

BOOK THREE OF THE CAPTIVE PRINCE TRILOGY

KINGS RISING



C.S.
PACAT

KINGS RISING

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THE CAPTIVE PRINCE TRILOGY

Captive Prince

Prince's Gambit

Kings Rising

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For Vanessa, Bea, Shelley and Anna.

This book was written with the help of great friends.

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CHARACTERS

AKIELOS

The court

KASTOR, King of Akielos

DAMIANOS (Damen), heir to the throne of Akielos

JOKASTE, a lady of the Akielon court

KYRINA, her handmaiden

NIKANDROS, Kyros of Delpha

MENIADOS, Kyros of Sicyon

KOLNAS, Keeper of Slaves

ISANDER, a slave

HESTON of Thoas, a nobleman of Sicyon

MAKEDON, Nikandros's general and independent commander of the largest army in the north

STRATON, a commander

Bannermen of Delpha

PHILOCTUS of Eilon

BARIEUS of Mesos

ARATOS of Charon

EUANDROS of Itys

Soldiers

PALLAS

AKTIS

LYDOS

ELON

STAVOS, a guard captain

From the past

THEOMEDES, King of Akielos and Damen's father

EGERIA, Queen of Akielos and Damen's mother

AGATHON, first King of Akielos

EUANDROS, former King of Akielos, founder of the house of Theomedes

ERADNE, former Queen of Akielos, known as Queen of the Six

AGAR, former Queen of Akielos, conqueror of Isthima

KYDIPPE, former Queen of Akielos

TREUS, former King of Akielos

THESTOS, former King of Akielos, founder of the palace at Ios
TIMON, former King of Akielos
NEKTON, his brother

VERE

The court

THE REGENT of Vere
LAURENT, heir to the throne of Vere
NICAISE, the Regent's pet
GUION, Lord of Fortaine, a former member of the Veretian Council and the former Ambassador to Akielos
LOYSE, Lady of Fortaine
AIMERIC, their son
VANNES, Ambassador to Vask and Laurent's First Advisor
ESTIENNE, a member of Laurent's faction

The Veretian Council

AUDIN
CHELAUT
HERODE
JEURRE
MATHE

The Prince's men

ENGUERRAN, Captain of the Prince's Guard
JORD
HUET
GUYMAR
LAZAR
PASCHAL, a physician
HENDRIC, a herald

On the road

GOVART, former Captain of the Prince's Guard
CHARLS, a Veretian cloth merchant
GUILLAIME, his assistant
MATHELIN, a Veretian cloth merchant
GENEVOT, a villager

From the past

ALERON, former King of Vere and Laurent's father
HENNIKE, former Queen of Vere and Laurent's mother
AUGUSTE, former heir to the throne of Vere and Laurent's older brother

CHAPTER ONE

‘D^{AMIANOS}.’

Damen stood at the base of the dais steps as his name spread in tones of shock and disbelief over the courtyard. Nikandros knelt before him, his army knelt before him. It was like coming home, until his name, rippling outwards over the ranks of the gathered Akielon soldiers, hit the Veretian commoners thronging the edges of the space, where it changed.

The shock was different, a doubled shock, a rippling impact now, of anger, of alarm. Damen heard the first voice in outcry, a swell of violence, a new word now in the mouths of the crowd.

‘Prince-killer.’

A hiss of a rock, thrown. Nikandros came up off his knees, drawing his sword. Damen flung out a hand in a motion for halt, stopping Nikandros instantly, his sword showing a half-foot of Akielon steel.

He could see the confusion on Nikandros’s face, as the courtyard around them began to disintegrate. ‘Damianos?’

‘Order your men to hold,’ said Damen, even as the sharp sound of steel closer by had him turning fast.

A Veretian soldier in a grey helmet had drawn his sword, and was staring at Damen as though he faced his worst nightmare. It was Huet; Damen recognised the white face under the helmet. Huet was holding his sword out before him the way Jord had held the knife: between two shaking hands.

‘Damianos?’ said Huet.

‘Hold!’ Damen ordered again, shouting to be heard over the crowd, over the new, hoarse cry in Akielon, *‘Treason!’* It was death to draw a blade on a member of the Akielon royal family.

He was still keeping Nikandros back with the gesture of his outflung hand, but he could feel every sinew in Nikandros strain in the effort to hold himself in place.

There were wild shouts now, the thin perimeter breaking down as the crowd swelled with the panicked urge to run. To stampede and get out of the

way of the Akielon army. Or to swarm over it. He saw Guymar scan the courtyard, the tense fear in his eyes clear. Soldiers could see what a peasant mob could not: that the Akielon force inside the walls—*inside* the walls—outnumbered the skeletal Veretian garrison fifteen to one.

Another sword was drawn alongside Huet's, a horrified Veretian soldier. Anger and disbelief showed in the faces of some of the Veretian guard; in others there was fear, looking to one another desperately for guidance.

And in the first spilling breach in the perimeter, the spiralling frenzy of the crowd, the Veretian guards no longer fully under his control—Damen saw how completely he had underestimated the effect of his identity on the men and women of this fort.

Damianos, prince-killer.

His mind, used to battlefield decisions, took in the sweep of the courtyard, and made the commander's choice: to minimise losses, to limit bloodshed and chaos, and to secure Ravenel. The Veretian guards were beyond his orders, and the Veretian people . . . if these bitter, furious emotions could be soothed among the Veretian people, he was not the one to soothe them.

There was only one way to stop what was about to happen, and that was to contain it; to lock it down, to secure this place once and for all.

