was still alive. Do you mind telling me, Uncle, what you were doing coming out of his rooms so late?"

He did not believe in his uncle's innocence. There was no part of him that held any shred of hope for it. Or so he would have said, until that very moment, when his uncle grimaced as though acknowledging a hit, and the last wisp of something unacknowledged died within him.

"Ah," said his uncle, "That was not part of the plan, at first. I intended to take him to Chastillon with me, after the funeral, to distract his grief with the diversion of the hunt. But who can resist, when a boy like that asks you to stay with him? 'Please, don't leave me alone, Uncle.' He begged so prettily. Really, what would you have done?"

His uncle's eyes did not seem to be darting about as he spoke, but he angled his head towards Auguste in such a way that he could take in the entire room, and Auguste could tell that he was playing for time, drawing up his tactics. Let him. Auguste had planned this out already as he walked down the hall, and he could see how this was going to end.

"What I would have done," said Auguste, calmly, "Concerns you much less than what I am going to do."

His uncle threw the wine goblet at his face - a coward's move, but one Auguste anticipated, and it clattered safely to the floor as he drew his sword and knocked it away. In that time, his uncle had fetched his sword from where it lay on top of his chest of arms, and was on him.

His uncle meant to take tactical advantage of their positions - Auguste, seated, and himself, bearing down from above. But Auguste was no stranger to combat strategy either, and it was not by accident that he had let himself be led to a chair. He had his own ideas about how his uncle,
experienced boar hunter, would respond to a threat from below, and he surged forward to meet his uncle's attack not into a stance, but a crouch.

It only happened for a second - his uncle's body, well-trained, instinctively moved into a form that would have served him well with a hunting spear, but not with the short sword he had taken. He realized what had happened almost immediately, was already moving to correct his mistake, but too late - Auguste lunged upwards, the weight of his body behind his sword, from under his uncle's guard and the blade thrust below his ribs and angled up into his lungs.

The tip of his uncle's blade pierced Auguste's shoulder, but pinned as he was, he could get no leverage to drive in the blow. His uncle dropped the sword and wheezed around the blade.

"You were dead," Auguste said, "From the moment you touched him. But if there is any honor or family feeling left in you, use your last breaths to tell me what drug you gave to my father, so the physicians may do what they can for him."

"He- enjoyed- it," his uncle managed in wet, burbling gasps, "Think of that - when you look - at h-"

The last word ended in a gurgle of blood from his mouth, and Auguste pulled his sword free and let the last of his uncle's life spill out over the floor.

That was it. Over in moments.

It was only then, staring at his uncle's still-twitching corpse, that Auguste realized he had not the faintest idea what to do next. He could sneak his way back out of the palace, find a place to shave his face, return under his own identity and pretend to be as surprised as anyone that his father's brother lay dead on the floor of his rooms. But there was blood now on his borrowed uniform, and the wound to his shoulder would make it difficult to climb. He was still thinking it over when a knock came at the door.

"Sir?" called a voice from the door, "Sorry to trouble you, but a pet was passing by just now, says he heard a struggle." The voice sounded dubious. "Are you all right?"

"All is well," he tried calling back, in a gruffer tone than his usual voice.

"I don't think that was the Regent's voice," said a second man, after a pause.

Auguste sighed. He really had no head for this.

"All is well," he repeated, opening the door and surrendering his sword, "But you must take me before the Council. I am Crown Prince Auguste, and I have killed my uncle."

"It was a duel of honor," Auguste insisted, "We were both armed."

"A duel of honor at that time of night, without witnesses, in the Regent's private rooms?" asked Councillor Guion doubtfully. He had just taken over the seat from his father, and his eagerness to prove himself to his colleagues was pushing him to an active role in the great matter of the prince's trial. His fellow councillors murmured in dubious assent, and Guion flushed with poorly suppressed pride. In the front of the room, the throne, the seat of judgement where Auguste's father should be sitting, remained vacant.

"It must have been a grave dishonor indeed to prompt such an unusual challenge," prompted Councillor Audin.
"Yes."

"What was it?"

"So grave a dishonor that it cannot be spoken aloud, even here, without bringing further shame upon the royal family." Auguste had had several hours confined to a luxurious but secure state room in the early hours of the morning to decide what he was going to say when he was brought before the Council at dawn. There had been very little to think about; he was not willing to risk damage to Laurent's reputation for a crime that was all his uncle's, nor was he willing to lie under oath. This limited his options severely.

"But if you will not tell the Council what the dishonor was," Councillor Jeurre put in, "How are we to judge whether your murderous attack on your uncle was truly justified?"

"The Council knows my character. Since my coming of age, you have had proofs of my judgement, and my sense of honor. You have only to decide whether or not these are sufficient for you to trust that my word is true and my actions were just."

"The prince would do well to remember that we knew the character of your uncle, too."

"I thought I did too, until last night."

"You said earlier that the attack upon you at the border was not a random skirmish, but treachery by your own men," Councillor Herode spoke for the first time, "You did not know this at the time, but one of the men from your personal guard had come to me just after the news reached us with similar suspicions. He spoke of last minute roster changes, filling your troop with strangers. He that the few men he did know and trust numbered among the dead. He believed, as do I, that such intimate scheming could not have been managed with foreign gold alone, but showed the hand of someone highly placed in Vere itself."

Surprised mutterings went up from the Council around him as Herode kept his eyes fixed on Auguste.

"Did you believe that your uncle was responsible for the attempt made on your life at the border?"

"Yes."

"Have you any proof of it?"

"No."

"Was this the dishonor you spoke of?"

"No, that was ... something worse."

"They have to believe you," Laurent said, as they waited for the Council to return and render its decision. Laurent had come running into the throne room early in the proceedings, shouting, "It's not true!" and having to tell Laurent that no, Auguste had done exactly what they said he'd done and watch his face crumple had been the most difficult part of the entire trial. Laurent had been allowed to sit beside Herode for the rest of it, as long as he kept quiet, and Auguste had struggled to keep his eyes on the Council members who were questioning him instead of watching his brother for reactions. When they had withdrawn to discuss their ruling in private, Laurent had stayed with him.
"You are the most honorable man in Vere," Laurent continued, "Probably in the whole world. Everybody knows that."

"I think not everyone has the faith in me that you do, little brother."

"They should," said Laurent, stubbornly, "Although I wish that you had told them something, even if it hadn't been the real reason. I suppose you are too good and honest for that."

There was a heavy silence as Laurent looked uncertainly at Auguste, and he could hear the unspoken question Why did you really do it? hanging in the air between them. For a moment, Auguste felt the first real fear since he'd pulled back the sheets fall over him, as he realized he did not know how to answer such a question from Laurent, whether the truth or silence would do him more harm. But, perhaps fearing Auguste's answer, Laurent let the moment pass.

"Have they told you about Father yet?" he asked instead, "He's - not doing well. I don't think he's recognized me, all the times I've gone to visit. We'll have to go together after they're done with you, maybe you'll get a better reaction. He's known you longer."

"Tell me about Father's condition. And the other things I missed on the road."

It was not good. The seizure that had taken the king on hearing of his son's death had left him paralyzed over much of his body and half his face. He could not walk, nor rise from his bed without assistance. His speech was garbled and unintelligible, when he tried to speak at all. It was difficult to tell with communication thus hindered, but the king seemed to be in confusion most of the time, and did not seem to know where he was, or who the people were around him. Laurent, however, thought there had been some small improvement: he attempted to help now when the servants fed him, and the last time Laurent had visited together with their uncle, the king had seemed to recognize his brother, if not his son.

Auguste was just starting to question Laurent about the physicians who had been placed in charge of his father and what they were attempting to do when the Council swept back into the room. Auguste stood.

"Prince Auguste," Herode began, "You have asked the Council to put a great deal of faith in you and in your judgement. Before we render our decision, I beseech you, one last time, to show us the same faith that you asked for, and tell us what we need to know to judge with full understanding."

"I am sorry. I cannot say any more than I have already said."

Councillor Herode sighed, and sat back down.

"If the prince remains obdurate, than the Council must abide by the decision it has already made, with the limited information that it has," said Councillor Guion. Councillor Audin rose, nodding.

"A duel of honor is no crime, but a duel of honor should be offered in public and fought in front of witnesses. It may be possible to forgo these codes in the most extreme provocation, but as the prince refuses to explain his conduct, this Council has no choice but to find him guilty of the murder of his uncle."

"No!" Laurent shouted, jumping up from his chair, "You can't do that! You stupid old men, of course he's telling the truth! Do you know how easy it would have been to come up with a lie that would satisfy you? He could have said anything! The only reason he could possibly have for telling you that Uncle did something too horrible to be repeated is because it is true!"

"Prince Laurent, sit down."
"You idiots, you-

"Silence, or you will be sent from this court before hearing the sentencing."

Laurent sank back, ashen-faced.

"The punishment for the wrongful slaying of a kinsman should be death," Councillor Audin continued, "However, in recognition of the prince's great and heroic service to his country, both on the field of battle and in times of peace, we instead remove Crown Prince Auguste from the succession. All his lands and titles revert to his brother Laurent, now Crown Prince of Vere. As for the person of Auguste himself, we hereby banish you from the kingdom of Vere."

Laurent was out of out of his seat again.

"No, you can't! You can't send him away, he's all I have left-

"The Crown Prince is too young to be present at these proceedings," Councillor Herode pronounced with heavy patience, "He should return to the schoolroom."

The guard that he nodded at moved forward to take the prince's arm, but Laurent, in a fit of pique such as he had outgrown some time ago, kicked the man's shin and wrenched his arm away, then fled from the room.

"Auguste," Councillor Audin continued, the name awkwardly familiar in his mouth without the title that should accompany it, "We will give you the morning to pack, and say goodbye to your father and anyone else you feel the need to. You may take with you one horse from your stable, along with riding gear, and as many of your personal possessions as it can carry. This afternoon, you start for the border at a place of your choosing, under armed guard. They will turn back when you have crossed the border. Once past it, we give you neither soldiers for your protection nor servants for your comfort, though if any of your own people choose to accompany you into exile, we will not hinder them."

"The Council's decision is generous, given the circumstances. I thank you," Auguste said, "I - I have reason to believe that my uncle's treachery included the poisoning of my father, and that his illness is not natural. Please make sure that the royal physicians are informed."

"That, we shall certainly do."

"It is not too late," said Councillor Guion, "To think better of this course and come clean with us. Any new information you can give would of course cause us to revisit the choices we have made."

Auguste bowed wordlessly and left.

"What have you done to your hair, little brother?" asked Auguste.

It was afternoon. Auguste had said his goodbyes to his friends at court, sat for over an hour in the sickroom of his father hoping that the king heard and understood at least a little of what was said to him, gently dismissed those among his servants and guards who wanted to come with him ("I would not have any man give up his place at court for the privations of a life in exile, no matter how willing"), and gathered what little he wanted from his rooms. His brother had been by his side for all of it, and they had had both their clingy personal goodbyes in private and the dignified formal ones before the court as Auguste was officially dismissed. He was now in the courtyard where his horse was being saddled and the guards who were to escort him to the border mustered, and he spoke to a boy in page's livery, trying to go unnoticed at the back of the crowd. A scarf
covered his nose and mouth, despite a distinct lack of chill in the air, and his uncovered hair was a dull mouse-brown with curiously uneven streaks to it.

"I don't know why you should call me that, sir, I am only a very faithful page who-"

"Laurent."

"But I'm not Laurent! I'm-"

"Laurent."

"Please let me come with you," Laurent begged, dropping the pretense, "Please. Don't leave me alone here."

"You know I can't," Auguste said as gently as he could

"Yes you can! I'm in disguise, no one would know!"

"It will be less than an hour before you are missed, and then everyone will know."

"Longer than that. No one cares about me except you, and you'll be gone. And by the time they do notice I'm missing, we'll probably be over the border and then no one can stop us. Please, I won't be much trouble!"

"I would give anything to have you with me, Laurent, but you cannot go. You are the only prince Vere has left now, your duty is to our people."

"How can I have any duties when I'm too young for them to let me do anything!" Laurent was crying now. "Father's sick, and the people only want you, and I don't care about the stupid Council, just let me stay with you! Auguste, please!"

"I love you, but you cannot come with me."

"Then you're lying. You don't care about me at all!"

"Laurent-"

"I hate you!" Laurent cried. Then he turned and ran back into the palace.

Auguste breathed deeply.

"Mount up," he said to the men, "We make for the border into Patras."

Thundering hoofbeats on the road ahead halted the party slightly more than an hour into their ride from the palace. They moved to the side of the rode to let the rider pass, and when he came into view around a curve in the path, it was Laurent, back in his own clothes and riding the light mare he had been given after he graduated from ponies.

"How did he come to be on the road ahead of us?" asked the guard next to him.

"He must have cut straight through the woodlands to the next crossroads and circled back around to us," Auguste explained.

"The prince can ride like that?" the man asked doubtfully, clearly remembering Laurent's
reputation as a bookish lad no good at soldierly pursuits.

"Yes. The prince can ride like that."

Auguste dismounted and walked to meet his brother.

"I don't hate you," Laurent said, "I'm mad at you for leaving me and for not letting me come with you and for refusing to lie to the Council so you could stay, but I don't hate you. I'm sorry I said that."

"I know you don't."

"I didn't want that to be the last thing I said to you."

"Last thing you said to me? Were you intending not to write me back?"

Laurent's eyes lit up. "They did not say you could not write!"

"No, they didn't, and I most certainly will."

"That'll be good," said Laurent, sounding relieved, "And it won't be forever, you know. Father will get better and overrule them. And if he doesn't, then when I'm old enough, I'll make them let you come back."

"Who have they put in charge in the meantime?"

"They've decided to have a Council of Regents," Laurent said, making a face, "They're each going to be Regent for a year and then trade off. When I left, they were drawing lots to see what the order will be."

"They will not be happy to give up that power, when the time comes."

"They won't have a choice, though, will they?"

"My lord," one of his own men said apologetically, "We really should get moving again if we want to make good time for the border."

"I can ride with you for a bit," said Laurent, "Then I can turn and get back to the palace before dark. I'm very fast."

"One hour," Auguste conceded. He looked towards the men around him. His own men, he had refused to allow to accompany him, knowing that to avoid being tainted with his dishonor, they must distance themselves from him as soon as possible and quickly take up duties with other masters or with the families they had left behind. Still, there was someone that he knew here among the guards, a soldier from the regular army he had picked out for advancement. He had no idea if this man was trustworthy or not; still, he remembered the instant, unquestioning help he had received from the peasants on the way here, and hoped that it would be safe to guess that this one at least had not lately been on the payroll of his uncle. "You will escort the prince back to the palace at the end of that time, and see that he arrives safely."

The soldier bowed.

"It will be good for the people to see us together when we ride," Laurent said, as they turned their horses and continued together, "They are not happy about you being sent off. When they come to cheer you, I want them to see that I'm not happy about it too."
"But won't they just think that I'm riding with a very loyal page boy?"

"Auguste!"

"Will that stuff wash off? Or will you be Prince Laurent the Mouse-haired from now on?"

"Stop it!" Laurent laughed, and they rode towards the future together.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains Auguste finding evidence of their uncle's abuse of Laurent, and a confrontation with the Regent in which he says some additional skin-crawling things about the abuse. If you want to skip the discovery, skip everything between the break line immediately following Auguste's decision to enter Laurent's rooms, and the next one. If you want to skip both scenes, skip everything between the next two break lines.
The Field at Marlas

Chapter Summary

King Theomedes makes an attempt to reclaim the Akielon ancestral lands of Delpha, to which Vere must respond without the aid of its royal family.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings apply to this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Battles are different, Auguste discovered, when you cannot fight them under the prince's banner. A year ago, he would have had the Prince's Guard around him and his standard bright before him. The rock that would break the Akielon lines like waves.

Now, he fought anonymously, shield blank and armor bare, and surrounded by Patran mercenaries instead of the best of his own men.

It was exhausting. He thought he'd known what constant battle was before, when he had only faced those strong enough through the lines of his Guard, or who'd managed to slip through while they were occupied. But the Patrans he had brought with him were there to do their own fighting, not facilitate his, and they did not winnow down the soldiers for him. The men he fought were weaker now than when he'd had to deal with only the best, but there were more of them, and they came from all sides. It had not taken long after the Patrans had ridden down from their camp behind to fort to join the Veretian sortie for Auguste to be identified as the best man on the field, and the Akielons were competing for the honor of bringing him down.

Worse, he had underestimated just how much he'd been buoyed up by the allegiance of the men and his need to raise their spirits with his own. He was not a leader here, and his personal victories did not garner cheers and renewed effort that could stem the tide of an assault or push a surge a few feet forward. When he felled an enemy, the only result was the need to face the man behind him.

Around noon, the Veretian troops began to falter. Auguste was used to being a commander, half his mind on the fight before him while the rest held the whole of the field in its grasp, and he could feel the little movements of the army around him that signaled the imminent need to retreat before being driven into a rout. He was preparing for the call when he saw it - a break in the Akielon lines, an opportunity to push through and scatter them, sending them back to their own camp.

"To me!" Auguste shouted, projecting his voice down the field as he'd done dozens of times before. And what remained of his Patran troop circled round him, along with a few Veretians who instinctively responded to the commanding tone. But most did not come, and no one took up the cry, "To the Prince! To the Prince!" echoing it down the line. The men would not rally for a stranger, and the opportunity was lost.
Lord Touars successfully brought the men round him and drew them back to the walls, where they turned to fight the barbarians back far enough to safely open the gates and bring their own soldiers into the protection of the fort. Auguste let go of his larger picture of the battle and concentrated on job before him. Slash, stab, block, push back. Advance the lines. Guard the retreat. Serve.

Behind him, the strongest of the Veretian fighters were beginning to fall in, making an arrowhead with Auguste at its point that gradually pierced into the Akeilon lines. Slow, grueling work that taxed his strength to the limit and seemed to make no difference, like swimming against the current, constantly borne back to where he started. But - incrementally, gradually - they were pushing forward, and space began to clear before the gates. Eventually Auguste heard the gears grinding as behind him they began to let the main force of the sortie back into the fort. He continued, waiting for the hornblow to tell him it was safe for himself and the others to retreat.

Suddenly, with no signal Auguste could see, the Akielon masses began to part. Auguste turned into the empty space, and before he could prepare, there was a flash of red and gold before him - a circlet on the helm, and a lion on the shield. He came at Auguste like a whirlwind, and it was all Auguste could do to meet each blow as it came, fast and powerful, unpredictable and planned. Here he faced his match for the first time that day. Off-balance and wrong-footed, Auguste struggled to block each strike, never finding the bearing to return a blow. Until finally came a sword-blow of such force that Auguste, arms ringing with the clash, was stumbled back - then a two-handed slice down to his thigh, continuing in an upward curve to the shoulder of his sword-arm, and Auguste was down - bleeding, on the ground, from a ten-second encounter with the nineteen-year-old enemy prince.

The Akielons were a vicious and brutal people, extreme in their violence, but honor and clean-fighting were important to them in open conflict (and all conflicts with Akielons were open conflicts). While they would keep a close watch for Veretian treachery, they would not interfere with those who ventured from the fort to treat the wounded and collect the dead. Auguste knew this. Lying there in the dirt, he assessed his own wounds and judged them to be incapacitating, but not fatal. This presented a problem. Could he do so under his own power, Auguste would have entered the fort with his helm on, keeping his face covered and letting no one hear his true voice until it was time to venture forth for battle again. If he were actually dying, Auguste would allow himself to be taken in under his own name, and wipe clean the stain to his reputation with a noble death for his own people. (He had planned out some truly heart-rending last words.) But he doubted that he could keep his identity a secret while being treated for his wounds - and without his convenient removal to the world beyond, the Council would be left with an exiled prince returned to his country in violation of sentencing, having made a sacrifice not great enough to expunge his sins, but just enough to make his punishment even more unpopular than it was when the decision was first made. It would mean political quagmire and instability, in a time when the Veretians needed above all to present a united front.

The Akielons would treat their own people first, even those with mere scratches, but after that the physicians would begin to see to the soldiers of the enemy. With that in mind, Auguste tore his plain surcoat into strips, bound his wounds as best he could, and, using his uninjured arm and leg, half-crawled, half-dragged himself towards the Akielon lines.

No one payed much attention to a boy in a military encampment, even when that boy was the Crown Prince. When the Council wasn't busy alternately dismissing him to discuss important affairs and berating him his ignorance of the discussions he was barred from, Laurent wandered about the fort, traipsing from the grand halls of the inner keep to the cramped rooms of the
barracks to the tent cities that had sprung up in the courtyards. Few took any notice of him at all, fewer still recognized that the pale blond boy who slipped by in the background was the Prince of Vere himself, and he was finding it a much more useful way to gather information than waiting on whatever scraps of intelligence the Council saw fit to let drop. (In particular, he was learning a few very interesting swear words that he made sure to remember for the next time one of the Councillors annoyed him.)

Laurent moved with a bucket towards the central well of the eastern courtyard and let swatches of the soldiers' talk wash over him.

"damned Akielons fight like sons o'bitches - bash their thick heads against our walls - gonna take Roland to bed tonight, bet he loses that stiffness along with his clothes - who the hell hired those Patran mercenaries, came out of fucking nowhere - ain't no way you're getting a leg over that tight-ass - like we need help fighting off stupid barbarians - tight-asses always pant for it the hardest, once they get an eyeful of me - see their leader though? almost as good as Prince Auguste. - too bad he's dead - all right, smartass, let's get 'em out and measure -"

"Wait!" Laurent shouted, jumping up on the lid of the well where he could be seen, bucket clattering to the ground. The men who had been talking looked at him in shock.

"A gold coin for whoever can tell me what became of the leader of the Patran mercenaries!"

Laurent held up his purse, and the men suddenly realized who he was and how freely they had been talking in front of him. Two in the back hung their heads sheepishly and began to slink away.

"He fell, fighting the Prince Damianos of Akielos," one of the remainder said, "I saw him go down."

"Dead?"

The soldier shrugged. "He wasn't brought in among the wounded."

"He's not dead," said a smaller man who had been talking with another crowd, "Or at least, he wasn't when he fell. When I went out with the physicians to tend to the wounded, we saw him being taken towards the Akielon camp."

Laurent took two gold coins out of his purse and tossed each to the two men who had spoken. Then he jumped down from the well and ran to his room.

"You wished to see me?" asked Councillor Herode, smiling in that grandfatherly way of his. He always talked to Laurent like he was six, and Laurent hated it. But today he let his eyes go big and trembly, like a baby's.

"It is more difficult than I thought it would be, watching a war," Laurent said. It was easy to make his voice shake, because that was true. He just never would have honestly admitted it to anyone. "All the noise ... and the blood ..."

Councillor Herode frowned. "A battlefield is no place for a boy."

"I know you think so. You spoke warmly before the Council of sending me to Fortaine. You said it was close enough to be kept informed with little strain on the messengers, but far back from the lines to be safe, even in defeat."
"It makes me uneasy, having king and heir on the same field. Too much left to chance."

"The others said that I should be here, to inspire the troops, and I want to brave for my people - I would be brave for my people - but I don't think it's helping! These are men. They don't want to follow a boy. I hear the talk. Having a child paraded in front of them - I think it insults them more than anything else."

Laurent took a deep breath.

"If you think my presence here is really lifting the spirits of the soldiers, then I will stay with no complaints. But if I am right, that it does nothing - and if you still think it wise to send me - then I think I would like to go now."

"To choose prudence over needless show of valor is wise beyond your years, and does credit to your judgement," Herode replied, "But how to get you safely to the Fortaine now that the battle's started; that is the difficulty."

"Surely those Akielon dogs have not so breached our defenses that I would be traveling in any danger behind the fort!" Laurent protested with offended patriotism.

"Certainly not. But that may well change if their scouts get wind of a large retinue leaving Marlas and travelling inland."

"I need not take the whole retinue," said Laurent, "Surely a few good men to protect me from raiders, and any lone Akielon scouts who might slip past our own, would be sufficient, and could pass by unnoticed."

"That's certainly true," Herode mused, "And I would be easier if I knew you were safe behind other walls than these."

"You there." He summoned Jord. "Do you know who the best fighters are among the Prince's Guard."

"One of those would be me, sir," Jord said simply, not boasting, "A man called Orlant another, and then perhaps two or three more if I made a list."

"He's right," Laurent said quickly, "Auguste set him personally to watch over me."

Which was stretching things quite a bit, but Laurent could see the effect it had on Councillor Herode.

"Then you shall take the Prince out of the fort in secret, with those men whom you deem most capable, and bring him safe to Fortaine. And if the rest of the Council are not happy about it, let me deal with them," he said with a grandfatherly wink.

Laurent smiled like a child.

In the end, they took five guards with them - Jord, Orlant, and three others - and managed a secret exit by taking the horses out through the front gate with scouts on their backs and circling them around in the woods. The armored men met them in the back of the fort, climbing over the rear wall on rope ladders, with Laurent descending in between them so he could be caught if he fell. Then the scouts clambered back up into the fort and took up the ladders, the escape party mounted the horses, and off they were on their way to Fortaine with no Akielons the wiser.
Laurent did not know the terrain around Marlas as well as Aquitart, or even Chastillon, but he was good with maps, and there were particularly minute and detailed ones at the fort for the convenience of the hunting masters. Laurent waited until he thought they were near a place that had seemed convenient for his purposes, then he turned to Jord and said,

"I want you to know that I know what I'm doing and I'm going to be perfectly fine."

"The road to Fortaine is a safe one," Jord agreed in surprise. Orlant, a bit quicker on the uptake, made a grab for his reins, but Laurent danced out of his reach and was soon galloping for the tree line, the startled guards fumbling into a belated pursuit. He led them a merry chase for a while, until he found the shallow ravine he had seen marked. It had appeared to be wide enough that his sprightly mare could just manage the jump across, while heavy chargers of his guards would have to clamber down and wade through. In person, it did not disappoint. She took the leap with a handspan to spare, and Laurent sprinted for open country, the echoes of Orlant's curses ringing in his ears.

Auguste waved away the slave who approached him. There was water and a goblet on the small table next to him, in reach of his good arm, and his injuries were not severe enough that he needed anything else. The parodies of tenderness going on around him, as enslaved people pretended to enjoy wiping fevered brows and offering sweet caresses to those in need of comfort, made him faintly sick. He would have spoken to the wounded men around him, but the recovery tent he had been placed in contained no other prisoners. Every other cot was filled with an Akielon, most of them injured far more severely than Auguste. Several of them were unconscious, and more were actually missing arms or legs. Auguste had initially wondered if he had been segregated thus for a purpose, but as the hours passed and no one came to question him, he decided it was just a random accident of where they happened to have spare beds.

The tent flap rustled open and Auguste turned towards it. Every now and then a medic would come to examine the bandages or an officer to visit his men, but this time the doorway admitted a boy in peasant garb, carrying what looked like a sack of potatoes. He looked around the long tent as his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, then made straight for Auguste and plopped himself down on the bed by his knee, sitting facing him.

Auguste looked round to make sure no one was minding them, then, in frantic Veretian that he hoped no one around them could understand, hissed, "Laurent, what are you doing here?"

"It's all right, no one saw me," Laurent said, "I'm glad I finally found you; this is the third medical tent I had to look in."

"And yet no one saw you."

"Well, no one who knew who I was. I'm getting much better at disguises. It's more a matter of looking like you belong where you are than hiding your face." He held up the sack of potatoes as if to demonstrate, and took on the cringing, slightly panicky posture of a local boy conscripted into aiding an invading army. "I go - food-make - this," he said, in utterly atrocious Akielon, "And then they point me where the kitchen is."

"You could have been killed! You still might be, if you are caught. You have a plan for getting back into the fort?"

Laurent looked around to check that no one was watching him, then parted the peasant clothes to show that he still wore the standard of the Veretian royal house, golden starburst on a field of blue. "I have my horse hidden a ways outside the camp. When we get close enough, I'll take these off
and they'll know to take me in."

"Good. Go now, before anything happens."

"But I came here to see you!"

"And you've seen me. Look, I'm fine: conscious, talking, one good arm-" he struck out and cuffed Laurent's ear, quick as a snake - "Now get out of here before something happens, you little moron."

"But this is the only time we'll get to talk in ages. Who knows how long? And I snuck away from my guards and through an enemy camp for it. And if you won't talk to me - if you waste it - then I'll have risked my life for nothing."

Laurent had apparently learned how to use his blue eyes in the time Auguste had been away, for he fixed him with a look of utter pathos that the old Laurent never would have been able to manage. He'd grown taller too, though his cheeks still retained that little hint of baby pudge Auguste remembered. He'd be losing that soon enough, if his cheekbones were any indication, and Auguste would not be there to see it go. He stared, drinking his brother in, and he knew he should not be encouraging this, but - it really had been so long.

"Ten minutes," Auguste said, breaking, "Ten minutes, and then you're on your way back with no arguments or excuses, you hear me?"

Laurent threw himself forward onto Auguste's uninjured shoulder and gave him a fierce half-hug. Auguste wrapped his arm around Laurent's narrow ribs.

"I missed you too, little brother."

"They said you might be dead, at first," Laurent whispered into the side of Auguste's neck, "No one knew what happened after they took you away."

"I'm fine," Auguste repeated, reaching up to stroke his hand over the silkiness of Laurent's curls.

That was enough tenderness for a thirteen-year-old boy to take, and he sat up.

"I think my disguise is better than yours, anyway," said Laurent, "'Anonymous Patran lord.'"

"Did anyone besides you see through it?"

"I don't think so. Or if they did, they haven't mentioned it, at least. Not a lot of people know that you went to Patras."

Auguste nodded. It would have been broadly assumed that the prince would spend his exile somewhere in Vask, but Auguste had not wanted to muddle the already complex and vital alliance by making the Imperial court constantly choose whether the treatment of him should focus more on the "prince" or on the "disinherited." Luckily, neutral Patras had been happy to accept his help with their border disputes, even with his stipulation that he would only fight to defend, not expand, Patran territory out of respect for his own country's treaties.

"What happened to your good armor?" Laurent asked, poking at a bit of leather that had not been removed when they treated him.

"Sold it to Prince Torveld, along with just about everything else I took out of Vere," Auguste explained, "Used the money to hire the troops that came with me. He bought everything for twice what it was worth when he guessed what I wanted the money for, in spite of his nation's
sympathies. He's a good man, Torveld."

"Did he give you that tin plate too?"

"Yes, as a farewell gift, 'in recognition of my great service to Patras.'"

Laurent scowled.

"It's perfectly serviceable armor!" Auguste protested, "It just doesn't look as shiny as my old set."

"You got stabbed in it!"

"More like sliced, actually. And that was hardy the armor's fault."

Laurent glared at it dubiously, and Auguste smiled.

"Tell me how things are at the fort."

"They've tied Father to a horse to have him paraded before the troops to rally the men," Laurent said bitterly, "They've built a special saddle and everything so that they can bind him in the upright position and it will look like he's sitting. Other than that, they leave us both alone."

"You wrote last time that he seemed to be improving?"

"He seems to know what to do when they take him out," Laurent said, after a moment, "He sits as straight as he can manage and he waves to the army with his good hand, like he's remembering. And he recognizes me now when I go to read to him, I'm almost certain. I mean, it's hard to tell, because he still can't talk, but he looks at me like he knows me. Oh, and I didn't get to write you about it before all this started, but when I went to see him a few weeks ago I brought a new book even though we were still in the middle of the old one, to see if he'd notice, and he got upset! So he must be aware enough to be following the story."

"That seems promising," said Auguste, hoping that it did. He didn't really know much about what could be expected from this kind of condition. (All that the physicians he had consulted had been able to tell him was that a stroke induced by a drug would have the same recovery as a natural one, and that it depended on what parts of the brain had been damaged and how extensively.)

"And the military situation?"

Laurent hesitated. "They don't really let me in the important meetings."

"And I'm sure that stopped you," said Auguste, "Go on, tell me what you do know."

Laurent did. He had to read between the lines a bit, as Laurent tried to shield him from the worst of it, but no thirteen-year-old boy is quite as subtle as he thinks he is, and the picture Laurent drew was bleak. Chelaut, the current Regent, was running scared, made as timid by the war as he was bold in matters of trade. Guion, sensing weakness, was trying to spin the Council and gain more power for himself; as was Audin; while Jeurre was backing Chelaut more in an effort to stymie the others than out of any real support for the man or his policies. The only one who seemed to be keeping the good of Vere as his ultimate purpose was Herode, and he was entirely the wrong man for this situation. His political style was to watch and learn, intervening only when he was certain he saw the situation clearly, his efficacy resting on a reputation for neutrality and disinterest that would utterly erode if he made a habit of pushing one way or the other in political games. With no one rising to take control, the Council was fractious, divided, and far more interested in using the battle for their individual gain than risking winning it with another man's plans. Almost worse was
the way they were treating Laurent himself. Herode was infantalizing him and trying to keep him out of it - everyone else was trying to pull him one way or the other for the caché of having the Crown Prince agree to his plan and thus endow it with the only remaining source of royal approval. Auguste had suspected as much from inferences he made reading Laurent's letters, but the more he spoke, the more certain he became. The Councillors - grown men - were manipulating Laurent's thinking, coaxing him with honeyed words and edited information until he cast his support behind one particular plan with all the enthusiasm of an adolescent who thinks he understands the world and how it works. And when he did, the opponents would respond not with reasoned arguments, but underhanded personal attacks, trying to provoke Laurent into contradicting himself or throwing a tantrum, so that they could declare that he was obviously too immature for his support to count for anything at all. And his only champion made matters worse by insisting that the prince was too young to be involved in these matters anyway. Well, young or not, Laurent was involved by simple virtue of being the only royal not dead, exiled, or physically incapacitated, and no one was taking him under wing and showing him how to enact the role he had been suddenly thrust into. No one was teaching him how to make a decision and stick to it, how to take in all the information first to be sure it was a right one, how (when necessary) to change his mind without appearing weak, how to tell which tasks to delegate and which the people needed to see their own prince doing, and how to choose the right people to delegate to - in short, how to rule. These were skills Auguste had learned at his father's knee, but they had always thought they would have time left to teach them to Laurent.

He had always comforted himself, when the privations of his exile cut to deep, that he could not have rightly done anything differently - but as Laurent spoke, he became convinced that he had done completely the wrong thing in not telling, under oath or not, whatever lie was necessary to remain in Vere.

"I think they're moving towards capitulating," Laurent was saying, as a summing-up, "Chelaut's scared of more fighting, and Audin keeps bringing up how much the battle is costing."

"We'll be fine as long as we stick to the fort," Auguste said, "Akielon lines are the strongest an army could face on an open plain, but they are not masters of siege engines, and Veretian walls are strong. King Theomedes has only just managed to bring all his kyroi together under one banner - he will never keep them united under the strain of a siege long enough to starve us out. As long as we don't do something stupid, like bring the whole force out to meet them in the field, victory is ours."

"That's what Lord Touars said," said Laurent, "Well, not exactly the same thing - he said Akielons were weak cowards who would break before a strong resistance - but it amounted to the same thing."

"The Akielons are not that," said Auguste, "But they do have more to fear from a prolonged siege than we do."

"I'd tell them that, if they'd listen to me."

"The Council should put Touars in charge as military commander. He has more experience fighting Akielons than almost any man in Vere."

"Guion wanted them too, but Audin protested on - I forget what grounds he claimed, but it was really because he thinks Touars is too much Guion's man. The motion didn't pass."

"Who have they chosen inst-

Auguste cut off as a flash of sharp sunlight signaled the tent flap being opened again, and he
motioned for Laurent to go before they were noticed. Laurent rose to do so, then he caught sight of who had just entered and he quickly sank back down. This was no medic, or low-ranking officer. Tall enough to brush the canvas as he passed through the tent, broad-shouldered and (even in the eyes of Auguste, who was no slight man himself) hugely well-muscled, cloaked in red with a gold pin in the shape of a lion serving in pace of a crown: this was Damianos, Crown Prince of Akielos, who, when those "Veretian snakes" slunk back into their fort, had made sure the door slammed behind them. A muffled cheer went up from those who were still capable of it.

Laurent was either too frightened of attracting his notice by moving or too concerned to leave Auguste alone with him, for he did not leave the tent. Instead, he took up a cloth and a bowl of water from the table and began needlessly bathing Auguste's face, hunching his shoulders and crouching low over him as if he could mask his small size with poor posture. Go! Auguste mouthed silently. Laurent moved the damp cloth over his eyes, blocking his glare.