Damen said to Nikandros, 'Take the fort.'

* * *

Damen swept along the passage, flanked by six Akielon guards. Akielon voices rang in the halls and red Akielon flags flew over Ravenel. Akielon soldiers on either side of the doorway drew their heels together as he passed.

Ravenel had now changed allegiance twice in as many days. This time it had happened swiftly; Damen knew exactly how to subdue this fort. The skeleton Veretian force had quickly buckled in the courtyard, and Damen had ordered their two senior soldiers, Guymar and Jord, brought to him, stripped of armour and under guard.

As Damen entered the small antechamber, the Akielon guards took hold of their two prisoners and thrust them roughly to the ground. '*Kneel*,' the guard commanded in mangled Veretian. Jord sprawled.

'No. Let them stand.' Damen gave the order in Akielon.

Instant obedience.

It was Guymar who shrugged the treatment off and regained his feet first. Jord, who had known Damen for months, was more circumspect, rising slowly. Guymar met Damen's eyes. He spoke in Veretian, giving no sign that he had understood Akielon.

'So it's true. You are Damianos of Akielos.'

'It's true.'

Guymar purposefully spat, and for his trouble was backhanded hard across the face with a mailed fist by the Akielon soldier.

Damen let it happen, aware of what would have happened if a man had spat on the ground in front of his father.

'Are you here to put us to the sword?'

Guymar's words were spoken as his eyes returned to Damen. Damen's gaze passed over him, then over Jord. He saw the grime on their faces, their drawn, tight expressions. Jord had been the Captain of the Prince's Guard. He knew Guymar less well: Guymar had been a commander in Touars's army before he'd defected to Laurent's side. But both men had been ranked officers. It was why he had ordered them brought here.

'I want you to fight with me,' said Damen. 'Akielos is here to stand by your side.'

Guymar let out a shaky breath. 'Fight with you? You will use our cooperation to take the fort.'

'I already have the fort,' said Damen. He said it calmly. 'You know the manner of man we face in the Regent,' said Damen. 'Your men have a choice. They can remain prisoners at Ravenel, or they can ride with me to Charcy, and show the Regent we stand together.'

'We don't stand together,' said Guymar. 'You betrayed our Prince.' And then, as though he almost couldn't bear to say it, 'You had him—'

'Take him out,' said Damen, cutting it off. He dismissed the Akielon guards, too, and they filed out until the antechamber was deserted, except for the one man he allowed to stay.

In Jord's face was none of the mistrust or fear that had been stamped so clearly on the faces of the other Veretians, but a weary search for understanding.

Damen said, 'I made him a promise.'

'And when he learns who you are?' said Jord. 'When he learns that he is facing Damianos on the field?'

‘Then he and I meet each other for the first time,’ said Damen. ‘That was also a promise.’

* * *

When it was done, he found himself pausing, his hand on the doorframe to catch his breath. He thought of his name, spreading through Ravenel, across the province, to its target. He had a sense of holding on, as though if he just held the fort, held these men together long enough to reach Charcy, then what followed—

He couldn’t think about what followed, all he could do was keep to his promise. He pushed open the door and walked into the small hall.

Nikandros turned when Damen entered, and their eyes met. Before Damen could speak, Nikandros went to one knee; not spontaneously as he had done in the courtyard, but deliberately, bending his head.

‘The fort is yours,’ Nikandros said. ‘My King.’
King.

The ghost of his father seemed to prickle over his skin. It was his father’s title, but his father no longer sat on the throne at Ios. Looking at the bowed head of his friend, Damen realised it for the first time. He was no longer the young prince who had roamed the palace halls with Nikandros after a day spent wrestling together on the sawdust. There was no Prince Damianos. The self that he had been striving to return to was gone.

To gain everything and lose everything in the space of a moment. That is the fate of all princes destined for the throne. Laurent had said that.

Damen took in Nikandros’s familiar, classically Akielon features, his dark hair and brows, his olive face and straight Akielon nose. As children, they had run barefoot together through the palace. When he’d imagined a return to Akielos, he’d imagined greeting Nikandros, embracing him, heedless of the armour, like digging in his fingers and feeling in his fist the earth of his home.

Instead, Nikandros knelt in an enemy fort, his sparse Akielon armour incongruous in the Veretian setting, and Damen felt the gulf of distance that separated them.

‘Rise,’ said Damen. ‘Old friend.’

He wanted to say so much. He felt it welling up inside him, a hundred moments when he had forced back the doubt that he would ever see Akielos,

the high cliffs, the opaline sea, and the faces, like this one, of those that he called friend.

‘I thought you dead,’ said Nikandros. ‘I have mourned your passing. I lit the ekthanos and made the long walk at dawn when I thought you gone.’ Nikandros spoke still partly in wonder as he rose. ‘Damianos, what happened to you?’

Damen thought of the soldiers bursting into his rooms, of being lashed down in the slave baths, of the dark, muffled journey by ship to Vere. He thought of being confined, his face painted, his body drugged and displayed. He thought of opening his eyes in the Veretian palace, and what had happened to him there.

‘You were right about Kastor,’ Damen said.

It was all he said.

‘I watched him crowned at the Kingsmeet,’ said Nikandros. His eyes were dark. ‘He stood on the Kingstone and said, “This twin tragedy has taught us that all things are possible.”’

It sounded like Kastor. It sounded like Jokaste. Damen thought of how it would have been in Akielos, the kyroi gathered among the ancient stones of the Kingsmeet, Kastor enthroned with Jokaste beside him, her hair immaculate and her swollen belly swathed, slaves fanning the air in the still heat.