Damianos did not seem to notice. He was moving among his people, clapping arms and speaking softly with those who were awake. Occasionally, Auguste caught a scattered word or phrase - "proud," "service," "shores of Ellium," "send over a barrel of Makedon's griva" - but as long as the prince continued to ignore them, he kept his eyes locked on his brother's in a silent battle of will. When Damianos suggested to a particularly lively soldier that he should impress the ladies by telling them that, in service of his country, his left leg had become "only" as big as his third one, Auguste took advantage of their laughter to risk a frantically whispered, "Get out of here now before they -"

Laurent soaked the cloth and stuffed it into his mouth, leaving him sputtering. By the time he had recovered, the laughter had stopped and he dared not say anything else into the quiet. Laurent looked triumphantly smug.

But as angry as he was at Laurent, Auguste knew that this was really his fault. He had known it was a bad idea to give in and let Laurent stay. He had known that he shouldn't indulge him. But Auguste had indulged him and now they were both in a dangerous situation, with Laurent refusing to flee, and Auguste swore that when they got out of this (if they got out of this), he was going to march right back into Vere, take the boy over his knee, and -

Prince Damianos was standing at the foot of the bed. He had seen the last of his men and had circled back around to them.

"So we meet again," he said, in a low enough undertone that he couldn't be heard by the men around them, "Auguste Kin-Slayer."

The world had crashed around him, but no one outside seemed to notice. The ground did not shift, the tent remained upright, and the wounded men in the cots around continued sleeping or moaning or being comforted by the slaves. Ten minutes later, half an hour before, and his recognition would not matter - but now he had Laurent with him, small and vulnerable, bowing beside the bed as if he was still trying to blend in with the slaves.

"No," Auguste said desperately, in hesitant Akielon, "No - I don't know why you say me -"

"I speak your language better than you speak mine," Damianos said, switching into Veretian.

"I am not Prince Auguste," Auguste continued stubbornly, grappling for the unfamiliar Akeilon words, "I am -"

"A Patran lord," Damianos said, still in Auguste's native tongue, "A mysterious, unnamed, blond
Patran lord who rides in support of Vere, fights in the Veretian style, and receives secret visits from well-bred Veretian boys disguised as peasants."

"I am a peasant!" Laurent protested.

"I suppose you have the hands of one, then," said Damianos, holding out his own broad palm as if he expected Laurent to submit his for inspection. Laurent hid both his hands behind his back and scowled.

"Or we could continue pretending that I don't know who you are," said Damianos, turning back to Auguste, "I expect that your 'native Patran accent' will be amusing."

Auguste considered whether Damianos really spoke Patran well enough to recognize a Veretian accent, and decided that he probably did. Prince Damianos struck him as a man unlikely to bluff.

"If I am to admit to your claims - which I do not promise - I would only do so privately," said Auguste, "Give me accommodations consistent with the title you have bestowed on me, allow no chance for eavesdroppers, and send the child back to his parents, and then we may talk."

"And the child is?"

"A messenger," Auguste said dismissively, "He brought me a coded message, but does not know what it means. If you would find out, you would do what I ask."

Auguste held his breath in the silence.

"They say Veretians are treacherous snakes for whom honor and morals mean nothing," said Damianos, after a pause, "But I do not believe that even they would bring a boy this young onto a battlefield. Save perhaps one boy."

Auguste made an instinctive grab for Laurent, playing his hand, but he could not help it - his need to get himself between his brother and the Prince's stare was too great. Damianos put his hand on his sword and surged forward, then paused, as though reconsidering, and softened. Auguste realized with dawning horror that the Prince had misinterpreted his impulsive clutching as an attempt to shield himself with his brother's body.

"Send for Nikandros," he ordered in Akielon, and moved to sit. A chair was placed underneath him with the legendary unobtrusiveness of Akielon slaves, and Damianos considered them in silence. Laurent did not speak as Auguste held onto him.

They waited like that for what seemed an age until the tent flap parted again, and a young man with military bearing came in and bowed before his Prince. It was impossible to tell rank in Akielos, save from the quality of the armor: everyone moved like soldiers.

"Take your most trusted men with you, and escort young Prince Laurent back to his fort under flag of truce. Tell no one else who he is." The Prince spoke Veretian for secrecy, and Nikandros nodded with only a flicker of surprise.

"Perhaps a kin-slayer does not know what men of honor look like," Damianos continued, "But we will not use a boy as a hostage of war."

"What will you do with my brother, then?" asked Laurent.

"That is the question, isn't it?" asked Damionos, "The Veretian soldiers will be ransomed back at the conclusion of the fighting. The Patrans will have their weapons confiscated and be released, on
their oath not to fight against Akielos for three years. But you are neither."

"I am of no use as a hostage," said Auguste, "The Council exiled me, and have no desire to get me back. They do not care if I live or die."

"The people of Vere do, though," Laurent interrupted quickly, "They are still loyal to the royal family, and the Council needs their support, whether they like it or not. He's of much better use to you alive and unharmed."

"Lad," Nikandros said gently, "You have just told your enemies that killing your brother would cause civil unrest between the Council and the people."

Laurent went white.

"The penalty for murder of family is death," Nikandros mused.

"But the crime was committed in Vere, and they have dealt with it-" Damianos's face twisted in disgust at the light sentence Veretians felt appropriate for "dealing with" such a crime - "As they saw fit. He should not be put to death unless it is for crimes against Akielos, or committed on our soil. For now, the King shall decide what is to be done with him. And it is high time that you took the boy away."

"A moment," pleaded Laurent, in a small voice, and he turned and hugged Auguste's neck.

"There is one place where you will always be a prince, whatever the Council says," Laurent whispered into his ear, "Meet me there if you can."

Laurent stood and moved sadly towards Nikandros, but to Auguste's surprise he stopped where Damianos stood and took one of his hands in both of his.

"Please," he begged, looking up into his face and letting his eyes fill with tears, "Don't let them hurt my big brother."

Then he let Nikandros take him away.

For the first time since he'd entered the tent, Damianos looked profoundly uncomfortable. He kept glancing down at his hand.

It was humiliating, being dragged back to the gates under a white flag, surrounded by barbarians. That brute Nikandros had at least let him stop for his horse, but he'd had to leave Auguste still trapped there. He couldn't believe they'd both been caught, and by stupid barbarians too! At least the big dumb brute was the one in charge. Clearly, he liked to think of himself as a good person. It would be harder to keep up that image if he hurt Auguste after Laurent had directly appealed to him. Not that he would care about all brothers and fathers that he'd probably killed today whose children were not directly in front of him, but you couldn't expect better than hypocrisy from an Akielon.

The gates opened and a small force road out to meet them - Council's men, except for the two in the back, red faced and frazzled as if they had seen what was happening and scrambled out behind the group without orders. Orlant looked furious, but Jord was wearing that face of quiet disappointment that made Laurent squirm. He wondered how much trouble they'd gotten into for losing him.

The heralds of each group were still speaking after Laurent was handed over, using twenty words
for every one that was needed and each speaking in the other's language out of respect. Laurent nudged his horse over to his own men.

He knew he should give them an apology, but he only muttered, "I told you I would be fine."

Jord inclined his head in such a scrupulously correct I-am-accepting-the-words-of-my-Prince-no-matter-what-they-are way that Laurent flushed with shame, while Orlant gestured to the nearby Akielon soldiers and shouted, "This is not fine!" before he could stop himself.

Unexpectedly, Nikandros laughed. Orlant turned to glare at him.

"Not fine," Nikandros agreed, "If anyone other than Prince Damianos had found him..."

Nikandros shrugged.

The heralds wrapped it up then (perhaps they had grown uncomfortable now that members of both parties were talking to each other directly) and Laurent was allowed to return to the fort. The men let up a cheer as he entered the gates.

"Prince Laurent!" shouted a voice from the crowd, "Is it true? Do the barbarians have your brother?"

Laurent was shuffled along before he could decide whether or not to answer. He wasn't sure how anyone had known: he hadn't said anything, and no messengers had come from the Akielon camp since the Prince had found them. Maybe it had been guessed. In the search for him, someone would have tracked his movements and discovered that he had asked pointed questions about the wounded Patran leader before running away from his guard ... it wasn't too hard to put it together. Ahead of him, he saw the Council gathered in the doorway of the keep, angry frowns not hiding their worry, and Laurent wondered what it would do to their negotiations to know that at any moment the enemy could put them in a position to choose or choose not to ransom back the popular and beloved prince that they had exiled. And he knew that despite the Akielon Prince recognizing Auguste on his own, they would consider that to be Laurent's fault.

"When the Council finishes reaming me out, I want a full report on what was done to the guards and anyone else they might have punished for letting me escape," Laurent told Jord.

"Yes sir," Jord said evenly, and Laurent could already see how horrible it would be, Jord would give him nothing, no anger or edge that he could fight against and feel justified, just that calm acceptance of unfair treatment that would make Laurent feel awful and guilty and wouldn't Auguste be disappointed in me if he could see what I was doing right now.

"You'll have to come up with something for Orlant while we're at it."

"What?"

"You'll need to punish him further, for insubordination."

"For the shouting," Orlant agreed grimly, already accepting his due.

Today was a horrible day.

Damen sat at his father's right, flanked by a selection of most important kyroi and commanders as they considered the treaty offered to them by the Veretian envoy. The kin-slayer was there too, not bound, but under conspicuous guard to illustrate that he was their prisoner. Damen had expected
that a man capable of the crime the ousted prince was known to have committed would show his character in his features: weaselly, shrunken, unsteady. Auguste looked nothing like that. Damen knew that the wounds he had given to shoulder and thigh must pain him, but he gave no sign of it, sitting upright under his own power in the low chair provided rather than show weakness before his enemies. Damen supposed that a man without honor could still have courage and pride.

The Veretian envoy had not tried to speak to him, but he did keep darting little looks over at his former prince while he made the proper obeisances before the King. Likely that was why Theomedes had chosen to put his captivity on display.

The envoy had been dismissed now so they could consider his offer in private, but to Damen's surprise his father allowed the kin-slayer to stay.

"What do we think of the Veretian offer," King Theomedes began, "To retain their claim to Delpha, but to lease it to Akielos for a period of ten years."

"It's sheer madness for them to offer such a thing. They must know that they'd never get it back."

"Doubtless it's some form of Veretian treachery. We go in to take possession, only to find that they've laid traps in every room and hidden half the army wine cellar."

"Or they wait, silent as you please, in Ravenel and Fortaine until we finally withdraw the bulk of our troops and go home, then up their whole army appears overnight to take it back from us."

"They would not find it easy to take it back once we are inside," said Theomedes, "And they would have to do it before we could remuster, or the counter-attack would find them exposed on the field. What do you think?"

The King was looking at Damen.

"Some sort of treachery does seem the most likely answer, but I cannot conceive of a trap that we could not expose long before it endangered all our forces, and then they'd be left with the same battle in a weaker position," he said doubtfully.

"Indeed, the first place some of our men would look would definitely be the wine-cellar," agreed Nikandros, who also was of an age to accompany his father to important meetings.

"Perhaps they've poisoned the wine."

"It is a fool who does not expect treachery from the Veretians, and we shall look for it," said the King, "But suppose for the moment, the offer is genuine. What are your thoughts?"

"The payment they've asked for is the same value the land yields, or perhaps a little more," said Damen, "And accepting it would mean acknowledging their claim. Delpha belongs to Akielos. It was taken in the days of King Euandros. Better that we take it back outright."

"But if the Veretians are running scared enough to make such a cringing offer so early in the fighting, perhaps we ought to take more than that," said Makedon, "Push on, see if we can't take Arran and Alier as well."

"Delfeur is one of the royal holdings," their prisoner put in unexpectedly, "But members of the Council hold lands in the rest of the border provinces, including Fortaine. They may rather squander my brother's inheritance than fight for it, but they will defend their own."

"You would lend your counsel to your enemies?" said the King.
"I would stop a pointless march where thousands of my people would be dispossessed and brutalized by an invading army before you even reach another keep worth having."

"This man's words cannot be trusted," said Damen, though what a slippery thing for the Council to do if it were true: trade off the holding of a young boy who cannot protest; lose the funds that should go to the royal treasury and put them in the public coffers in the form of foreign payments, lessening their own tax burden; kick the actual dispute ten years down the line when their odd joint Regency will be over and it will be the new King's problem; avoid the blame for permanently losing Delfeur without having to spend blood or treasure to keep it. Twisted and self-serving. Veretian.

"What I've said may be easily verified."

King Theomedes motioned to one of the guards. "Send for our old ambassador Capaneus, and we shall see what he may tell us about who owns Veretian lands. In the meantime, I think we should continue this discussion without the exiled prince."

The kyroi did not see the final word that Theomedes sent back with the Veretian envoy, but he discussed it with Damen that night in the privacy of the royal tent.

"I have made the Veretians a counter offer. We will accept their lease, but defray two-thirds of the cost as payment for fostering the sometime-prince Auguste, who has become our prisoner in his exile."

"Yes, Exalted."

"You do not like it?"

"It is not my decision to make."

"No, but it will be someday. Speak your mind."

"So we threaten them with harm to their exiled prince if they do not cede our terms, knowing that harm to him would throw their nation into turmoil?"

"I did not threaten Auguste, nor do I intend to. He will be released with the Patrans when this is over, if they reject our modified offer. But I do not think they will."

"Because they will read an implied threat into your words, whether there is one or not."

"If the Veretians twist themselves into knots looking for every man to be as treacherous as they are, that is to their own dishonor - not to that of he who deals straightly with them and is suspected."

"Still, I would prefer to win our prize outright."

"So would I, in my heart. But their walls are strong, and they will not be foolish or arrogant enough to leave them. It will be a long, hard-won victory, and when given the opportunity to shorten the battle and save lives with no dishonor, it is a foolish king who will not take it."

Prince Damianos, leader of men since he was seventeen, undefeated on the field of battle, still longed for the glory of true victory. But he was young yet, and his father was older and wiser. Perhaps his confidence in the ease with which they would win was naive.
"Do you know why Auguste spoke up today?" asked his father.

"No."

"He thought that Makedon was proposing pretending to take the deal in good faith, and then turning Marlas into a garrison from which to launch our assault on the Veretian homeland."

Damen scoffed. "A coward's move. The kyroi would not stand for it."

"No, but it is what a Veretian would have done. Remember," he said, "What you have learned about them these past few days. Remember how they fight. Remember how they think. Veretians are over-complicated. That is both their strength and their downfall. Never trust them, but don't forget how honest dealing can cut straight through them, like a sword through a knot. You will need to know that, someday. In ten years' time, this may well be your problem to deal with."

"Don't say that, Father!" Damen protested. Then, slyly, "Surely you have at least eleven years left."

"Just how old do you think I am, boy!"

"I never thanked you," said Auguste, some days later, "For what you did for my brother."

The negotiations had concluded then, and the Veretians had taken themselves off, but the transfer of power was still ongoing. There had been the celebratory games, and the distribution of the better part of the stores of the keep among the local peasantry (both to encourage the transfer of loyalties and to check for poison), and they had reached the point of delegation of power. Nikandros's father would be made Kyros of Delpha, with Makedon serving as Commander under him. Decisions were still being made about how to staff the fort and how many troops to leave in defense of it, and the lands around.

The kin-slayer's wounds were healing well, in the time they had dawdled, and there was hope he would be able to ride his own horse by the time they were ready to return to Ios.

"What I did," said Damen, "Requires no thanks. It was the only thing an honorable man could do. Perhaps you would know that, if you'd lived among better people."

"You truly despise us, don't you?"

"What I have learned at Marlas is that Veretians are exactly like what I have always thought them: duplicitous, deceitful, and entirely without honor."

"I notice that there was only one of your 'honorable Akielons' whom you trusted with the secret of Laurent's identity," Auguste observed.

Having no response for that, Damen left him.

Chapter End Notes

I intended to post this a week ago, and I'm still not entirely happy with it, but I didn't want to wait any longer, so here it is! My intention from now on is to have shorter chapters and post them every other Monday, but I just found out that, due to
circumstances, I will be applying for jobs while still working full time for the next few weeks so ... who knows!

(Incidentally, I really enjoyed writing all the dialogue for Damen and Auguste. I was thinking the whole time, "Dude, you guys are going to be such bros. You don't even know. The ultimate bros.")

(Hopefully) See you in two weeks!
Three days after leaving the fort, the Veretian Council sent an envoy over from Fortaine with a cart full of clothes and personal possessions for Auguste to take with him in his imprisonment. It was far more than he had been allowed to carry out of Vere in the first place, but with all eyes on him now, he knew how important it would be for them to make a show to the men of caring for his comfort and to the Akielons of the kind of riches and finery a Veretian prince was entitled to. He spoke personally with each of the men who had brought it as they took their leave at the edge of the camp, and when he turned to go back to his tent, he found Nikandros watching him.

Many of the Akielons watched him, the enemy prince, high-profile stranger in their camp. But Akielons showed their emotions in their faces, so it did not unsettle him, because he could usually tell what they were watching him with. Theomedes gazed at him with smug satisfaction in having taken him as a prize and thus put one over on the Veretians; Damianos was disgusted by his very existence; the kyroi and almost all the men glared at him in suspicion and open animosity; a handful of the men wanted to fuck him. But whenever he caught Nikandros at it, his face was always inscrutable. He was not patronizing or glaring or threatening or lusting. He was just - watching. It made Auguste uneasy.

As he did with most things that bothered him, Auguste approached him directly. Nikandros's Veretian was passable, but not as fluent as the King' and Prince's, and it was important that Auguste better learn the language of the nation he would be in for some time. So he said, hesitantly,

"I told them that I was being housed well," even though he was not sure if "house" could be used as a verb in this tongue. He did not know the words for treated or kept. Nikandros seemed to understand him anyway.

"I should hope so. You've been staying in my tent."

"I have? Then, where have you been ..."

"In order to keep our new prisoner of war in accommodations suitable to his rank, I have been given the high honor of sharing the royal quarters with Prince Damianos."

"I'm sorry," said Auguste automatically.
Nikandros raised an eyebrow and said nothing, until the absurdity of apologizing for displacing the man who owned what was essentially his prison cell sank into Auguste's bones.

"It's fine," Nikandros said, when the pause had lasted long enough to be uncomfortable, "His tent is much finer than mine, and it reminds me of when we went hunting together as boys, sending all the attendants away so that no one would know we had snuck out with our fathers' liquor."

Auguste looked Nikandros up and down.

"That would have been, what, three whole years ago?"

Nikandros smirked. "Something like that."

On the day they were finally to start the journey back to Ios, the attendants he had been assigned laid out for him the finest clothes that had been sent. Delicate undershirt so fine it could be pulled through a signet ring, then embroidered jacket trimmed with gold and pearls, and finally a surcoat with the starburst on it, emblazoned bold across his chest. The surcoat, of course, was meant to be worn over armor, not palace clothes, but Theomedes wanted his standard to show. They placed him just behind the King and his son, in the procession, on his own horse (a fine white charger, fit for a prince), but surrounded by a truly ridiculous number of guards: before, behind, on either side, and then four more marking the corners, ringing him in. The people of Delfeur had come out, lining the streets to watch the army return, and King Theomedes was sending them a message. "See how strong we are? See your golden Prince, best beloved, completely in our power? You belong to us now, just as he does."

Auguste remembered the lessons his father taught him about ruling here, on the border. Everyone was mixed, in Delfeur. Probably everyone in both countries was, at least a little, from far back in the time when the countries were part of one empire, but on the border it's more obvious: a pair of blue eyes in a dark face, black Akielon hair above fair skin. It didn't matter, most of the time. Everyone was the same when it came to planting and harvesting, storing up for the winter. But in times of conflict, they remembered: who has more blood from one country or the other? Who feels the more loyal to their father's side, or to their mother's? Whose grandfather or great-grandfather fought on which side of the old war? And it all got mixed up with commonplace peasant resentments: whose cow thrived while its sister on another farm sickened and died? Whose field flooded and whose stayed dry? Who, by lucky chance, started planting barley just before a blight on the wheat? There were tensions here, simmering, always.

Perhaps most people did not care who owned the land they farmed on as long as the fighting stopped, but enough of them did that there were mutterings as the starburst banner, defeated, was paraded before them.

"The Prince," someone shouted from the crowd, as if he could change a prisoner transport into a procession by sheer force of will, "The Prince! Auguste! Auguste!"

"The Prince Auguste!" like-minded people in the crowd echoed, "The Prince Auguste!" And there was noise and movement up and down the road. Some of the soldiers moved as if they would stop the insubordination and repay the insult, but King Theomedes held them back with a raised hand and continued riding, unperturbed. Let them cry for their prince, his attitude said, we still have him in chains. Let them shout their defiance; we still hold their land.

Prince Damianos was less composed, eyes darting about to either side, willing to ignore what was happening for now but obviously watching for the moment when it became a mob. Auguste concentrated on sitting straight and keeping his eyes forward.
Up ahead of him, there was some jostling among the peasants as they leaned forward to shout Auguste's name, and a brown-skinned man was pushed forward and nearly stumbled. Dark coloring was not uncommon on the border, but this man was a clearer throwback to Akielon lineage than any of those around him, and as he glared back at his Veretian fellows, Auguste could read his history in his face: perhaps not quite an outcast, prior to this conflict, but always different, always marked. The man strode forward.

"The Prince!" he shouted, in a startlingly deep voice that carried over the others, "Damianos! Damianos!"

Here and there, small pockets of the longer-memoried took up his cry as well, shouting back at the others. There was scuffling in the crowd, threatening to turn into an ugly brawl. Auguste stood in his stirrups, ignoring the pain in his thigh.

"Stop!" he shouted, in the voice that had commanded armies, "No more fighting! The field is taken and the battle over. It is done!"

But these peasants were not soldiers, and despite his name being their rallying cry, this was not about him so much as resisting the Akielons. They ignored him, and blows began to fall. Someone screamed as the women began picking up their children and running.

"Flats of the swords only," Theomedes commanded. And the Akielon army surged into the crowd.

Three men stood before the King and the Prince in the village common, having been identified as the ringleaders of the mob (or at least, convenient scapegoats.) By some miracle, and the strict discipline of the Akielon army, there had been no fatalities, though the army physicians were even now attending to those who had been wounded in the scuffle, setting broken arms and soothing bruised ribs as best they could. These three men, while obviously involved (split lips, blackened eyes, scraped knuckles), where some of the least hurt of the assailants. In the confusion no one knew who really had thrown the first punch, or how deeply these particular men had been involved. But the King now ruling Delfeur had been insulted, and someone would have to be punished. The dark man who had first cheered for Damianos was not among them, nor was any man who had shouted for their side.

"The punishment for the insubordination performed today," proclaimed Theomedes, laying down his judgement, "Will be a public whipping. Ten lashes each."

It was a light sentence, Auguste knew. He could have asked for fifty lashes apiece, or a hundred; he could have demanded the removal of the hands that struck the blows. The punishment was a fair one, within the moderate limits of what would be needed to restore discipline and set an example for the rest of the populace. And yet - and yet, Auguste thought of what had been taken from them already, by Veretians and invaders, as each alike raided their stores to feed their armies. It was spring still, and the stores distributed from the fort included some germinable seeds. They could replant, if they did it quickly, and perhaps harvest enough that none of them need starve this winter. But for that they would need every available hand, and they had already lost a number of able bodies who were injured in the fighting. They could hardly afford to lose three hale men, even for the scant number of days it would take to recover from so light an injury. He remembered them - bold, defiant, shouting his name.

"I will take their punishment myself," declared Auguste, standing up.

"And cause another riot?" Damianos whirled around and glared at him. But he could see that Theomedes liked the idea, as a further insult to the Veretians, and he kept his eyes on the King.
Shouting at Auguste was acceptable, but the Crown Prince would not argue with his father in public.

"We will not interfere with a former prince's love for his people," said Theomedes, smiling as though he thought love the least likely explanation for what was going on here, "Prepare the cross for our noble guest."

Auguste could not help but be grudgingly impressed with the speed with which things happened after that. He did not see the orders being given, but half the army moved through the gathered crowd in a staggered formation, so that there were no more than five civilians between each soldier, quelling further threats of violence with a show of force. The cross was erected in the center of the common, padded with the quilting that the army must carry with them in case corporal punishment is needed on campaign, but it was wrapped in fine silk, and a cushion was placed at the base of it. Auguste let out a horrified laugh when he realized this was in bizarre consideration (exhibition?) of his birth. Throughout these preparations, the King and Prince had kept up a whispered council, and Theomedes had not looked happy, but the last thing his son said seemed to please him, and he raised his hand for silence before they brought Auguste to the post.

"The blood of a prince, even a disinherited one, must be deemed at least three times as valuable as the that of a peasant," Theomedes announced, "We shall adjust our pleasure accordingly. Ten lashes." And he expanded his arm to the crowd. See? He was saying. Your new masters can be merciful.

Auguste felt a minor surge of relief. He had offered, and had expected, to take the sentence for all three men: a full thirty lashes. Surely - surely he could do ten. He had ordered more than that to be given on the field, when offenses called for it. No one had ever dared to tan his hide, but what kind of man would he be if he could dish out what he could not bear? He could take only ten.

Two guards led him gently to the post they had erected, and tied his wrists to it for support. They were business-like, as was the King watching, and Prince Damianos bore an expression of barely concealed disgust, as if this whole display was beneath him. But the man holding the whip was grinning with malice, gleeful at having a Veretian prince at his mercy, and Auguste knew that these would be the ten hardest lashes a man was capable of dealing out.

He closed his eyes as the first blow fell.

Auguste was never going to assign whippings for military discipline again. If he ever got back to a post of command, any man who disobeyed him would be mucking out latrines and disposing of the waste from the medical tents until his face was permanently green. But not - never - this.

The wound on his shoulder had reopened from the strain of holding himself up while reacting to the blows, and he had to sit in agony while the surgeons stitched it back up again before he could finally lie on his stomach, trying to keep pressure off the wound while the physicians saw to his back. They rubbed it with a salve that burned before it cooled, and he passed out momentarily from the pain of it. His back felt hot, and he was sure he was slightly feverish from the efforts of his body to knit itself back together. And yet this was a lighter pain than any he had caused to be inflicted. The marks were few, and did not overlap, and the physicians assured him that - if they were cared for properly - they might not even scar. When they were finished, they wrapped him in fine white bandages and made him drink something milky and unfamiliar.
Prince Damianos swept into the tent, regal as a lion.

"What's this I here about you quarreling with my physicians?"

"I have discovered," Auguste announced portentously, "The secret to world peace."

"Have you?"

"Yes. We put the healers of all nations in one room, and let them unite to yell at the rest of us for being bad patients."

The corner of Damianos's mouth twitched. "They gave you something very nice for the pain, I see." He turned to the head physician. "What's going on?"

"He refuses to leave the tent, sir, without putting on one of those damned Veretian jackets," said the man, bowing, "They are too tight. They will interfere with the bandaging and inflame the wound."

"I am not putting on one of those things," said Auguste, gesturing awkwardly at the Akielon Prince.

"A chiton?"

"It's less than a whore wears!"

"The whores in Vere must be very disappointing."

And Damianos left.

But later that day, before they took to the road again, a Patran tunic was found for Auguste that could be worn over his pants. If he had been less woozy during the initial altercation, he would have proposed shirt alone as an acceptable compromise, but the tunic actually made him more comfortable. Unlike a shirt, it was obviously meant to be worn on the outside, and he had donned them with no discomfort in Patras, on occasion. The physicians pronounced it loose enough to be worn safely over the bandages, and Auguste gladly put it on.

Damen watched as those injured from the riot were taken out of the medical tent and brought back to their homes. This was not right. Armies marched into battle, and good men were wounded, maimed, killed - but those were fair fights, the armed against the armed, for the glory and honor of their country. These people were farmers, weaponless, and there were women and children among them, hurt in the chaos of the scuffle. There was no glory in this.

He thought back to the Veretian prince, who had started this whole mess. How had they let this happen, in his name? How could they be loyal to him, knowing what he had done?

Before him, a man who had been trampled after falling in an attempt to bring a child to safety was being led out by his wife and mother, each woman supporting him under one arm. The old woman turned as she passed Damen and spat on his foot, where the skin was exposed by the sandal. His guards moved forward to avenge his honor, but he held up a hand to stay them.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because Akielons are barbarians and monsters, no better than scum."
"No. You did that because you knew it would reflect worse on me to punish an old woman than to let the insult stand. It was a coward's trick, unworthy of your age and wisdom."

The old woman glared at him, unbowed, but her daughter-in-law flushed with shame and inclined her head to him, before leading her husband forward. Only when their backs were towards him did he allow a slave to clean him off.

Nikandros requested an audience with the King and with Capaneus, their former ambassador to Vere before tensions became too high for normal diplomatic relations.

"Exalted, I would ask Capaneus what he knows of the Veretian prince, and of his uncle, before we travel with him any further into Akielos," he said, bowing, "If we are to take a snake into our hold, I would know what manner of snake it is."

Theomedes was his King, but he was also his best friend's father, and he had always spoken a little more freely before him than was normal for a kyros's son. Damen thought that his father respected him for it.

"But we do know the breed: Veretian. Cowardly, duplicitous, like all their kind," said the King.

"Perhaps even among them there may be variety, Exalted."

"I was never in close contact with the royal family for long," said Capaneus, "What I do know of their characters, I know by reputation only."

"And what were their reputations, in Vere."

"Well, that is why the Council had so much trouble. The Prince claimed, as I understand it, that his uncle had done something so horrific that Auguste could not reveal it without shaming the entire royal family, so he handled it privately in a secret duel of honor. Either he was telling the truth, and his uncle was dishonorable; or was lying and Auguste is dishonorable. But before last year, they were both reputed to be the two most honest men in Vere. There was no one said to be more forthright than the King's younger brother and the King's eldest son."

"If you had to choose which of them was more likely to be in the wrong ..."

"I lack the understanding to do that, Exalted."

"But if your King asks you to use your judgement."

"... I would not base policy on it, but I would be inclined to favor the Prince."

"Why?"

"It is shaky ground. A man's bedroom habits and his public morals do not always mesh. We have all known the otherwise honest, honorable man who beats his wife, and the vicious scoundrel who treats his mistress like a queen."

"You know the royal family of Vere's bedroom habits?"

"It was an open secret among the court that the King's brother took - catamites. Very young ones. Boys who were truly boys and not merely young men. It may not mean anything, but I have trouble believing a man capable of that to be incapable of anything else."

"But if the Prince truly had just cause for slaying his uncle, why would he not says so?" asked
"That I cannot tell you."

"Likely they were both crooked and deceitful, and putting up fronts," said the King with finality.

"I know of no reason not to think so, Exalted."

"How's your back?" Nikandros asked.

"Healing well, I think," said Auguste, "It's going to be hell sitting on a horse, but I don't think any permanent damage was done."

"That was quite a thing you did, taking the lashes."

"They'll need the men to work the fields."

"Damianos thinks you were putting on a show, pretending at valor and compassion."

"Yes, he's made it quite clear what he thinks. The question is, why are you telling me this?"

Nikandros levelled an even gaze at him.

"You are from Sicyon." Auguste had learned that much in the camp. "You must hate us more than the rest of them."

"Veretians are liars and cowards all," Nikandros recited, in a bored tone, "They drink treachery with their mothers' milk. Always run from an even fight but stab you in the back if they have half a chance. They are deceivers and traitors and frauds."

"So I've heard."

"But you haven't told a lie about why you killed your uncle," said Nikandros slowly, tilting his head and watching him closely, "Not before the Council, when it would have saved you from exile. Not here in the camp, when it might earn you the respect that you need to survive. So I think, perhaps ... I think perhaps you're not one."

Then, after a pause.

"Or you really did murder him in cowardice over a petty personal vendetta and are just too stupid to invent a believable story. I haven't made up my mind yet."

And he left Auguste, somewhat stunned.

Auguste wondered if all Akielons would simply announce their intentions to you if you asked them directly. It could make his stay in Akielos much easier.

Chapter End Notes

Technically still Monday! I cut this chapter in half so that I could post it on time, so apologies for updating (almost) a day late and a dollar short! Plan is to finish this chapter in two weeks (but maybe check back on Tuesday if I keep up my habit of
posting at like 11:45 Monday night). See you next in Ios! (Also, you may have noticed there's less connective tissue between the cuts - that should be becoming more pronounced as the story progresses and we start to skip time, so heads up)
Chapter Summary

Auguste's first year as a prisoner of war in Akielos (part 2).

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: mentions/depictions of canon-typical slavery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Theomedes liked to show him off. Each keep they stopped in, returning some portion of their soldiers back to their home fort, recounting the battle for those who had stayed behind, Auguste was always thrust forward like a prize: and here is the exiled Veretian prince, whom we took as a spoil of war after he fell in single combat with my son. A murmur would go around as they recalled Auguste's reputation as the finest warrior in Vere, and, under the King's encouraging eye, extrapolated from that a still greater respect for the power and skill of their own Prince who had bested him. Then King Theomedes would lean close to whomever he felt needed the attention and give them a private accounting of Auguste's defeat; displaying his strength, shoring up loyalty, and securing support for the eventual succession. It was overt - clumsily done, they would have said in Vere. But these people appreciated a direct approach, and he was beginning to understand that this pageantry was effective where Veretian subtlety would have engendered only scorn.

It was much the same when they finally reached Ios: Auguste was to be housed ambassador's quarters, allowed free movement among the public areas of the palace (the library, the training grounds, certain of the gardens), and given his own place at the high table - all under conspicuous guard so that his captivity would be constantly on display. Such was King Theomedes's desire to show the riches and generosity of his country that, for the duration of his stay at the court, Auguste was to be given the use of his own slave.

"No."

"No?"

"Vere is a free country. We do not keep slaves."

They were standing in a gallery, where six beautiful people were displayed before him in gilded chains. There were three men and three women, and none of them looked older than twenty-five, or younger than nineteen. Their heads were bowed in identical poses of submission, and they looked up at him becomingly through their eyelashes.

"What do you keep instead?" Damianos said skeptically. The Prince always appeared whenever Auguste and King Theomedes were in the same room, as though he did not trust their prisoner not to make an insane murderous attack on his father at any moment. King Theomedes sometimes
interfered with their sniping to carry his own point, but this appeared to be one of the times he was holding back.

"There are paid servants at the Veretian court, and pets, but they are free-born."

"Pets?"

"Pleasure workers. They sell contracts to serve a particular master for a set number of years."

"And what happens to them when the years are up?"

"The contract may be renewed, if both agree to it, or they may auction themselves off for a new master."

"And what happens to those who become unwanted? The slaves' obedience is a pact: they give up free will, and in return their masters give them perfect treatment and protection for their entire lives. It is an honorable relationship."

"There can be no honor without choice."

"And I'm sure the choices made by those reduced to selling themselves are deeply meaningful and in no way illusory."

Auguste flushed. "A pet may have little power and little choice, but it is still more than a slave has. I will take no part in this."

King Theomedes spoke, "What would you decide, if this were your prisoner instead of mine? Force him to take a slave, or find a paid servant for him?"

"Neither," said Damianos, "If he's going to stand on his 'convictions,' then let all the slaves be instructed not to serve him, including those provided for anyone who goes to the tables or the baths. He can see to his own needs."

Theomedes nodded slowly. "That is not what I would have chosen, but it is not a bad idea. Do you find it agreeable?"

He turned to Auguste.

"Yes, Exalted, that suits me fine."

"It will be done."

Auguste disarmed his third man and sent him tumbling onto the sawdust. It was his sixth day at the court in Ios, and during each of them he had spent the morning down in the training grounds - conducting his own exercises privately, in the beginning, but it never took long for someone to challenge him, and soon there would be a line. Every soldier and guard in the palace wanted to be the first one to defeat their captured prince, but so far Auguste had disappointed all of them, and it was a more exhilarating challenge than he had faced in a long time. There was something clean and refreshing about a match of skills without war and death at the end of it, just one man against another. He reached down a hand to help his opponent to his feet, and for the first time he was not angrily rebuffed - the Akielon soldier allowed him to pull him up, and bowed in recognition of his skill before leaving the ring. He was, Auguste realized dizzily, slowly earning their respect.

"Impressive," said a voice. Auguste turned around and saw Prince Damianos watching him.
"Care to try me yourself?"

The Prince dropped his cloak outside the ring and picked up a sword, not stopping to don practice armor. They circled each other warily. Auguste had been looking forward to a rematch now that he was nearing full strength, and he was eager to see how he would fare this time without the confusion of a battle all around them. Let the Prince see his true skill, and discover how he would fare - how he would have fared, if they'd met on the field that day as princes and equals.