He said to Nikandros, ‘Tell me.’

He heard it. He heard all of it. He heard of his own body, wrapped and taken in the processional through the acropolis, then interred beside his father. He heard Kastor’s claim that he had been killed by his own guard. He heard of his guard, killed in turn, like his childhood trainer Haemon, like his squires, like his slaves. Nikandros spoke of the confusion and slaughter throughout the palace, and in its wake, Kastor’s swordsmen taking control, claiming wherever they were challenged that they were containing the bloodshed, not causing it.

He remembered the sound of bells at dusk. *Theomedes is dead. All hail Kastor.*

Nikandros said, ‘There’s more.’

Nikandros hesitated for a moment, searching Damen’s face. Then he pulled a letter from his leather breastplate. It was battered, and by far the worse for its method of conveyance, but when Damen took it and unfolded it, he saw why Nikandros had kept it close.

To the Kyros of Delpha, Nikandros, from Laurent, Prince of Vere.

Damen felt the hairs rise over his body. The letter was old. The writing was old. Laurent must have sent the letter from Arles. Damen thought of him, alone, politically cornered, sitting at his desk to begin writing. He remembered Laurent's limpid voice. *Do you think I'd get on well with Nikandros of Delpha?*

It made tactical sense, in a horrifying way, for Laurent to have made an alliance with Nikandros. Laurent had always been capable of a kind of ruthless pragmatism. He was able to put emotion aside and do what he had to do to win, with a perfect and nauseating ability to ignore all human feeling.

In return for aid from Nikandros, the letter said, Laurent would offer proof that Kastor had colluded with the Regent to kill King Theomedes of Akielos. It was the same information that Laurent had flung at him last night. *You poor dumb brute. Kastor killed the King, then took the city with my uncle's troops.*

'There were questions,' said Nikandros, 'but for every question Kastor had an answer. He was the King's son. And you were dead. There was no one left to rally behind,' Nikandros said. 'Meniados of Sicyon was the first to swear his loyalty. And beyond that—'

Damen said, 'The south belongs to Kastor.'

He knew what he faced. He had never supposed to hear that the story of his brother's treachery was a mistake: to hear that Kastor was overjoyed by the news that he lived, and welcomed his return.

Nikandros said, 'The north is loyal.'

'And if I call on you to fight?'

'Then we fight,' said Nikandros. 'Together.'

The straightforward ease of it left him without words. He had forgotten what home felt like. He had forgotten trust, loyalty, kinship. Friends.

Nikandros drew something from a fold in his clothing, and pressed it into Damen's hand.

'This is yours. I have kept it . . . A foolish token. I knew it was treason. I wanted to remember you by it.' A crooked half-smile. 'Your friend is a fool and courts treason for a keepsake.'

Damen opened his hand.

The curl of mane, the arc of a tail—Nikandros had given him the golden lion pin worn by the King. Theomedes had passed it on to Damen on his seventeenth birthday to mark him as heir. Damen remembered his father

fixing it to his shoulder. Nikandros must have risked execution to find it, to take it and to carry it with him.

‘You are too quick to pledge yourself to me.’ He felt the hard, bright edges of the pin in his fist.

‘You are my King,’ said Nikandros.

He saw it reflected back at him in Nikandros’s eyes, as he had seen it in the eyes of the men. He felt it, in the different way Nikandros behaved towards him.

King.

The pin was his now, and soon the bannermen would come and pledge to him as King, and nothing would be the way it was before. *To gain everything and lose everything in the space of a moment. That is the fate of all princes destined for the throne.*

He clasped Nikandros’s shoulder, the wordless touch all he would allow himself.

‘You look like a wall tapestry.’ Nikandros plucked at Damen’s sleeve, amused by red velvet, fastenings of garnet, and small, exquisitely sewn rows of ruching. And then he went still.

‘Damen,’ said Nikandros, in a strange voice. Damen looked down. And saw.

His sleeve had slipped, revealing a cuff of heavy gold.

Nikandros tried to move back, as though burned or stung, but Damen clasped his arm, preventing the retreat. He could see it, splitting Nikandros’s brain, the unthinkable.

His heart pounding, he tried to stop it, to salvage it. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Kastor made me a slave. Laurent freed me. He gave me command of his fort and his troops, an act of trust for an Akielon he had no reason to elevate. He doesn’t know who I am.’

‘The Prince of Vere freed you,’ said Nikandros. ‘You have been his slave?’ His voice thickened with the words. *‘You have served the Prince of Vere as a slave?’*

Another step back. There was a shocked sound from the doorway. Damen whirled towards it, releasing his grip on Nikandros.

Makedon stood in the doorway, a growing horror on his face, and behind him Straton, and two of Nikandros’s soldiers. Makedon was Nikandros’s general, his most powerful bannerman, and he had come to pledge to

Damianos as the bannermen had pledged to Damen's father. Damen stood, exposed, before them all.

He flushed, hard. A golden wrist cuff had only one meaning: use, and submission, of the most private kind.

He knew what they saw—a hundred images of slaves, submitting, bending at the hip, parting their thighs, the casual ease with which these men would have taken slaves in their own households. He remembered himself saying, *Leave it on*. His chest felt tight.

He forced himself to keep untying laces, pushing his sleeve up further. 'Does it shock you? I was a personal gift to the Prince of Vere.' He had bared his whole forearm.

Nikandros turned to Makedon, his voice harsh. 'You will not speak of this. You will never speak of this outside this room—'

Damen said, 'No. It can't be hidden.' He said it to Makedon.

A man of his father's generation, Makedon was the commander of one of the largest of the provincial armies of the north. Behind him, Straton's distaste looked like nausea. The two secondary officers had their eyes on the floor, too low-ranked to do anything else in the presence of the King, especially in the face of what they were seeing.

'You were the Prince's slave?' Revulsion was stamped on Makedon's face, whitening it.

'Yes.'

'You—' Makedon's words echoed the unspoken question in Nikandros's eyes that no man would ever say aloud to his King.

Damen's flush changed in quality. 'You dare ask that.'

Makedon said, thickly, 'You are our King. This is an insult to Akielos that cannot be borne.'

'You will bear it,' said Damen, holding Makedon's gaze, 'as I have borne it. Or do you think yourself above your King?'

Slave, said the resistance in Makedon's eyes. Makedon certainly had slaves in his own household, and made use of them. What he imagined between Prince and slave stripped it of all the subtleties of surrender. Having been done to his King, it had in some sense been done to him, and his pride revolted at it.

'If this becomes common knowledge, I can't guarantee I will be able to control the actions of the men,' said Nikandros.

‘It is common knowledge,’ said Damen. He watched the words impact on Nikandros, who could not quite swallow them.

‘What would you have us do?’ Nikandros pushed the words out.

‘Make your pledge,’ said Damen. ‘And if you are mine, gather the men to fight.’

* * *

The plan he had developed with Laurent was simple, and relied on timing. Charcy was not a field like Helay, with a single, clear vantage. Charcy was a pocketed, hilly trap, half backed by forest, where a well-positioned force could quickly manufacture a surround on an approaching troop. It was the reason the Regent had chosen Charcy as the place where he would challenge his nephew. Inviting Laurent to a fair fight at Charcy was like smiling and inviting him to take a stroll across quicksand.

So they had split their forces. Laurent had ridden out two days ago to approach from the north and reverse the Regent’s surround by bringing up at the rear. Damen’s men were the bait.

He looked for a long time at the wrist cuff before he walked out onto the dais. It was bright gold, visible at some distance against the skin of his wrist.

He didn’t try to hide it. He had discarded his wrist gauntlets. He wore the Akielon breastplate, the short leather skirt, the high Akielon sandals strapped to his knee. His arms were bare, as were his legs from knee to mid-thigh. The short red cape was pinned to his shoulder by the golden lion.

Armoured and battle-ready, he stepped out onto the dais and looked out at the army that was gathered below, the immaculate lines and shining spears, all of it waiting for him.

He let them see the cuff on his wrist, as he let them see him. He knew by now the ever-present whisper: *Damianos, risen from the dead*. He watched the army fall silent before him.

He let the Prince he had been drop away, let himself feel the new role, the new self settle about him.

‘Men of Akielos,’ he said, his words echoing across the courtyard. He looked out at the rows of red cloaks, and it felt as it felt to take up a sword or fit a gauntlet to his hand. ‘I am Damianos, true son of Theomedes, and I have returned to fight for you as your King.’

A deafening roar of approval; spear-butts hammering into the ground in approbation. He saw arms raised, soldiers cheering, and caught a flash of the impassive, helmed face of Makedon.

Damen swung up into the saddle. He had taken the same horse he had ridden at Helay, a big bay gelding that could take his weight. It struck its front hoof on the cobbles, as though seeking to overturn a stone, arching its neck, perhaps sensing, in the manner of all great beasts, that they were on the cusp of war.

The horns sounded. The standards went up.

There was a sudden clatter, like a handful of marbles cast down steps, and a small group of Veretians in battered blue rode into the courtyard on horseback.

Not Guymar. But Jord and Huet. Lazar. Scanning their faces, Damen saw who they were. These were the men of the Prince's Guard, with whom Damen had travelled for months. And there was only one reason why they had been released from confinement. Damen held up a hand, and Jord was allowed through, so that for a moment their horses circled each other.

'We've come to ride with you,' said Jord.

Damen looked at the small clump of blue now gathered before the rows of red in the courtyard. There weren't many of them, only twenty, and he saw at once that it was Jord who had convinced them, so that they were here, mounted and ready.

'Then we ride,' said Damen. 'For Akielos, and for Vere.'

* * *

As they approached Charcy, long-range visibility was poor and they had to rely on outriders and scouts for information. The Regent was approaching from the north and the north-west; their own forces, acting as bait, were downslope and in an inferior position. Damen would never bring men into this kind of disadvantage without a counter plan. As it was, it would be a close fight.

Nikandros didn't like it. The closer they came to Charcy, the more obvious it was to the Akielon generals how bad the ground was. If you wanted to kill your worst enemy you would lure him to a place like this.

Trust me, was the last thing Laurent had said.

He envisaged the plan as they had constructed it in Ravenel, the Regent overcommitting, and Laurent at the perfect moment sweeping down from the north. He wanted it, wanted a hard fight, wanted to seek out the Regent on the field, find him and take him down, to end his reign in a single fight. If he just did that, just kept to his promise, then after—

Damen gave the order to form up. There would be the danger of arrows soon. They would take their first volley from the north.

‘Hold,’ was his order. The uncertain terrain was a valley of doubt, fringed by trees and dangerous slopes. The air was laden with tense expectation, and the high-strung, raw mood that came before battle.

Distantly, the sound of horns. ‘Hold,’ Damen said again, as his horse fidgeted, fractious, beneath him. They must fully engage the Regent’s forces here on the flat before they counterattacked, draw them all here, in order to allow Laurent’s men to manufacture a surround.