He expected, from their earlier encounter, that Damianos would rely on his strength to overpower an opponent, but Auguste was hardly less strong, and he knew some Veretian tricks for twisting out of a blow and using his opponent's momentum against him that were foreign to Akielon swordplay. So he hung back as they circled, waiting for Damianos to make the first strike, choosing to take the defensive. When the attack did come, it was not one strike, but a series, blow following blow in a complex pattern that roved over all parts of Auguste's guard. Fast. He'd forgotten how fast the Prince was. His size made him forget; strong as a bear should lumber like one, but he was swift as a hind and deft as a fox, each movement following so quickly that all of Auguste's attention was focused on parrying the strikes as they came, with no time to turn a successful block into an advantage. He had been pushed back nearly to the wall by the time he finally managed to twist away, deflecting the blow and ducking aside in the same movement, bringing him at right angles to Damianos's attack. He expected the Prince to be carried forward by momentum and prepared for a blow to his unprotected back or side, but Damianos pulled up short and spun to face him, giving Auguste his front while Auguste's sword was still raised. He knew from experience how hard it was to stop a surge with such strength behind it, how all the muscles protested as the direction of the body was forcibly changed, and he was impressed all over again with Damianos's strength. But strength wasn't everything, and Auguste had used blocks designed to deflect the force of the blows rather than absorb it. Here at the end of the first exchange, he was less tired than his opponent, and it was his turn to attack.

Damianos had seemed to be more likely to stop a blow with sheer power than try any of Auguste's fancy deflections, and Auguste made him do it, eschewing skill for speed and strength, using forms that put all of his body weight behind his blows and lessened the strain to his arms. He had no chance of getting inside Damianos's guard like this, or making him drop his sword, but Auguste wasn't trying to: he just wanted to tire him out for the next exchange. Gradually he pushed Damianos back to the edge of the ring, tracking the sweat on his body and the speed of his breath, surprised once again at how slowly he was flagging. Most men would would be ready to drop by now. But Auguste had been so focused on wearing down his opponent's superior strength, he had forgotten about his considerable skill, and Damianos blocked a strike with a twisting parry Auguste knew well that should have struck the sword from his hands if he had not wrenched it back with sheer strength, and he was forced to retreat almost to the other end of the ring to give his wrists time to recover. But Damianos was crossing the ring to come back at him, and now they each knew how the other fought.

Auguste could not tell how long it went on - attack, defend, advance, retreat - Damianos trying to put more strain on the now weak point of Auguste's wrists, Auguste continuing his strategy of trying to exhaust the other man. The sawdust wasn't smooth under their feet any more - no matter where they moved, they crossed over an earlier path. But Damianos was finally starting to slow, and Auguste finally saw an opportunity to strike at the Prince's ungirded body - not hard enough to kill, not in the sparring ring, but enough to earn him first blood - but either he was overestimating his opponent's exhaustion, or cushioning the force of the blow slowed it too much, for Damianos not only managed to spin out of reach, but to bring his sword up in the same motion, clashing against Auguste's from below with a twisting arc that sent his blade spinning up out of his hands to land quivering in the ring behind them.
Auguste stood, gasping and panting, drenched in sweat. Every inch of him was tired, and Damianos did not look much better. He could not remember the last time he'd been so physically exhausted, and he felt the deep burn of his muscles with thrilled satisfaction. They were both grinning, and Auguste could not say whether either of them had started it during the match or after. If this had been a friend, he would have embraced him after a fight like that, pounding him on the back and threatening cheerful retribution, but with Damianos he held back, and merely nodded. The prince did so in return, acknowledging a worthy opponent and a difficult victory, and it was only then that Auguste realized that the rushing noise around him was not his blood pulsing in his ears, but the roaring of a crowd of soldiers and guards who'd gathered round to watch.

"Twenty minutes!" one of them shouted, and the grin on Damianos's face widened in surprise.

"You did not fight that way at Marlas," the Prince commented.

The grin faded from Auguste's face.

"At Marlas, I was exhausted from a long slog through lines of men, and disheartened from having to fight anonymously without the will of the people. It was - an unanticipated challenge."

Damianos tilted his face as if in understanding, and went to celebrate with the men who were cheering his victory. Auguste sought out the baths and thought. It was clear that the Crown Prince was his equal at swordsmanship - the first equal he had faced in some time, to his chagrin, and it surprised him more than it should have to acknowledge that this was so. He had wanted to see how their battle would have gone in Marlas under other circumstances, confident that he would be assured of an easy victory, but now - now he was more uncertain than ever. It was clear that they were too evenly matched for a victor to be predicted. About one thing, however, he was grimly certain. He sank down deeper into the water. There would be no minor injuries between them, in a fight where they were not holding back. If former prince Auguste and Prince Damianos ever came to true blows, it would be nearly certain that one of them would kill the other.

Laurent opened the book on his lap.

"Shall we pick up where we left off, Father? Or would you like to do something else today?" It was one of his "wandering days," the servant had warned him as he entered, and he was not sure if his father could focus enough to follow the story. Would that make him frustrated? But then, perhaps simply talking would be more difficult for him, especially as his words were, on the best days, still slurred to the point that it generally took him three or four tries to be understood. They could always re-read the same passages on Laurent's next visit, if he was feeling better.

The King's eyes focused on him, as they always did now, and Laurent smiled. His father mumbled something.

"I'm sorry, try again?"

He leaned closer to hear, and his father placed his wrinkled hand over Laurent's own.

"Awger," he said, looking into Laurent's eyes.

"I'm sorry, I know you're trying, but I still don't-"

"Awger," the King said louder, growing more agitated, "Awgou!"

Laurent's smile froze.
"No, it's not Auguste, Father. It's Laurent, remember? Your younger son? Would you like to finish the story now?"

His father grabbed at his hand, making the same approximation of Auguste's name over and over.

"No, it's Laurent, Father, it's Laurent! You have two sons! This is your son, Laurent, don't you remember me?"

Laurent's voice broke in something like desperation on the last word, and his Father was visibly distressed, making strange noises and rolling his head about, looking in all corners of the room as if searching for something. *I have to stop this*, Laurent thought, *He's getting upset. I can't make it any worse.*

"I'm - sorry, Father," Laurent said, blinking rapidly, "It's alright. Everything's alright."

He patted his father's hand.

"Awegou?"

He swallowed past a lump in his throat. "Of course it's Auguste. Shall I read to you some more, Father?"

Laurent picked up where they had left off, his voice smooth and steady. And if the hand not grasping the pages trembled as much as the old King's did, nobody else saw it.

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It was a hot day, and the afternoon sun had sent everyone from the white stillness of the marble halls into the green shade of the gardens, trying to get closer to the breeze coming over the cliffs from the sea below. Auguste, watching the Prince and his friend walk past him, finally saw the point of the brief chitons, and felt a quick stab of jealousy in the Patran tunic over Veretian pants he continued to insist on wearing.

On the portico to the left, a lady walking by in the company of serving women paused and called out to the Prince. Damianos lifted a hand in acknowledgement, then parted from Nikandros and went to her. On the way, he passed under an apricot tree, and he stretched up impulsively and plucked one of the low-hanging fruits. He offered it to her, when he reached her, and her women laughed gently.

Auguste had frequently seen this woman at the court, and she often sat by Theomedes at table, but he had not yet learned who she was. He watched as she took the fruit from the Prince's own hand and spoke to him softly. Damianos's behavior confused him. She was an attractive woman, but it was a mature beauty, with streaks of gray in her black hair and lines around her dark eyes. He did not believe Damianos would pay court to a woman who must be more than twice his age, and even if he would, the attitude was all wrong - at once too familiar and too respectful. The aura of respect as he inclined his head to hear her words, his coming at her call and offering the gift as would a boy: these actions struck Auguste as deeply filial. But Damianos's mother had been dead for many years.

"Who is that woman the Prince is talking to?" he asked Nikandros, approaching him.

"That's the King's mistress, Hypermenestra." And then, taking Auguste's blankness for confusion instead of shock, he added, "Kastor's mother."

Auguste had known that such things were done openly here, had seen with barely suppressed disgust the King and Prince both embrace the bastard who was their son and brother, but that this
relationship should be acknowledged as an official position, that she should be given a place at court and the service of her own slaves, that she should have such status that she could call the Prince himself and expect an answer...

"And the Prince honors her so?"

"Perhaps it would be different if the Queen had lived. But this is the beloved of his father and the mother of his brother. Of course he honors her."

In Vere, the woman who defiled a royal house with tainted seed would be castigated as a whore and ostracized with public shaming.

"And it is not an insult to the late Queen's memory, that he treats her rival as family?"

"I don't see how one has to do with the other."

Auguste looked at him.

"It was a royal marriage. I am too young to remember Queen Egeria, but it is said there was mutual honor and affection, even love, between her and the King. But the needs of the crown are not the same as the choice of a man's heart."

He had seen more than one married couple in Vere treat each other with friendly affection while they reserved their real love for their pets or high status lovers of the same sex. Somehow that seemed different to him. Man and woman should belong only to man and wife, and to take a mistress seemed more a usurpation of his queen's place than if the King had openly acknowledged a male and given him the same benefits and honors. But he could not think how to explain to Nikandros that this was a deeper betrayal than the kind of upperclass adultery easily practiced in his own country, or why it stung him so to see the legitimate son accept it.

He watched them again. Hypermenestra had finished discussing whatever matter she wanted to bring to the Prince's attention, and seemed satisfied with the answer he had given her. She reached towards his face, and he obediently ducked down from his towering height so that he could receive her blessing: a kiss on the forehead, in parting. Her relationship with the King was at least as old as Kastor was - probably older, as he doubted she would have been so bold as to openly bear the King's bastard if their union was not already of some standing - and Kastor was nearly thirty. She had been his mistress then, and was still so now - she would probably keep her place until the end of the King's life, with no marriage vows to secure her. A pet who stayed with a master for so long, or a pair of free lovers who kept their affair for so many decades, would be sung as one of the great romances. Perhaps he could think of no reasons he could give to Nikandros because there were none, other than custom. Still -

"You can choose," Auguste said, "You can make the woman your crown needs the choice of your heart. You can choose to love her like that."

"Is that what you would have done, had you stayed in Vere?"

"I would have tried," said Auguste.

The sword clattered down to the sawdust as Auguste knocked it out of Damianos's hand in the same striking motion that knocked the prince off balance and sent him sprawling to the floor. It had not taken long for this to happen - it was only their third encounter - and for a moment Auguste stood frozen with his sword in his hand, waiting to see how he would react. Around them the men were silent for the first time.
When Damianos leaped up from the ground, he was laughing. He reached his arm towards Auguste as though to clap him on the shoulder in friendly camaraderie - then his eyes caught on Auguste's face and he recoiled in disgust. Then his face smoothed into calm dignity and he offered Auguste his hand to shake, polite but distant, acknowledging the victory only because Damianos himself was too great a man not to do so. Around them, the men made a grudging attempt at applause. Auguste shook Damianos's hand with forced solemnity, biting his lip.

He had never met anyone who showed the world every thought and emotion fleeting through his head the way Damianos did. It was almost impossible not to like him.

"I don't understand," said Auguste, "How you can be so private in so many ways and yet watch things like this without laughing."

They were sitting on a fence in the training grounds watching the young soldiers practice. Nikandros, seeing him walk by, had called him over to sit with them, ignoring Damianos's scowl. He still wasn't sure what Nikandros's game was, but it was very dull in Akielos without anyone to talk to, so he'd taken the invitation up gladly. Before them, the warriors were outdoing themselves displaying for their prince how far they could throw a heavy metal disc. This apparently involved whirling about several times very fast, and Auguste could see how the loose, skirt-like Akielon garments might twist around and get in the way of such an activity - but without them, everyone could see exposed bits of the athlete's body also whirling about very fast. He could not understand how a people who would not even discuss the things lovers did without the most gentle, discreet euphemisms would not bat an eyelash at such a display.

"That was a good throw," said Nikandros, and Damianos looked at him in confusion.

"Not the throw, it's the whole-" he gestured helplessly "-Nevermind."

"What do you do all day then, if you will not enjoy our slaves and find our sports ridiculous aside from the sword?"

"Very little," said Auguste ruefully, "I'd give anything to go riding, but I see why you can't allow that. So it's sword-work in the morning, nice long bath just for something to do, drag my guards on a walk through your gardens, write to Laurent, visit the library ... I feel like I'm back in the schoolroom, all this time indoors."

"Well, we're not letting you out on a horse."

"I said I knew that! I wish I had a chess set though."

"You have someone to play with?" Nikandros inquired.

"My brother. We could play long distance. Each of us sets up a board in his own rooms and we write our moves into our letters."

The Akielons let him write to whoever he wanted, though his correspondence was read. They told him that his correspondence was read, which rather defeated the point of reading someone's correspondence, but he wasn't here to educate his enemies in elementary statecraft.

"Doesn't sound like that would take up very much time."

"Ah, but there is all the time between the letters that I must spend strategizing, predicting what he will do and planning my own moves in response. It could take up hours."
"It's that difficult to defeat a twelve-year-old?"

"He just turned fourteen, actually - and he's very bright, and he pouts whenever he wins because he thinks I've let him, so I have to beat him every time."

"Doesn't Father give you an allowance?"

He did, for the form of it, since the rent Akielos was keeping back from what Vere said was owed to them was supposedly for Auguste's upkeep. It was a pittance, but as his food and basic needs were already provided for, he didn't need much.

"It's not as if I'm allowed to go anywhere to spend it, is it?"

Damianos blinked as if this had not occurred to him before. From another man, he might have expected either to be offered a chess set as a bribe for who knows what, or to be pettily taunted for not being able to buy his own things, especially given the Prince's personal dislike of him. But Damianos just shrugged and said,

"I'll have someone give you the name and address of a merchant you can order from by letter."

"Thank you."

"You know," said Nikandros, "If you really want to get back on a horse, I think you could train for the okton without too great a risk of escape attempts, as long as you do it in an inner courtyard."

"Wonderful idea. Teach the enemy prince how to fight better."

"That'll only be a problem if we ever let him go. Anyway, you're the one who faces him in the ring nearly every morning. If there's a quicker way to make a warrior more dangerous than daily sparring with the best swordsman in the known kingdoms, I'd like to hear of it."

"What's the okton?"

"It's a sport. Spear-throwing at stationary targets while riding a pattern on horseback. I think you'd like it."

"As long as I can wear clothes," said Auguste.

Damianos still did not know what to make of the foreign prince. He found it hard to reconcile the Auguste who had admitted to committing one of the worst crimes a man was capable of with this man who fought well and honorably in the ring, won and lost with equal grace, was polite and friendly to those who held him captive without tripping over into ingratiating, and who took more joy in a new letter from his younger brother than all the pleasures of the court. It was always difficult for Damen to sustain animosity towards anyone whose company he enjoyed, no matter how good his reasons, and he did, grudgingly, enjoy Auguste's company. Their sparring matches, when he could make time for them, were the highlight of his day - the first time he'd faced such a challenge in the ring since he'd gained that last inch on Kastor. Worse, Nikandros liked him. Damen found himself watching the Veretian prince at odd times, wandering into his orbit and trying to figure him out. Sometimes he did not know what he was going to say to Auguste until after realizing that he had approached him.

"So our free women aren't good enough for you either I see."

Auguste whirled back from where he had been watching a disappointed court lady withdraw with
dignity from his company. He looked conflicted.

"No, it's - I could never be with any woman."

"You prefer the touch of a man?" Damen felt his eyebrows raise skeptically. Not only had Auguste refused the more frequent overtures from the young men who were getting to know him in the ring, but he had, for the first few weeks in Ios, lost all his Veretian subtlety in the face of Akielon garments, and it had been obvious whom he had stared at.

"It's Veretian custom. A nobleman must never be with any woman other than his wife."

"That sounds like an edict destined to be scrupulously adhered to."

"It is. Anyone caught in such a relationship would be completely ostracized from the court. It's not worth the risk."

Auguste started to walk away, and Damen followed him.

"You are telling me that high born Veretians never sleep with anyone besides their wives?"

"Any woman. Fucking another man is fine, and the ladies take female lovers. But never men and women together outside the marriage bed. Even to be alone in a room unchaperoned would lead to disgrace."

"But why?"

"Fear of bastards," Auguste said directly, "Bastards are taboo in Vere."

"There are things a woman can do to prevent a pregnancy."

"But not with complete efficiency. What if all your controls fail?"

"Then you raise the child you have made! Kastor is a credit to my father's house. He's served the King in the army along our borders. He shares royal duty in the court and in the halls of judgement. He will be a valued adviser to me when it's time for my own reign."

"I don't mean any personal offense to your brother. He may be an exception to the rule." Auguste said carefully, "But don't you feel that bastards, in general, are more likely to turn against their families? It must cause bitter resentment to see the legitimate son inherit property and titles that would have been theirs if they had been born on the right side of the blanket."

Damen shrugged. "No more so than a younger son should resent seeing his elder brother get everything through an accident of birth order."

Auguste visibly recoiled. "It's not the same! Even if I were still first in line for the throne, Laurent would never betray me for anything."

"Neither would Kastor," Damen said pointedly.

"Kastor has been accepted into your family," Auguste pointed out. "But a bastard in Vere must always be an outsider, and rejection breeds resentment. It's creating an enemy."

Damen could see that. Always the beggar at the feast, never quite part of the family circle: a man raised like that would desire revenge on the family that spurned him. But that was in Vere, where the men had no honor, and did not treat their illegitimate children as a man should. It would not happen here.
"But you are not in Vere anymore. And you have no inheritance to reserve for legitimate heirs."

"I may not be an exile forever. Father could change the sentence, if he recovers, and if he does not
Laurent has already promised to pardon me at once when he's old enough to wrest the Regency
from the Council," Auguste explained, "I can't do anything irrevocable until I know how things
will play out. You can't take back a life created. It would make it so I could really never go back
to Vere, if I soiled the royal line with a bastard."

Damen abruptly stopped moving. Auguste looked back at him in confusion, as if he couldn't
imagine what he had said that would cause the expression of shocked horror that must be on
Damen's face.

"Murdering your uncle is a less permanent bar to the throne than fathering a child?"

"Games are the best way to celebrate a feast day," said Nikandros.

"Build up the appetite," agreed Damianos, "Get the blood pumping."