Instead he saw the western flank begin to move, too soon, under the shouted order of Makedon. ‘Call them back into line,’ Damen said, putting his heels hard into his horse. He reined in around Makedon, a small, tight circle. Makedon looked back at him, dismissive as a general of a child.

‘We are moving to the west.’

‘My orders are to hold,’ said Damen. ‘We let the Regent commit first, to draw him out of position.’

‘If we do that, and your Veretian doesn’t arrive, we’ll all be killed.’

‘He’ll be here,’ said Damen.

From the north, the sound of horns.

The Regent was too close, too early, with no word yet from their scouts. Something was wrong.

Action exploded to his left, movement bursting from the trees. The attack came from the north, charging from the slope and the tree line. Ahead of it was a solitary rider, a scout, racing flat out over the grass. The Regent’s men were on them, and Laurent wasn’t within a hundred miles of the battle. Laurent had never planned to come.

That was what the scout was screaming, right before an arrow took him in the back.

‘This is your Veretian Prince exposed for what he is,’ said Makedon.

Damen had no time to think before the situation was on him. He shouted orders, trying to take hold of the initial chaos, as the first rain of arrows hit, his mind taking in the new situation, recalculating numbers and position.

He'll be here, Damen had said, and he believed that, even as the first wave hit and the men around him began to die.

There was a dark logic to it. Have your slave convince the Akielons to fight. Let your enemies do your fighting for you, the casualties taken by the people you despise, the Regent defeated or weakened, and the armies of Nikandros wiped out.

It wasn't until the second wave hit them from the north-west that he realised they were totally alone.

Damen found himself alongside Jord. 'If you want to live, ride east.'

White-faced, Jord took one look at his expression and said, 'He's not coming.'

'We're outnumbered,' said Damen, 'but if you run, you might still make it out.'

'If we're outnumbered, what are you going to do?'

Damen drove his horse onward, ready to take up his own place on the front line.

He said, 'Fight.'

CHAPTER TWO

LAURENT WOKE SLOWLY, in dim light, to the sensation of restriction, his hands tied behind his back. Throbbing at the base of his skull let him know he had been hit over the head. Something was also inconveniently and intrusively wrong with his shoulder. It was dislocated.

As his lashes fluttered and his body stirred, he became hazily aware of a stale odour, and a chilled temperature that suggested that he was underground. His intellect made increasing sense of this: there had been an ambush, he was underground, and since his body didn't feel as if it had been transported for days, that meant—

He opened his eyes and met the flat-nosed stare of Govart.

‘Hello, Princess.’

Panic spiked his pulse, an involuntary reaction, his blood beating against the inside of his skin like it was trapped. Very carefully, he made himself do nothing.

The cell itself was about twelve feet square, and had an entrance of bars but no windows. Beyond the door there was a flickering stone passageway. The flickering came from a torch on that side of the bars, not from the fact that he had been hit over the head. There was nothing inside the cell except the chair he was tied to. The chair, made of heavy oak, appeared to have been dragged in for his benefit, which was civilised or sinister, depending on how one looked at it. The torchlight revealed the accumulated filth on the floor.

He was hit by the memory of what had happened to his men, and put that, with effort, out of his mind. He knew where he was. These were the prison cells of Fortaine.

He understood that he faced his death, before which would come a long, painful interval. A ludicrous boyish hope flared that someone would come to help him, and, carefully, he extinguished it. Since the age of thirteen, there had been no rescuer, for his brother was dead. He wondered if it was going to be possible to salvage some dignity in this situation, and cancelled that

thought as soon as it came. This was not going to be dignified. He thought that if things got very bad, it was within his capabilities to precipitate the end. Govart would not be difficult to provoke into lethal violence. At all.

He thought that Auguste would not be afraid, being alone and vulnerable to a man who planned to kill him; it should not trouble his younger brother.

It was harder to let go of the battle, to leave his plans at their midway point, to accept that the deadline had come and gone, and that whatever now happened on the border, he would not be a part of it. The Akielon slave would (of course) assume treachery on the part of the Veretian forces, after which he would launch some sort of noble and suicidal attack at Charcy that he would probably win, against ridiculous odds.

He thought, if he merely ignored the fact that he was injured and tied up, it was one on one, which weren't terrible odds of his own, except that he could feel in this, as he could always feel, the invisible guiding hand of his uncle.

One on one: he must think about what he could practically achieve. On his best day, he could not take on Govart in a wrestling match and win. And his shoulder was dislocated. Fighting free of his bonds at this moment would accomplish, precisely, nothing. He told himself that: once; then again, to quell a deep, basic urge to struggle.

'We're alone,' Govart said. 'Just you and me. Look around. Take a good look. There's no way out. Not even I have a key. They come to open the cell when I'm done with you. What do you have to say to that?'

'How's your shoulder?' said Laurent.

The blow rocked him back. When he lifted his head, he enjoyed the look he had provoked on Govart's face, as he had enjoyed, for the same reason—if a bit masochistically—the blow. Because he couldn't quite keep that from his eyes, Govart hit him again. He had to strap down the impulse of hysteria, or this was going to be over very quickly.

'I always wondered what it was you had on him,' Laurent said. He forced himself to keep his voice steady. 'A bloody sheet and a signed confession?'

'You think I'm stupid,' said Govart.

'I think you have one piece of leverage over a very powerful man. I think whatever it is you have on him, it's not going to last forever.'

'You want to think that,' said Govart. His voice was heavy with satisfaction. 'Want me to tell you why you're here? Because I asked him for you. He gives me what I want. He gives me whatever I want. Even his untouchable nephew.'

‘Well, I’m an inconvenience to him,’ said Laurent. ‘You are too. It’s why he throws us together. At some point one of us will dispatch the other.’

He made himself speak without undue emotion, just a mild remark on the facts.

‘The trouble is, when my uncle is the King, no leverage in the world will stop him. If you kill me, whatever it is that you have on him isn’t going to matter. It will just be you and him, and he’ll be free to disappear you into a dark cell too.’

Govart smiled, slowly.

‘He said you’d say that.’

The first misstep, and it was his own. He could feel the distracting beat of his heart. ‘What else did my uncle tell you I’d say?’

‘He said you’d try to keep me talking. He said you had a mouth like a whore. He said you’d lie, wheedle, suck up to me.’ The slow smile widened. ‘He said, “The only way to make sure my nephew doesn’t talk his way free is to cut his tongue out.”’ As he spoke, Govart pulled out a knife.

The room around Laurent greyed; his whole attention narrowed, his thoughts attenuating.

‘Except that you want to hear it,’ said Laurent, because this was only beginning, and it was a long, winding, bloody road till the end. ‘You want to hear all of it. Every last broken syllable. It’s the one thing my uncle never understood about you.’

‘Yeah? What’s that?’

‘You always wanted to be on the other side of the door,’ said Laurent. ‘And now you are.’

* * *

By the end of the first hour (though it felt longer), he was in quite a lot of pain, and was losing touch with how much, if at all, he was delaying or controlling what was happening.

His shirt was now unlaced to the waist and hung open, and his right sleeve was red. His hair was a tangled mess ribboned with sweat. His tongue was intact, because the knife was in his shoulder. He had accounted that a victory, when it had happened.

You had to take pleasure in small victories. The hilt of the knife protruded at an odd angle. It was in his right shoulder, already dislocated, so that

breathing was now painful. Victories. He had come this far, he had caused his uncle some small consternation, had checked him, once or twice, forced him to remake his plans. Had not made it easy.

Layers of thick stone stood between him and the outside world. It was impossible to hear anything. It was impossible to be heard. His only advantage was that he had managed to free his left hand from its bonds. He couldn't let that be discovered, it would gain him nothing. It would gain him a broken arm. It was growing harder to stick to a course of action.

Because it was impossible to hear anything, he reasoned—or had reasoned, when more detached—that whoever had put him in here with Govart would return with a wheelbarrow and sack to take him out, and that this would happen at a prearranged time, since there was no way for Govart to signal. He therefore had a single goal, like moving towards a retreating mirage: to reach that point alive.

Footsteps, getting closer. The metallic scrape of an iron hinge.

Guion's voice. 'This is taking too long.'

'Squeamish?' said Govart. 'We're just getting started. You can stay and watch if you like.'

'Does he know?' Laurent said.

His voice was a little hoarser than it had been starting out; his response to pain had been conventional. Guion was frowning.

'Know what?'

'The secret. Your clever secret. What it is you have on my uncle.'

'Shut up,' said Govart.

'What is he talking about?'

'You never wondered,' said Laurent, 'why my uncle kept him alive? Why he kept him in wine and women all these years?'

'I said shut your mouth.' Closing his hand around the hilt of the knife, Govart turned it.

Blackness burst over him, so that he was only distantly aware of what followed. He heard Guion demanding, in a tinny voice far away, 'What's he saying? You have some private arrangement with the King?'

'You keep out of it. This isn't your business.' Govart.

'If you have some other arrangement, you will disclose it to me, now.'

He felt Govart let go of the knife. Lifting his own hand was the second hardest thing he had ever done, after raising his head. Govart was moving to face down Guion, blocking his path to Laurent.

Laurent closed his eyes, wrapped his unsteady left hand around the hilt, and pulled the knife out of his shoulder.

He couldn't contain the low sound that escaped him. The two men turned as his fumbling hands cut his remaining bonds, and he staggered to stand behind the chair. Laurent held the knife in his left hand in as close to a correct defensive posture as he could presently manage. The room was wavering. The hilt of the knife was slippery. Govart smiled, amused and pleased, as a jaded voyeur at some unexpected minor final act of a play.

Guion said, with mild irritation but absolutely no urgency, 'Get him back under control.'

They faced each other. Laurent had no illusions about his skill as a left-handed knife fighter. He knew how negligible a threat he presented to Govart, even on a day when he wasn't swaying. At his best, he would land a single knife strike before Govart closed on him. It wouldn't matter. Govart's structural bulk of muscle was layered over with a secondary bulk of fat. Govart could weather a single knife cut from a weakened, weaker opponent, and keep fighting. The outcome of his brief excursion into freedom was inevitable. He knew it. Govart knew it.

Laurent made his single clumsy left-handed strike with the knife, and Govart countered it, brutally. And indeed, it was Laurent who cried out at the tearing pain beyond anything he had ever known.

As, with his ruined right arm, Laurent swung the chair.

The heavy oak hit Govart in the ear, with the sound of a mallet striking a wooden ball. Govart staggered and went down. Laurent half staggered, too, the weight of the swing taking him part way across the cell. Guion was moving desperately out of his way, pressing his back to the wall. Laurent focused all his remaining strength on the task of reaching the barred door and placing himself on the other side of it, dragging it closed behind him and turning the key that was still in the lock. Govart didn't get up.