"And pretty slaves to keep it stirring long after."

Auguste made a face. "You'll both be competing?"

Nikandros nodded. "Different events, mostly, but I expect to come in second to you at the
wrestling," he said, giving Damianos a companionable nudge.

"And second place with the sword as well?"

"Damianos is not taking the sword this year, so I've actually got something of a chance."

"You're not?"

"Kastor has the sword this year," Damianos explained, "We switch off events so that between us,
we're in almost everything, and each man can say that he faced his Prince in honorable
competition."

"And so that they never face each other," Nikandros said wryly, "Kastor does not like to lose."

"No man likes to lose," said Damianos, even though he did seem to like it as much as Auguste did
to know that he faced an equal in the ring, and took no less pride and joy in a fight well fought
when it ended with him in the dust instead of the other way around.

"King Theomedes forbade me from that event as well," said Auguste, whose participation in both
the okton and the sword had been denied on the grounds that it was too dangerous. Most of the
deaths in the games, when they occurred, came from accidents in the okton, which was dangerous
even in practice with the spears blunted and the number of competitors reduced. In real
competition, with true weapons flying among a horde of riders, it would be too great a risk to their
valuable political asset - or at least, that was the excuse. Auguste suspected the true reason was
that he and his horse-sense had started to emerge as the consistent victor in the okton during
practice sessions and the King did not want to see his Akielon warriors defeated by their foreign
prisoner. He wondered if he would have been allowed the sword at least if he would have faced
the Crown Prince, who took him down at least half the time when they fought, rather than the
bastard prince whom he had never tried.

"So you'll be stuck just watching then?"
"Looks like it."

"Unless a man calls for you," said Damianos. August looked at him curiously.

"The champion of any event may ask for the honor of competing with those watching from the dais," he explained, "Usually it's someone from the royal family, but they can ask the privilege of any man. Facing a king or prince holds the greatest honor, so if a man does ask for you instead, you'll know he has designs on your virtue."

"Well, at least you Akielons aren't subtle," said Auguste, laughing.

Auguste was baking in the Akielon sun, but at least the royal pavilion where Auguste, as display prisoner, got to sit with the King and the two Princes when they were not competing, was well shaded and fanned by the strongest of the pleasure slaves, while their less muscular compatriots darted about with water and wine and cold grapes, some of which they placed on a table in Auguste's reach so that they would not, technically, be serving him. He enjoyed the displays rather more than the performances in Vere, once he got used to the nudity. He found himself cheering on men that he recognized from the sparring ring, celebrating their victories and groaning with their defeat. He wished he could have participated - not in the naked games, but in the swordplay, which Kastor won despite Nikandros's best efforts, and the okton, that would finish off the day - but he was surprised at how much fun it was simply to watch.

Damianos was competing again next, and despite his one-sided fondness for the Crown Prince, Auguste was planning to root against him this time because it was not fair that he should win everything he tried. Off to the side, the spear throwers, who would compete after, were already warming up. The competitors in the ring bowed to each other, Damianos's hand went to his lion pin ready to disrobe for the competition, when it happened: a young man, his eyes half on the Prince, fumbled his false-throw and actually let go, and the javelin flew into the ring. It was flying straight towards Damianos's competitor, and the Prince moved instinctively, covering the young man with his huge body and bearing them both to the ground. There was a confusion of images - the unhappy thrower, falling to his knees, neck already bared as though expecting death for his crime; the javelin quivering straight up through Damianos's side; the King, outwardly stoic but privately tense; Kastor leaning forward, the look on his face; and-

Damianos, standing up, unhurt, showing the crowd how the spear had pierced through the side of his chiton and into the earth, narrowly missing his ribs, pulling himself free and helping his companion rise from their tangle of limbs. Theomedes relaxed in his chair and started the applause, while Kastor leaped from his seat with a broad grin and ran to the field, the first to embrace the living heir.

"We almost thought we lost there for a moment, brother," he said, clapping Damianos on his back. "Not today."

"I'm glad of it. Come and show Father that hole in your clothes; he should see how close it came."

And he led Damianos back to the dais where Theomedes could reach for him and touch his arm, ensure himself that his son was whole and well as he obviously wanted to, without showing undue sentiment. Kastor settled back in his chair, his whole being suffused with happy relief. The games continued. Auguste kept his eyes on the bastard, and was silent.
"Auguste!" Nikandros called, "I need to speak to you. In private."

They left the hall, where the feast was shifting from food and drink to drink and food, and walked into the lamp-lit orchards, Auguste's guards trailing them like the wake behind a ship.

"Complete privacy," he clarified, and the guards shifted uneasily, wanting neither to disobey orders nor argue with someone of Nikandros's rank.

"We must keep the prisoner in our line of sight," the chief of them decided, then they stayed against the wall as the two of them walked deeper into the garden, keeping out of the trees and on the broad paths where they might be seen.

"You were in the royal pavilion today, when Prince Damianos fell," Nikandros said when they had passed out of earshot, but it was some time before he spoke again.

"In Vere-" he tried, and then fell silent for several more steps. Around them, the night insects began to chirp, calling their existence into the summer dark.

"If what they say of you is true, then you have seen the look in a man's eye when he turns against his family. Did you see that again in Kastor's eyes this afternoon?"

"I cannot tell you," said Auguste, surprised, "My uncle, he - no one saw anything faithless in him. I did not suspect what he was going to do until he had already done it. I don't know what it looks like."

"But you did see something, today."

"Yes."

"What was it?"

Nikandros fixed him with a look so desperate, pleading, that Auguste appreciated almost for the first time with how young Damianos and Nikandros really were. Young even compared to Auguste, who would still be called a young man.

"I don't know. It happened so fast that I can't be sure what I saw. I know he was leaning forward, eager, hopeful, when we did not know what had happened. It could have been hope that his brother would be all right. But just as he stood up, I saw - I thought I saw - just a flash - of bitter disappointment."

Nikandros leaned back on his heels and sighed.

"Some years ago, I was sent to serve at the Kingsmeet. You would not know what that is - it's an Akielon place. Suffice to say that it is sacred, and the youths who serve there do so in isolation. Maybe the sanctity of that place gave me insight, or maybe it was just that the time away gave the clarity of distance. But when I came back, that was when I first saw something dark in Kastor: the jealousy, the resentment. I thought I was imagining things, at first. This was Prince Kastor, the honored, the noble. This was Prince Kastor, who had the King's ear and the Prince's heart. No one else seemed to see it - surely I must be wrong. But now my eyes were opened, and that was all I saw. And now, you've seen it too."

"You wish to denounce him."

"For what? He's done nothing wrong. You cannot condemn a man for a false look in his eyes, especially not when he hides it so well. The King and the Prince will hear nothing against him."
"So what do you want us to do then?"

"Keep watch," he said, nodding to the guards who stood steady at their post.

"I am going back to Delpha at the end of midsummer," Nikandros continued, "I have to help my father rule the province, and learn to take over for him. I want you to keep an eye on Damianos for me, while I am gone."

"He hates me," Auguste pointed out.

Nikandros grinned. "No, he doesn't. He thinks he ought to hate you because of what you've done. That's an entirely different thing."

"You are putting an awful lot of faith in an enemy prince."

"Yes, I am." Nikandros reached out and clasped Auguste's arm. "Don't prove unworthy of it."

He stepped back, and dropped his fierce gaze from Auguste's face.

"Come on. We should get back to the feast."

Auguste followed, awkwardly, feeling more out of place at this court than he had since coming. He had thought he was beginning to understand these people: straightforward, open. Now they seemed as treacherous as the court he'd left behind, but utterly unprepared for this deception. He saw Damianos joking with his arm around his brother's shoulders, and grabbed a goblet of wine. "No more resentful than a younger son" indeed. Laurent would never look on him with frustration and bitterness. Laurent would never triumph at his downfall. Laurent would never, in any way, betray him. This was all the Akielons fault, their disgusting practice of making and keeping bastards, thinking that they could ever be something other than what they were.

It wasn't until he stumbled into bed that night, exhausted and head-swimming, that he remembered that his uncle had been his father's younger brother too.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for getting this in so late! It changed more in draft than any chapter so far. The next chapter should still be up the Monday after next. Hope you like it!
Two Princes

Chapter Summary

Damianos and Auguste attend a wine festival.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings apply.

There would be a greater harvest festival at the end of autumn, similar to the one in Vere, when all of the crops had been gathered in and it was the last chance to enjoy fresh food before everything was prepared for winter storage. But warm Akielos, rich in summer fruits, experienced a continual harvest from the middle of spring through to the first frost, and it was dotted with smaller festivals celebrating each of the gifts of the earth. The first brush of autumn was on the land, summer's heat slackening in unpredictable fits and spurts. The first of the red grapes were being harvested, and the bulk of the whites, while the earliest white grapes had already been plucked and pressed and, if not properly aged, at least fermented long enough to be potable. It was time for the wine festival. Tradition dictated that the first taste of the new wine be given to the King or, in his stead, one of the Princes. This year, it was Damianos's turn to be honored, and - having nothing else to do, and still affected by Theomedes's desire to show off his country to the foreign prisoner - Auguste was going with him.

There was, not surprisingly, a lot of drinking at the wine festival. He was given to understand that at least part of its purpose to use up a portion of the last year's wine to make room in the stores for what was being harvested now. The new wine would be served, ceremonially, at sunset; throughout the day, there were courses of old wine, red and white and sweet and dry and firm and soft. Auguste was keeping moderation. Nikandros had left for the border several weeks ago now, but his going away party had been gifted with several barrels of some dangerous border-drink called "griva," and Auguste shied away from over-indulgence now, fancying the inside of his head still tender from it. Damianos, too, was pacing himself, though for different reasons.

"The aged wine tastes better than the fresh," Damianos had said, holding aloft their first round, "But the more of the new wine you drink later, the greater the compliment to the wine-makers. And the more grateful they are - well." And he cast a roving eye over the women pounding the grapes.

That was the main part of the wine festival: showing the start of the wine making to their rulers, using for the demonstration not the best and most-experienced, but the new blood coming into their own, for whom this would be their first season out of their apprenticeship. This performance was their initiation. Huge vats had been brought to the clifftops, filled with white grapes to be pressed in the traditional manner. Maidens, from barely out of the schoolroom to well into their first blush of womanhood, had their feet bathed by slaves (the first and only time they could expect such
attentions) before being helped into the vats. Still topless in deference to the last of the summer heat, their long skirts pinned up to their waists so that only the tops of their thighs were covered, they placed their hands on their hips and moved their legs in a rhythmic pounding that sent juices running down a sluice at the bottom of the vat to be collected by the young men who ran to and fro. Their brown bare feet against the yellow-green of the grapes; liquid shining on their calves and running down in smooth drops; the muscles of their thighs in constant motion; bare breasts, bare shoulders, bare arms, bare necks; the sun on their faces as they tossed their hair and called to each other in light voices - Akielon women were actively trying to kill him.

Auguste took another sip of wine and glanced away, but it barely lasted between one breath and the next before temptation brought his eyes back.

There was singing too, and dancing, to break up the monotony of the wine press: professional performances by the palace slaves interspersed with the traditional songs of the peasants. At midday, a fresh shift of maidens was brought into the vats, the ones stepping out having buckets of water poured over them, unembarrassed, to cool their skin and rinse off most of the fruit pulp before they went off to bathe fully. Damianos would be slipping away from the feast with at least one of these women later that night, and Auguste abruptly hated him like fire.

The new women had begun a song in an old traditional dialect that Auguste, despite his vast improvement in Akielon, could not understand. He thought it was about the wine-pressing itself - both because he caught the word "grapes" several times, and because it fit the rhythm of the pounding so well. There were choreographed jumps too, where at regular intervals the women would leap up as one and come down with both feet on the pulp. The wine in his hand was almost too warm to drink in the afternoon sun, but he sipped at it languidly, letting the sound of their voices drift over him. He should not be enjoying the dance this much, but the music was soothing and the heat made him sleepy, so he let his gaze linger. One of the dancers caught his eye and winked at him. Knowing he couldn't finish anything he started, Auguste looked away.

Which was the moment that one of the support beams holding the great vats in place gave way with a loud crack.

Auguste jumped up and ran forward, along with most of the crowd of spectators. In the damaged vat, the women were panicking, trying to push their way through the fruit pulp to the side where they could get out, as it tipped precariously forward. The remaining support beams creaked and groaned under the added stress until a second snapped and caused another scream to go through the crowd. There were too many people gathered around, trying to help the women out, doing more harm than good as they first got in each other's way trying to grab the trapped winemakers, then fell back with a little cry every time the vat shifted, abandoning them again.

Damianos cupped both hands around his mouth and began shouting orders, getting most of the crowd to retreat down the hill while assigning Auguste's guards, his own, and a few other strong looking men to help extract the women. The soldiers and their companions flinched every time the vat moved, but they did not move, and the rescue effort was moving more orderly as they grabbed long brown arms and heaved bodies onto the solid earth.

But the supports were snapping more quickly now, unable to take the weight on their own, and Auguste moved forward to help before it was too late. Damianos grabbed his arm.

"I'm strong enough to-"

"I know. But we cannot risk the foreign prince. If you were hurt in this, it would be pretext for
Auguste nearly argued, but he said it with regret, not scorn, so he turned back and continued watching the scene he was powerless to help. Almost everyone was free and clear now, but the vat was nearly on its side, spilling grapes and liquid onto the dry ground. One crack - then shortly another - then the last three supports went, rat-a-tat-tat, and the round side of the vat was on the ground. They would have been alright if it had continued tipping over until it fell on its top, or even perhaps if they had been on even ground. But the land on the clifftop was riven with narrow dips and rises, and the vat began to roll down.

The men leaped out of the way, one of them grabbing one of the rescued women who was in the vat's path and rolling her to safety in a great somersault. There was still one winemaker left in the vat as it fell, but she bounced out in the first few moments and got shakily to her feet. The other women who lingered had the sense to get out of the way - but the youngest of them, dazed and no older than sixteen, began to run, not sideways, out of its trajectory, but forward, ahead of it. The vat chased her towards the cliff, emptying fruit all the way, beginning to slow as it neared the edge where the incline shifted and began to rise. Trapped between a long drop and being crushed, she finally leaped to the side, and would have escaped but - the vat teetered on the edge, and then slowly, the way a coin will when it's lost momentum after rolling on its side, stopped and righted itself, falling with its bottom down directly on her legs. The force of the impact sent a scattering of rocks down the cliff face.

Damianos barked a short series of orders, and the men who had been involved with the rescue gathered around the vat and prepared to lift it off the girl.

"On my count," he said, but as he shouted "heave" and the men started to lift, the rock crumbled away under the feet of the man closest to the cliffs edge and he had to throw himself on his closest companion to keep from falling. They both staggered back as more of the rockface began to crumble beneath them.

Damianos frowned and sent the civilians back down the mountain, instructing the men of the guard into new positions further back and trying again. But with their fewer numbers, they had no choice but to try to tilt the vat up and over the cliff instead of lifting it outright, and ground was falling away in every place they picked for leverage. The earth here must have been very unstable, and soon the girl was hanging with her legs trapped under the vat and her arm and half her torso hanging out in mid-air as more and more of the land fell away beneath her. On the fifth attempt, the soldiers stopped short when the ground trembled between their feet.

Damianos examined the situation. "Nothing can be done here without further help. You two go down to the city and bring what engineers and machinists you can find, along with ropes and pulleys. You report to the palace and tell the king what has occurred. The rest of you continue to encourage the retreating crowd to move along and see if anyone needs medical assistance."

The soldiers ran to follow their orders, but Damianos crouched by the girl's face, as close as he dared, and began talking softly to her, words Auguste could not hear over the panicked sound of her dry sobs. Not having been given any orders himself, Auguste stayed to watch, glancing back and forth between the trail, where help would come, and the girl still trapped beneath the wine vat, huge and heavy.

Something must have happened, some shifting of the earth that Auguste could not see, because when he turned back, Damianos was no longer waiting for men with knowledge and tools, but was bracing his feet by the edge of the vat, hands curled under its edge. *That moron's going to try to lift the thing by himself*, Auguste thought, and ran beside him.
"You cannot risk-"

"Put it down and stop me then," Auguste said, and then there was no time for further arguments.

Impossibly, Damianos had managed to shift the thing a little by the time Auguste got there, and there was some space for Auguste to put his hands. They had to bend quite low, but with the two of them putting their shoulders into it, the did manage to raise it a little. As soon as she was able, the girl beneath them began to crawl forward on her hands, crying out each time her injured legs were jostled, but still scrambling forward as quickly as she could, dragging her injured legs behind her. Auguste's arms strained as he struggled to hold the vat just those inches off the ground that she needed to pull herself away, and even Damianos's great biceps were trembling with the effort. The ground beneath them cracked ominously.

When the girl's bare foot passed the shadow of the vat, they dropped it as one and turned to run towards the safety of firm ground. Too late - the cliff fell away beneath them, and plunged into empty air. The last thing Auguste saw before the confusion of the drop was the girl, barely balanced on the edge of the new precipice, swinging her shattered legs behind her as she spun on her hip, reaching her arm towards Damianos for all the world as if she would grab her massive prince and pull his weight to safety.

Perhaps she would have, if she had reached him. Akielons.

The water closed over Damen's head, tumbling him under the waves. He was too smart to fight the waves, and too disoriented - toppling, breathless, unsure which way was up or down, where was the shore - to move with them, so he let himself go limp, sinking down until the undertow caught him and dragged him out. He didn't try to move until he surfaced, when he tried to hold his place until he could catch his breath and figure out where he was. A flash of white-hot pain surged through him when he kicked - his calf, perhaps, or his ankle - something was injured in the lower part of his right leg. He wouldn't be able to tell how bad it was until he reached land and could examine it. Floating, he took stock of the rest of his body and decided he was hale and whole everywhere else. He had been lucky. Tremendously lucky. He could have plunged into the shallows and wrecked his body on the seabed; he could have smashed into the rocks scattered at the foot of the cliff or been dashed against it by the waves; he could have been struck by that damn wine vat as it fell; and even if he had avoided all that, he had fallen from a height that could easily be neck-breaking if he'd hit the water at the wrong angle. Instead he'd somehow managed a clean landing, feet first (possibly how he had acquired the injury, thought the motion of the waves afterward may have twisted something too) into deep water and been carried swiftly out past the breakers, where it was relatively safe. He should be holding fairly steady in this part of the ocean, but as he looked back to the cliff he became aware that he was still being drawn further out, even though he was past the place where the undertow should have an affect. He must be caught in one of those narrow currents that fed unwary swimmers to the depths of the ocean, which was a greater problem given his injury, but still nothing he had not known how to get out of since he was a boy.