In the stillness that followed, Laurent found his way from the bars, to the open corridor, to the opposite wall, which he slid down, finding at the midway point that there was a wooden bench, which took his weight. He had expected the floor.

His eyes closed. He was dimly aware of Guion, tugging at the cell bars, which rattled and clanged and stayed irrefutably closed.

He did laugh then, a breathless sound, with the sweet, cool feel of the stone at his back. His head lolled.

‘—how dare you, you worthless traitor, you’re a stain on your family’s honour, you—’

‘Guion,’ said Laurent, without opening his eyes. ‘You had me tied up and locked in a room with Govart. Do you think name-calling will hurt my feelings?’

‘Let me out!’ The words ricocheted off the walls.

‘I tried that,’ said Laurent, calmly.

Guion said, ‘I’ll give you anything you want.’

‘I tried that too,’ said Laurent. ‘I don’t like to think of myself as predictable. But apparently I cycle through all the usual responses. Shall I tell you what you’re going to do when I stick the knife in for the first time?’

His eyes opened. Guion took a single, gratifying step back from the bars.

‘You know, I wanted a weapon,’ said Laurent. ‘I wasn’t expecting one to walk into my cell.’

‘You’re a dead man when you walk out of here. Your Akielon allies aren’t going to help you. You left them to die like rats in a trap at Charcy. They’ll hunt you down,’ said Guion, ‘and kill you.’

‘Yes, I’m aware that I have missed my rendezvous,’ said Laurent.

The passageway flickered. He reminded himself that this was just the torch. He heard the dreamy sound of his own voice.

‘There was a man I was supposed to meet. He’s got all these ideas about honour and fair play, and he tries to keep me from doing the wrong thing. But he’s not here right now. Unfortunately for you.’

Guion took another step back. ‘There’s nothing you can do to me.’

‘Isn’t there? I wonder how my uncle is going to react when he finds out that you killed Govart and helped me to escape.’ And then, in the same dreamy voice, ‘Do you think he’ll hurt your family?’

Guion’s hands were fists, like he still had them wrapped around bars. ‘I didn’t help you escape.’

‘Didn’t you? I don’t know how these rumours get started.’

Laurent regarded him through the bars. He was aware of the return of his critical faculties, in place of which up to now had been the tenacious adherence to a single idea.

‘Here’s what has become painfully clear. My uncle instructed that if you captured me, you were to let Govart have me, which was a tactical blunder, but my uncle had his hands tied, thanks to his private arrangement with Govart. Or maybe he just liked the idea. You agreed to do his bidding.

‘Torturing the heir to death wasn’t an act you wanted attached to your own name, however. I’m not certain why. I can only surmise, despite a truly staggering array of evidence to the contrary, that there is still some rationality left on the Council. I was put in an empty set of cells, and you came with the key yourself, because no one else knows I’m here.’

Pressing his left hand to his shoulder, he pushed away from the wall and came forward. Guion, inside the cell, was breathing shallowly.

‘No one knows I’m here. Which means no one knows you’re here. No one’s going to look, no one’s going to come, no one’s going to find you.’

His voice was steady as he held Guion’s gaze through the bars.

‘No one’s going to help your family when my uncle comes, all smiles.’

He could see Guion’s pinched expression, the tightness in his jaw and around his eyes. He waited. It came in a different voice, with a different expression, flatly.

‘What do you want?’ said Guion.

CHAPTER THREE

DAMEN LOOKED OUT at the sweep of the field. The Regent's forces were rivers of darker red, driving inroads into their lines, mingling their armies together, like a stream of blood hitting water, then diffusing. The whole vista was one of destruction, an unending stream of enemies, so numerous they were like a swarm.

But he had seen at Marlas how one man could hold a front together, as if by will alone.

'Prince-killer!' screamed the Regent's men. In the beginning, they had thrown themselves towards him, but when they saw what happened to the men who did that, they became a churning mass of hooves trying to fall back.

They didn't get far. Damen's sword hit armour, hit flesh; he sought out centres of power and broke them, stopping formations before they began. A Veretian commander challenged him, and he allowed one ringing engagement before his sword sheared through the commander's neck.

Faces were impersonal flashes, half shielded by helms. He was more aware of horses and swords, the machinery of death. He killed, and it was simply that men got out of his way, or were dead. Everything narrowed to one purpose, determination sustaining power and concentration beyond human endurance, over hours, longer than one's opponent, because the man who made a mistake was dead.

He lost half his men in the first wave. After that, he took the charges head on, killing as many as were necessary to stop the first wave, and the second, and the third.

Fresh reinforcements arriving at that moment would have been able to slaughter them all like week-old pups, but Damen had no reinforcements.

If he was aware of anything beyond the fight, it was of an absence, a lack that persisted. The flashes of brilliance, the insouciant sword work, the bright presence at his side was instead a gap, half filled by Nikandros's steadier, more practical style. He had grown used to something that had been temporary, like the flash of exhilaration in a pair of blue eyes for a moment

catching his own. All of that tangled together inside him, and tightened, through the killing, into a single hard knot.

‘If the Prince of Vere shows himself, I will kill him.’ Nikandros half spat the words.

The arrows by now were less, because Damen had broken enough lines that firing into the chaos was dangerous for both sides. The sounds were different too, no longer roars and screams, but grunts of pain, exhaustion, sobs of breath, the clang of swords heavier and less frequent.