Damen looked around to see if Auguste had survived and was in the same position. He would be surprised if any prince could grow to manhood without learning to swim, but while Vere did have a coastline, he remembered from maps that the capital was pretty far inland, and he did not know how much experience with ocean swimming a Veretian prince would be likely to have. He found Auguste a brief distance away, apparently uninjured and swimming with strong, graceful movements, as swift and sure as the world's dumbest seal: directly against the current, pushed back two yards for every one he gained.

"Swim sideways!" Damen shouted.
Auguste turned and looked back. "You're alive!"

"Sideways!"

"What?"

"With the shoreline!" Damen turned and began making his own awkward way out of the current with strong strokes of his arms, but wary of kicking even with his good leg lest it jostle the injured one and do further harm. He did not look to see if Auguste was following his directions - if Auguste was too foolish to heed either his words or his example, that was not Damen's responsibility - but when he finally felt the sea still past the edge of the current, and stopped to catch his breath, Auguste was swimming back to him.

"You are hurt. Do you need help?"

"I can manage. We should make our way back to land before our strength gives out."

Auguste nodded and began swimming back towards the shoreline, then stopped some distance away and turned back towards Damen, treading water until Damen reached him and then darting off again. In this way they traveled back to the beach. It was somewhat insulting, and it was on Damen's mind many times to tell him to stop and go ahead, but Damen knew that he might need the help of a strong man when they reached the shallows and he would have to walk through the waves.

The strange current had pushed them out far enough that the waves had much opportunity to shift their course during the long journey back. Though they had made for the shoreline in as straight a line as they could manage, the movement of the water had pushed them sideways, and their path was really on a diagonal - one made more severe by Damianos's injury, which had slowed them down and made them more susceptible to the gradual manipulations of the waves. By the time they reached the shore, the cliffs they had fallen from were out of sight, and they landed on a true beach with rocky sand, where the brushes and beachgrass came almost to the waterline, and turned quickly into low, twisted trees behind it.

"It's either a very minor break or a very bad sprain," said Damianos, examining the skin that had turned red-brown around the swelling just above his ankle, low enough that it was hard to tell whether it was the joint or the bone of his calf that was injured, "Either way, it will need to be wrapped before we move on."

Auguste looked around the unfamiliar wilderness in which they found themselves. "What do you suppose are the chances of a physician wandering out of the bushes?"

"Not good," Damianos said, smirking, "But it's nothing we can't handle ourselves."

Auguste blinked at him.

"You cannot make a splint?"

He did not know why Damianos looked so surprised at that. "Of course I cannot make a splint! I was born a prince. If I or any of my companions were injured, others would see to it for me."

"But what if you were separated from your men, and injured, perhaps badly? Could you treat yourself well enough to make it back to your troops, or survive until you were found?"

"Probably not, but it's not a very likely scenario, is it?"
Damianos did not say that they were in such a scenario right now, but he held the silence just long enough that Auguste heard it just the same. "Anything can happen on a campaign," he said instead.

"So your field surgeons taught you what to do?"

"My father did. It is part of a prince's training for war in Akielos."

"I suppose you'd better talk me through it, then."

"I can do the actual wrapping myself. But one of us will have to sacrifice part of his clothing for strips of cloth." He eyed the bottom of Auguste's tunic, which was about as short as an Akielon chiton, but worn over pants. "It is a lucky thing that you wear so many unnecessary layers."

Auguste snorted.

"I know where we are," Damianos said, when he had finally accepted the stick Auguste had cut as "straight enough" and wrapped his ankle to his satisfaction, "I have hunted here before. The way back to Ios lies over the hill, but if you skirt along the beach to the west, you will come to a port by the end of the day. There will be ships there bound for Patras, or for Vere, if you prefer."

It would be difficult to obtain passage with torn clothing and no money, especially if the palace guards who were no doubt searching for the two lost princes thought to look for blond hair that far down the coast. But he thought it could be managed, with time and thought.

"I appreciate the offer, and I do not mean to disparage the skill of your guardsmen," said Auguste, "But if I had anyplace to go where I truly wanted to be, do you really think you could have held me this long?"

Damianos gave him a look as if to say that he thought exactly that.

"The only place I want to go is home, but I am still exiled. Any other place is - is treading water."

"Then we'd better get started then," he said, awkwardly getting to his feet with the help of a sturdy branch, "It would be good to reach the top of the hill before nightfall."

It probably would have been an easier walk up the hill if Damianos had allowed Auguste to support him, arm slung around his shoulder, but there was a stubborn pride in Damianos's eyes as he leaned on his makeshift staff that made Auguste know better than to offer. As they walked, gratingly slowly to match the best pace Damianos could make on one leg, the Crown Prince tried to correct what he seemed to feel were the more egregious gaps in Auguste's knowledge. When this consisted of telling him which of the nuts and fruits on the trees they passed were edible (and ripe enough in this season not to make them sick), Auguste was grateful - for while they had been well fed at the wine festival, the long swim afterward had left them both ravenous, and Auguste could leave the winding goat-trail they were following to pick enough for them both and then easily catch up to what progress Damianos had made while he'd been harvesting. But the medical knowledge, while impressive, was far less useful. Yes, he supposed it was good to know that the huge spiky leaves that grew in clusters up the hillside contained within them a natural salve good for treating burns that you could get at as easily as splitting one open. But the plants that Damianos pointed out as useful for grinding into a poultice to prevent a wound from getting infected or encourage the natural staunching of blood looked exactly the same to him as any other
small, green, leafy plants in the world, even when he could tell which ones Damianos was pointing at, which was not always. He was tired and hungry and frustrated by the necessity of their slow progress. So when Damianos went on to intone that it was necessary to clean a wound before dressing it Auguste snapped,

"Yes, thank you, I am not entirely helpless."

Damianos was quiet for a time, then he began laughing privately to himself.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking ... I bet you know how to do that ridiculous kind of Veretian riding. The funny-looking one, where you make the horses dance."

At first, Auguste did not know what he was talking about. Then, "Dressage? Yes, I can do dressage. What of it?"

Damianos huffed. "Showy Veretians. You don't bother learning how to take care of yourself in an emergency, but you'll devote time and energy to this stupid, useless thing."

"Dressage doesn't have a point to it," Auguste said angrily, "Practicing it doesn't make you better at anything but itself, and it serves no purpose but to be beautiful. And it is beautiful - for the watchers, because of the lines and the movement, but even more so for the competitors: the connection between you and the horse, the communication between animal and rider, that's a beautiful thing. It's purely ornamental. So what? Isn't beauty enough of a reason for a thing to exist? Brutish Akielons. Even this healing you have been teaching me is something you learned for war, tricks to keep you alive long enough to fight again. Does everything have to make you better at killing in order to be worthwhile?"

Damianos was silent for a long time after that. In fact, they exchanged no words other than on practical matters of the journey in the remaining hours until they finally reached the crest of the hill, just at sunset. Before them the land dipped down into a valley, the outskirts of the city spreading out before them, then rose again to the clifftops of Ios with the marble palace directly across from them. The light of the setting sun caught the white stone in such a way that it seemed to glow, every parallel line and simple geometric shape shining out into the darkening sky.

"There is not one useless frill or garnish, not a single hint of frippery, in the whole of that place," said Damianos quietly, his eyes fixed on his palace in the distance, not looking to see if Auguste was looking that way too, as if he knew it had to catch his gaze, "But if you can't see beauty there, then I don't know what you mean by the word."

"Yeah, that's not bad to look at," Auguste admitted. The warmth in his voice surprised him, so he added, "Not saying it couldn't be improved with a bit of a flounce though."

And he laughed as Damianos snorted in disgust.

They had decided that making the trip down the hillside in the gathering dark would have been foolish even without Damen's injured leg to contend with, so they'd made camp up on the peak of the hill. Auguste had made a fire (that he did know how to do without aid) to keep the wild beasts at bay, and they lay now by the side of it, staring up into the stars. Damen wished he had said more in defense of his country's aesthetic. His people valued simplicity in their architecture and their clothing, but that did not mean that these were without beauty of their own kind - subtler than
Veretian ostentation, but all the more powerful for it. And there were things valued here that had no purpose beyond their own appreciation: ancient songs and poems; the melodies of the kithara; lithe, pleasing dances. But these arts were the purview of the palace slaves. Damen knew that making them the performers of these great works was one of the ways his people honored the slaves, but he suspected that Auguste would see it as devaluing the arts, and he could not find the ways to explain how that was not true. He felt twisted round by Auguste whenever they argued about the slaves.

Auguste was a man who made no sense. What Damen had always known to be true of him, and what he had come to know over the weeks of Auguste's captivity - they did not fit.

The smoke traveled up to the sky, and the firelight played over Auguste's golden hair.

"Why did you kill your uncle?" Damen said, into the silence.

"If I would not tell the governing Council of my own land to preserve me from exile," Auguste answered, "What makes you think I would tell you?"

"Nikandros has always thought that your silence speaks well of you, that you would not lie," Damen said slowly, "But why wouldn't you speak out, unless you were ashamed of the truth."

"I am ashamed," said Auguste, "Not of what I did, but what he'd done. There are things - things a man can do that bring shame on his entire family. I would kill him again before all the world and feel no trace of guilt. But I would not have anyone know that my own father's brother was capable of - of doing what he did."

It wasn't much of an answer, but Damen let it settle in, considering.

Wordlessly, he extended the hand between them - elbow still in the dirt, forearm straight up in the air. Auguste looked confused at first, as though he did not know what the gesture meant, then he reached out and clasped Damen's hand, firm and tight, as a man and an equal. No more needed to be said.

Excerpt from a longer letter by Auguste, first son of King Aleron and sometime Crown Prince of Vere, to his younger brother Prince Laurent:

... We had planned to make our way down the hill at dawn, but luckily the light from the fire caught the attention of the search party from the palace, and they found us in the middle of the night and brought us back on horses. King Theomedes was overjoyed to see his son, of course, but I think he's more suspicious of me than he was before. He kept looking at me sideways as though he suspected my brave and valiant heroism (which I expect you to be duly impressed by) was some sort of ploy to ingratiate myself. But never say that the Akielons are not fair, for despite his misgivings he proclaimed his own and the nation's gratitude, formally ended my captivity, and granted me free passage through all his lands and safe travel to any place I wanted to go.

If the Council would welcome me back, I would come home. Laurent, I promise you I would. But with the situation no better than it was, I think I need to stay in Akielos. Our nations have been enemies time out of mind, but it does not need to always be that way. King Theomedes has perhaps clung to our enmity too long to ever let it go, but with the younger generation there is hope. I see the possibility of genuine friendship between myself and Prince Damianos. I am not naive. I know that fellow-feeling among two nations' royal families do not make a peace. Kingdoms will have different needs and purposes, and those may clash beyond the capabilities of diplomacy no matter how the rulers feel. But understanding and good intentions between those involved helps.
is any chance to build something here that may, in the future, help break the cycle of suspicion and retribution we have been caught in for centuries, then I have to stay and see it through. There will be no going back to Patras.

King Theomedes was not well-pleased by my decision, but he could not be so churlish as to refuse hospitality to the man who helped recover his son. When next I write you, I shall do so freely as official guest of the Akielon court ....

The answering letter of Laurent, Crown Prince of Vere, in its entirety:

My dear brother Auguste,

If you are my dear brother Auguste, about which I have serious doubts, as I don't recall my brother being an idiot, and yet now you propose to stay, voluntarily, as the guest of the enemy nation that for months held you captive as a prisoner of war, out of a dubious hope for future peace to be gained through friendship with the man who stabbed you. Nevertheless, presuming you are in fact Auguste, think back to the very last words I spoke to you when we last met face to face. (That is, of course, if whatever brain fever that convinced you staying in Akielos was a good idea doesn’t prevent you from remembering them.) I think I can get away for a fortnight starting six weeks before my birthday. If you are not an impostor, you will understand me well enough, so please confirm or deny with your next letter.

Love,

your dear (if irritated) brother Laurent

Chapter End Notes

(In the canon timeline, this did not happen because the woman who winked at Auguste noticed that the vat was unstable in time to avert disaster, but here she was distracted by the hot foreign prince obviously checking her out.)

Once again I am apologizing for lateness. I lost about a thousand words when my computer froze too long after my last save and I know that's not so much but I got pouty-faced about it and didn't want to work on it anymore for several days. :( I will try very hard not to let this happen yet again. Next chapter has Laurent!
"I know exactly how it would have been. You and Auguste would have been slapping each other on the back and watching tournaments, and I would have been trailing around tugging on your sleeve."

"You promised my father," said Damen, "That you would not use your leave from us to return to Vere."

King Theomedes had been suspicious of Auguste's request to spend two weeks hunting, alone, after visiting Nikandros at Delpha - too close to the border, too close to temptation. Damen had pointed out that they'd given Auguste leave to go wherever he would, but his father had disliked the idea of the exiled prince returning from their lands without permission. It would have been forgiven, in the immediate aftermath of Auguste's "rescue" of the Akielon Crown Prince (although Damen could certainly have made it home without his friend's help), but half a year had passed since then, the full force of autumn coming upon the land and all of winter following it, and here in the middle of spring, Theomedes thought it likely to cause diplomatic incident. So he had required an oath from Auguste, who swore that he had no intentions of using his proximity to return to Vere. That had been enough for Damen, but his father would accept the word of no Veretian, not even Auguste, and had ordered Damen to follow him, in secret, and see where he would go. He had been certain that his following would only prove his father wrong, but now Damen was standing across the border, at the back entrance to what was clearly a Veretian keep, having arrived only minutes after Auguste himself.

"And I have kept my promise."

"You say that, even standing where we are now!"

"But we are not in Vere right now," said Auguste, smirking. He threw out his arms, "Welcome, our brother-prince of Akielos, to the independent principality of Acquitart."

"I don't believe I've ever seen an independent principality on your maps," said Damen.

"You wouldn't. It's so tiny they never bother drawing the borders - looks just like a fort inside of Alier. But it's not. This is its own place, held by the royal family of Vere, and the Council has no authority over it. They can make whatever decisions they like, but this will always be mine."

He looked about him, and it was as though he wrapped himself in princeliness like a cloak. Auguste was always confident, regal - but even at Marlas, Damen had only seen him as a foreign
prince, away from his home and his court. Now, he began to look like a man not only born to rule but in the place that he ruled. It suited him.

"Or, well, technically it belongs to my father, but he's indisposed and I'm still the heir. I wonder if the Council's thought of that yet, that they've removed me from the succession of Vere but not Acquitart. Probably not. I forgot about this place myself, until Laurent reminded me. We always overlook what's small."

An old man, gray-haired but still walking easily, came around the corner then and took their horses.

"And this is our subject Arnoul," said Auguste, brightening again, "He's the caretaker."

"I'm not your only subject, Your Highness," he said, as he led the horses towards the stable, "There's a village."

"A whole village?" asked Damen, amused.

"They grow turnips."

"I don't think I've ever had a turnip."

Auguste's eyes lit up. "Oh, they're a rare Veretian delicacy."

He looked like he was going to say something else, when the sound of hoofbeats - pounding ones, a fine horse, not some peasant's nag - came from beyond the keep and Auguste was running through the back door and straight through the fort until he shot through the front entrance, Damen trailing awkwardly after him. He reached the outer wall just in time to see a blond older boy tear down the road and halt his horse in front of the doorway. He leapt from the saddle into Auguste's arms, and Damen recognized him as Prince Laurent of Vere, a year older than he had been at Marlas.

"You came!" Laurent babbled, as Auguste whirled him around twice before setting him down, still embracing, "I know you said you would, but I thought those barbarians might find a way to keep you or something else might have gone wrong but you're here and I have so much to tell you and -"

The young prince froze as he caught sight of Damen lingering in the doorway.

"You brought the man who stabbed you." It was startling to hear such an icy tone from a small mouth.

"He brought himself," said Auguste good-naturedly, his hands still on his brother's shoulders, "But now he's here, we might as well let him stay. We must show hospitality, after all."

"I don't quite understand. Are we receiving a diplomatic visit from foreign royalty in a crumbling fort with no staff, or welcoming our ancient enemy who has already shed our blood to an intimate gathering in our ancestral homeland?"

"'We' are treating your brother's friend like any other guest," said Auguste, and they glared at each other in silent argument, Auguste's eyebrows raised and Laurent scowling.

"I won't get in the way of your reunion with your brother," Damen promised, and Laurent looked at him.

"No, you won't." He grabbed Auguste's arm and began dragging him inside.
"I'll send Arnoul to set you up in a guest room," Auguste called back over his shoulder, before following Laurent away for some private discussion.

Arnoul set the last of the platters on the table, and Laurent waited until he left the room before leaning across the table and hissing, worried,

"Is something wrong with Acquitart's finances?"

"Nothing more than usual, as far as I know," said Auguste.

"Has there been a famine?"

"Again, not as far as I know, though you would be better informed than me."

"Then why do all the dishes contain turnips?"

Next to Auguste, Prince Damianos, who had already eaten a heap of them with an expression of fixed diplomatic approval, snorted.

"Rare Veretian delicacy?" he asked.

And Auguste lost himself laughing.

Laurent was in no mood to have his dinner ruined by practical jokes, especially jokes that he was not in on. "I don't like turnips," he said, pushing them around on his plate. Then, looking at Damen with smug superiority, "They're peasant food."

"They are," Auguste admitted, wiping his eyes, "Their main benefits are that they're filling and grow pretty well in soil unsuited for other crops. They must not take too well down south, and as our esteemed guest has never had them before, I thought it best to that he be given full opportunity to sample Acquitart's chief delight."

Damen attempted to share a look of commiseration with Laurent, but he dodged his gaze.

"They take other flavors pretty well, even if they're not much in themselves," said Auguste. He dipped a lump of the pale vegetable in one of the rich sauces that accompanied the dish and brought it to his mouth as if in demonstration.

"Root vegetable, I'm guessing, based on the texture," said Damianos, mimicking Auguste's movements, and he nodded as if there had been an improvement. "Hmm. Not my favorite flavor, but hearty."

Laurent called for Arnoul to bring him some decent food, trying not to feel like a spoiled child.

Laurent slept late the next morning in the way of growing boys, so Damen, who had spent much of the previous day entertaining himself in order to give the brothers time alone, felt no guilt about dragging Auguste down to what was left of the practice ground and chasing him about with a sword. The keep was in poor repair, all crumbling walls and vines in the paving stones, but it was clear that it had once been important, long long ago, and it was still outfitted to hold a military force that would likely never be stationed there again.

Sparring with Auguste was always invigorating, and after the loneliness of the previous day Damen cherished all of the time with him, the shouting and the trash-talk, each clash of the sword. Until,
of course, the younger brother finally emerged in the late hours of the morning.

"We should go for a ride, down to the river," said Auguste, wiping his face with the towel Laurent had handed him when he made his way to the edge of the sawdust, "I could do with a swim before lunch."

"Yes, let's, I haven't been on the runs around here ... well since the last time I came down with you, now I think on it."

"A nice refresher for both of us, then. You coming, Damen?"

"So long as I'm welcome to join you." Damen remembered being a boy Laurent's age, trotting along after Kastor and desperate to prove himself. Being included with Kastor's friends had meant the world to him, when it had happened, but he could only imagine how he would feel if they had been separated from one another as long as the Veretian princes and some lumbering foreigner had intruded on their time.

"Course you're welcome," said Auguste breezily, ignoring the look from his brother that said that Damen very much was not, "I want to see how these Akielon horses do on Veretian terrain."

"We are not so far from the border as that," said Damen, but he went along to the stables with them.

Auguste had claimed to be hunting in solitude, Damen had followed him in secret, and somehow young Laurent had managed to slip away alone - so the three of them were without guards or retainers. The keep's staff seemed to be practically nonexistent, so for the most part the three princes fended for themselves with anything they did not want to bother Arnoul for, and they saddled their own horses like old campaigners. Damen liked it - it felt like playing the truant, sneaking away from his duties as he had as a boy, despite the fact that he was here on his father's orders. Laurent seemed to feel the same, chucking over and talking to his horse in the most carefree manner, then abruptly pretending he was too old for such nonsense when he remembered his brother was watching. Damen hid a smile.

"Shall we make it a race?" Auguste asked, when they were all in the saddle.

"So long as you don't let me win," Laurent said sharply.

"When have I ever?" said Auguste, one hand on his chest and his face the very picture of outraged innocence.

"Every time we ever rode until I was nine! I spent my entire childhood convinced that I had a very fast pony!"

Damen laughed, and Laurent whirled round to glare at him.

"I shall not let you win," Damen assured him.

Laurent raised an eyebrow. "And I suppose I am to thank you for that?"

"At least you shall know that how you fare against me is a measure of your true skill."

Laurent sniffed.

Then Damen realized that Auguste had taken off while they were talking and spurred heels after him, Laurent trailing belatedly behind and shouting that they were both cheaters.
The days in Acquitart had turned into a pattern: sparring with Auguste in the morning, riding together with Auguste and Laurent after the latter finally emerged from his bedchamber (sometimes to the river, sometimes along one of the other trails that stretched into the rocky hills around the keep), letting the two brothers enjoy each other's company in private for the afternoon (and dealing with being phenomenally bored), then coming back together for the evening meal. The nights were deliciously cool in the spring, and they had taken to making a fire out in one of the courtyards or gardens nearly every night as though they were camped out, looking up at the stars and telling whatever fire tales one could tell in front of a boy. Sometimes Laurent rose before they had finished their sparring and came down to watch them, sitting on the fence by the training ground with a heavy book on his lap. He pretended to be too busy reading to notice whenever Damen won, but whooped loudly whenever his brother triumphed.

"I don't understand why you both get up at such ungodly hours to whack each other with swords anyway," said Laurent, as he turned a page.

"We don't need to lay slug-a-bed anymore," said Auguste, walking up to him. "Our bones don't stretch while we're asleep." And he tugged at one of Laurent's ankles, grinning with sincere affection.

"You should join us some morning," said Damen, "I'm sure your tutors would be impressed with your continued practice."

Laurent gave him a quelling look, and maybe it was not Damen's place to nag the boy about his studies, but it galled him to see him there sitting still while they worked. Laurent was a child still, but not for much longer. He was staring down at manhood as if on the crest of a hill, about to start the tumble downwards, and it was long past time he started preparing. Auguste seemed content to indulge him yet, but Damen had been facing grown men in the ring (for learning purposes, if not true competition) for years at that age, and judging by his skill, he would wager that Auguste had been too.

"Thank you for your free advice, but I believe I am managing my time in a more valuable manner," he said, turning back to his book.

"I never said books weren't valuable, but exercise keeps the mind sharp too," Damen argued, "It clears your head, let's you turn to what's next with a fresh mind."

"Perhaps my mind is large enough to take in new information without needing to 'clear out' something old," he returned, and Damen shook his head and let him be.

On the first full day that Auguste and the barbarian had spent in Acquitart, Auguste had cheated on the race, and the barbarian prince had been quicker to catch on to it than Laurent had been. (This still galled him, as it showed that Auguste still did not take competition with his little brother seriously - he would never cheat in a real match - but it also pleased him, as with all that had happened, it had been a long time since Laurent had seen a playful, teasing Auguste. He still did not know which he felt more.) Auguste refused to race in the hills, citing the treacherous nature of the rocky trails and that their "guest" did not know them. (Prince Damianos always ruined everything.) So it was some days before they were able to have a race again. But when he finally declared that it was a fine day for a swim, and should they see whose horse was fastest today? Laurent was thrilled.

"We start together," he said, glaring at his brother. Auguste laughed and looked sheepish.
Laurent was almost as good as Auguste at riding - or at least, he thought he was. When you were a prince, it was difficult to tell whether your victories were earned or simply politic. But he was nearly certain that he really was very good.

"Try to keep up with me," said Laurent airily, "I want to show you what I can do."

Auguste won, as instructed - though he was tempted to hang back just a little and justify Laurent's boasting. But he had promised years ago that he would not let his little brother win any longer, so trounce him he would. Still, he was surprised to reach the river with the sound of Laurent's hooves right behind him.

"Did you see that? Of course you didn't, you're in front, but I finished right by your flank! We were really close! And I totally drubbed the Prince of Akielos, ha, I'm the best!"

Damen was a little close behind him to justify that degree of victory celebration, but he allowed it with good humor. "It was well done of you."

Laurent looked back at the grown man he had defeated, and straightened himself up, all princely dignity in a moment. "Thank you," he said, with adult calm.

"Come on and tie up the horses; let's go for that swim!" said Auguste.

"It's so hot," Laurent moaned, as they sat around the campfire.

"Roasting," Auguste agreed, as he flopped on his back away from the flames.

It had been one of the hottest days of their visit, and Damen was a trifle over-warm himself. But still.

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable if you would wear sensible clothes," Damen said, grinning. Auguste had shed his jacket but kept the long-sleeved white shirt on; in the morning Laurent had reached for his laces as though he would follow suit, but glanced at Damen and thought better of it. He now sat in full court dress before the foreign royalty, with his face all red and tendrils of his blond hair sticking to his neck.

"I would rather be caught dead than parading around in one of those things like a - like a pet," said the boy with a scowl.

Auguste made a noise of agreement.

"You Veretians have everything backwards," said Damen, stretching his bare arms to the sky, "You cover yourselves up like you're ashamed of the bodies the gods gave you, but every private act between a man and his lover you display for the public eye."

Then Damen remembered uncomfortably that he and Auguste were not alone and glanced at Laurent, wondering if the boy was young enough to still be sheltered from the ring performances that Damen had only heard rumors of. But Laurent was making a disgusted face, as if he knew exactly what Damen was thinking of.

"They're disgusting," he said with feeling.

Auguste laughed. "You won't think so when you're older."
"In public, it is always disgusting," Damen said decidedly, and Laurent shot him a look of sympathy.

Auguste hummed noncommittally.

"You seem different, now we're here," said Damen, for he would never have called Auguste a "stiff" man before, but there was something free and easy about his Veretian friend since they left behind the borders of his country.

"I had forgotten what it is like, to be in your own place," said Auguste, "Everything I had has been taken from me, but not this. Thank you, Laurent, for reminding me. It is so good to be somewhere the Council cannot take away."

"They could invade," Laurent pointed out.

"That's true," said Auguste, grinning, "Their armies could wrestle Arnoul on the stairs."

"You must keep them from discovering Acquitart's agricultural bounty," said Damen, remembering the turnips, and the three of them laughed.

"Come on and take-up a sword with us!" Damen shouted over to Laurent, "Reading can't be that interesting!"

They were running through their drills that morning, having decided they needed a break from sparring, and Damen seemed to take this as an opportunity to coax Laurent out with them again. He hadn't tried for several days, but Laurent's animosity towards him seemed to be waning, and perhaps he thought he'd have better luck now.

"I like books," said Laurent, not moving from where he was sitting in the shade of one of the trees that grew right up against the fence to the sparring ground.

"Good for you," said Damen walking over to lean against the fence, "You make a much better scholar than I did at your age. But as Prince you need know things that you can't learn in books."

"Like how to swing a sword about?"

"Yes, like how to swing a sword about." Damen said, extending the hilt of his down to where Laurent was settled between the tree roots, "What will you do when you are a man and you cannot lead your troops into battle?"

Auguste remembered the deal they had made when Laurent was younger, that he would fight the wars and get the heirs, and Laurent would read the books. He wondered if Laurent was going to bring it up now, but instead the boy smiled and said,

"Perhaps I will use what I have learned about negotiations and other cultures to ensure that there are no battles to fight."

Damen grinned. "King Laurent the Peace-maker," he said, "A fine thing for a ruler to be. Perhaps the best thing."

Laurent looked startled, then he visibly swelled with pride, preening so extravagantly under the praise that Auguste wondered if this was the first time that Laurent's future kingship had been described to him in terms other than "less good than Auguste's would have been."
"But despite the best efforts of your intelligence and your industry," Damen continued, "There may come a time when diplomacy fails, and the men will not follow you unless they know you can fight beside them."

"Thank you," Laurent said, blushing, "But I'm not going to be King for very long. Just long enough to pardon Auguste, and then he'll come back and take the throne."

And Laurent smiled at his brother with all the innocence of a child.

"It's best to be prepared for anything," said Damen, but when Laurent still showed no signs of moving, he gave it up.

Auguste had troubled dreams one night - probably caused by the heat - and as a result slept later in the morning than was his usual habit. Skipping the training ground, he went off in search of Laurent. The boy was not still sleeping (a surprise, Auguste didn't think he'd been that late), nor was he in the library, or in the stables visiting the horses. Auguste finally found him tucked away in a corner overlooking the training ground, book clutched unopened and unheeded in his fingers, and his eyes fixed on Damen, who was working through morning exercises. He was leaning forward, intent, and biting his lower lip.

Oh. It had been three days since Damen had tried to coax Laurent into joining them, and in that time he thought he'd seen a few hastily smothered glances, but - this was rather obvious. He was not sure what a man was supposed to feel when he realized that his younger brother harbored a puppyish infatuation for one of his adult friends, but he was pretty sure it was not supposed to be "giddy relief." Still. There was hardly a safer target for such affections than Damen, who would no more take advantage of a child than he would sprout wings and fly to Isthima. And it was such a normal thing for a boy that age to feel. It was good to know that whatever their uncle had done had not robbed Laurent of this part of himself.

Then there was the person of Damianos to consider. Yes, he was an impressive physical specimen - but Laurent had not seemed interested when that was all he knew of him. If Auguste was observing rightly, then it wasn't until Laurent got to know who Damen was - honorable, intelligent, honest, kind, consistently treating Laurent with respect - that Laurent began to be drawn to him, and if these continued to be the qualities that attracted him, then his little brother was going to have such good taste in men!

But still, no matter how pleased he was, he was the older brother, and he had certain responsibilities.

He crept up to the fence as quietly as he could, and when he was right behind Laurent, leaned down and murmured into his ear,

"You know, Akielons wrestle naked."

Laurent jumped straight in the air and then whirled around.

"They do not!"

"They do. They lather themselves with oil too, so they're all slippery and glistening."

Laurent scoffed. "Oh, stop teasing me, I know you're making that up."
Adolescent urges are one thing - brothers are something else. As the days before it would be time for Laurent to return to Arles and take up whatever duties the Council would allow him grew fewer, he spent more time with Auguste in private and very little nurturing his new feelings by chasing Damiano's eye. In understanding, Damen drew back to let them spend what was left of their time alone. The morning training stopped now as soon as Laurent arose, and Damen no longer accompanied them on their rides. Auguste thought that that would be the end of it, a flimsy adolescent longing collapsing into vapor against the real pain of being separated from his brother again.

But on the last night of their stay, when they built a fire in the middle of the eastern courtyard, Auguste returned from a necessary detour inside to find that Laurent had abandoned his seat and slid up next to Damen, leaning close to him in the manner of a pet. He could see them lit up by the firelight long before they could see him in the shadowed archway of the hall, and he got there just in time to hear Laurent finish a sentence with: "after Auguste goes to bed."

"You're too young for all that," said Damen, and Auguste flinched. Perhaps his teasing had been misconstrued as encouragement, perhaps he should have found some other way to jest him. Auguste moved to interrupt them when Laurent returned,

"I'm not a virgin - I've done things before," and that was so horrible that Auguste was fixed where he stood.

"How old are you?" asked Damen.

Laurent raised his chin. "Almost fifteen."

"So fourteen then," said Damen. He blinked a little; Laurent had always looked younger than he was. "Well, that's not entirely beyond the pale to start fooling around with girls." Lauren made a face. "Or other boys."

"And," said Laurent, leaning forward again.

"And I am not another boy."

Laurent put on a smirk that was totally unlike him, still aping the pets, the only model of seduction he would have seen.

"Just because I am young doesn't mean that I couldn't handle you."

"Boys always think they are man enough to handle anything. Do what you want with people your own age, but you must keep away from grown women and men until you are one yourself."

Laurent's features shifted into something more honest. "I don't need to be grown to know what I want and what I don't want. I'm old enough for that."

Auguste stood torn between his desire to swoop in and stop what was happening, and his fear of fracturing the moment before Laurent understood what he was doing, lest he try this again later, in Arles, where Auguste could not watch him - and where he may find a recipient for his advances less honorable than Prince Damiano. Damen looked at the boy for a long moment.
"I want to show you something," he said, and he lifted his hand to the pin of his chiton, unclasped it, and let the fabric pool into his lap. Auguste saw a moment of half-terrified excitement flit over Laurent's face before he noticed that Damen was pointing to something on the lower part of his side.

"Oh," he said, "You have a scar."

"I got this when I was only a year younger than you. I had just scored my first hit against my older brother in the ring. I thought I was a man. He thought so too, or at least that I was ready to fight like one. We put away the wooden blades and tried sparring with real swords. This was the result."

"Your own brother did that to you?"

"Yes. Even someone who loves you can hurt you if he stops treating you like a boy when that is what you are." Damen picked up the corner of his chiton and pinned it back into place. "Don't mess around with adults. That's fighting with true steel."

Laurent was quiet for a moment, and Auguste watched the emotions play over his face. There was a flash of disappointment when the fabric covered up Damen's chest again, mingled with a private relief that Auguste doubted Laurent was conscious he was feeling. A little hurt, that his feelings were not returned, but also a serious, thoughtful expression, as though he were deeply considering Damen's words. Finally, he nodded and slid away in resignation, putting a more appropriate space between them.

Then he looked up slyly. "So you're saying I should stick to boys because they only have practice swords."

Damen blinked at him, then he threw back his head and gave a full-hearted laugh. Laurent grinned in unadulterated happiness, more genuinely pleased to have provoked a laugh with a dirty joke than he would have been if he'd gotten what he thought he wanted, and all the tension went out of Auguste's shoulders. He waited until the laughter died away, then stepped forward to join them.

"You know he'll have left by now," said Damen, as Auguste turned back for the sixth time to look at the fort of Acquitart in the distance.

"I know." Auguste sighed. "I just don't like leaving him in Vere. The Council's not looking out for him as they should."

"You are showing him how to be a good man. That's what's important," said Damen.

"What, in my letters?"

"Yes, letters, and the example of the choices you've made, and what you could say to him while you were here."

"That's not enough. I should be there to protect him."

"Perhaps it will turn out to be good for him, having to get by on his own," Damen suggested.

"You think I coddle him."

"Only natural, given the situation."
"But you think I do," Auguste pressed.

Damen frowned. "You said you want to protect him. Princes need seasoning, not protecting."

The words went through Auguste like a knife. If, when he had had the chance, Auguste had spent less time protecting Laurent and more time teaching him to protect himself, would he now be a stronger Laurent? Did Auguste rob him of the self-sufficiency to bear the separation or the boldness to stand up to the Council? Could he, if Auguste had treated him differently, even have been strong enough to say no, or to fight back when - on that night -

"Kastor knew that," Damen continued, and all Auguste's doubts vanished in a puff of angry smoke.

"Oh? I suppose I should fight against him with true steel then?" he jeered, then he kicked his horse and put distance between them.

Damen caught up to Auguste later in the day after he had cooled off. He cleared his throat.

"So, you heard what happened last night, between me and your brother?" he asked awkwardly.

"Most of it. I came back in time to hear you refusing him."

"Do you think I ... handled the situation rightly?" He looked worried, less at Auguste's reaction than his own uncertainty about what he had said.

"I don't think I would be the best judge," Auguste admitted, unsure how he himself would do if he were the recipient of inappropriately young attentions. Probably not as well. "But you didn't encourage him or laugh at him, which are the two most dangerous things, I think. You probably did alright."

Damen sighed in relief, and they rode forward together a few strides, side by side. Then Auguste leaned across the space between their horses and cuffed Damen hard in the shoulder.

"Hey! I though you said I handled it well! What was that for!"

"For taking a boy with a crush on you and trying to discourage him by showing him your abs!"

Chapter End Notes

Content Warnings: this chapter contains glib references to previous child sexual abuse, and inappropriate advances on an adult made by a child sexual abuse survivor trying to assert control over their sexuality. The adult ensures that nothing happens, but if minors expressing desires that way makes you uncomfortable, skip the scene where Auguste overhears Damen and Laurent talking around the campfire.

ETA: This story is now on hiatus while I catch up on work things and try to finish another fic, but I have an outline and it is not abandoned! Thank you everyone for your support.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!