Hours of death; the battle entered its final, brutal, exhausted stage. Lines broke and dissolved into mess, degraded geometry, heaving pits of straining flesh where it was hard to tell enemy from friend. Damen stayed on horseback, though bodies on the ground were so thick that the horses foundered. The ground was wet, his legs were mud-spattered above his knees—mud in dry summer, because the ground was blood. Thrashing wounded horses screamed louder than the screams of men. He held the men around him together, and killed, his body pushed beyond the physical, beyond thought.

On the far side of the field, he saw the flash of embroidered red.

That is how Akielons win wars, isn't it? Why fight the whole army, when you can just—

Damen drove his spurs into his horse, and charged. The men between him and his object were a blur. He barely heard the ringing of his own sword, or noticed the red cloaks of the Veretian honour guard before he hewed them down. He simply killed them, one after another, until there was no one left between himself and the man he sought.

Damen's sword sheared the air in its unstoppable arc and cleaved the man in the crowned helm in two. His body listed unnaturally, then hit the ground.

Damen dismounted and tore the helm off.

It wasn't the Regent. He didn't know who it was; a pawn, a puppet, his dead eyes wide, caught up in this like the rest of them. Damen flung the helm aside.

‘It's over.’ Nikandros's voice. ‘It's over, Damen.’

Damen looked up blindly. Nikandros's armour was sliced open across the chest, where he was bleeding from a cut, the front plate missing. He used the little name that Damen had been called as a boy; the childhood name, reserved for intimates.

Damen realised that he was on his knees, his own chest heaving like the chest of his horse. His hand was fisted in the fabric of the dead man's sigil. It felt like closing his hands on nothing.

'Over?' The word grated out of him. All he could think was that if the Regent still lived, nothing was over. Thought was slow to return after so long living by action and reaction, the responses of the moment. He needed to come back to himself. Men were dropping weapons around him. 'I hardly know whether the victory is ours, or theirs.'

'It is ours,' said Nikandros.

There was a different look in Nikandros's eyes. And as Damen looked around at the ruined battlefield, he saw the men, staring at him from a distance, the look in Nikandros's eyes echoed in their expressions.

And with returning awareness, he saw as if for the first time the bodies of the men that he had killed to get to the Regent's decoy, and beyond that, the evidence of what he had done.

The field was a rutted earthworks strewn with the dead. The ground was a churned mess of flesh, ineffective armour and riderless horses. Killing ceaselessly, for hours, he had not been aware of the scale of it, of what he had caused to happen here. He saw flashes behind his eyelids, faces of the men he'd killed. Those left standing were all Akielon; and they stared at Damen as at something impossible.

'Find the highest-ranked Veretian still living and tell them they have leave to bury their dead,' said Damen. There was a fallen Akielon banner on the ground beside him. 'Charcy is claimed for Akielos.' As he rose, Damen wrapped his hand around its wooden pole and planted it in the earth.

The banner was torn and it stood lopsided, weighed down by the mud that spattered over its fabric, but it held.

And that was when he saw it, as in a dream, appearing out of the fog of his exhaustion, on the far western edge of the field.

The herald came cantering across the devastated landscape on a white, glossy mare with a curved neck and a high, flying tail. Beautiful and untouched, he made a mockery of the sacrifice of the brave men on the field. His banner streamed out behind him, and its blazon was Laurent's starburst, in blue and shining gold.

The herald reined in in front of him. Damen looked at the mare's shiny coat, not dirt-covered, not heaving or darkened with sweat, and then at the

herald's livery, in immaculate condition, unflecked by the dust of the road. He felt it rising at the back of his throat.

'Where is he?'

The herald's back hit the ground. Damen had dragged him bodily from his horse into the dirt, where he lay dazed and winded, with Damen's knee in his stomach. Damen's hand was around his neck.

His own breath was harsh. Around him, every sword was drawn, every arrow notched and ready. His grip tightened before it opened enough to allow the herald to speak.

The herald rolled onto his side and coughed as Damen released him. He pulled something from inside his jacket. Parchment, with two lines on it.

You have Charcy. I have Fortaine.

He stared at the words, written in familiar, unmistakable handwriting.
I'll receive you at my fort.

* * *

Fortaine eclipsed even Ravenel, powerful and beautiful, its towers high-flung, its jutting crenelles biting the sky. It rose to a sheer, impossible height and, from every vantage, it was flying Laurent's banners. The pennants seemed to float on the air effortlessly, patterned silk in blue and gold.

Damen reined in as they crested the hill, his army a dark fringe of banners and spears behind him. His order to ride had been unforgiving, calling on his men, the battle barely over.

Of the three thousand Akielons who had fought at Charcy, just over half had survived. They had ridden, fought and ridden again, leaving behind only a garrison to attend to the bodies, the scattered armour and ownerless weapons. Jord and the other Veretians who had stayed to fight were riding with him in a small clump, nervy and uncertain of what to do.

By that time, Damen had received the tally of the dead: twelve hundred of us, six and a half thousand of them.

He knew the men were behaving differently towards him since the battle's end, falling back as he passed. He had seen their looks of fear and stunned awe. Most of them had not fought with him before. Perhaps they hadn't known what to expect.

Now they were here; they had arrived, dirt and grime covered, wounded, some of them, pushing past exhaustion because it was what discipline

demanded of them, to look out at the sight that greeted them.

Rows upon rows of peaked, coloured tents were pitched on the field outside Fortaine's walls, the sun lighting the pavilions, the banners, and the silks of a graceful encampment. It was a city of tents, and it camped a fresh, intact force of Laurent's men, who had not fought and died through the morning.

The constructed arrogance of the display was intentional. It said, exquisitely: Did you exert yourself at Charcy? I have been here examining my nails.

Nikandros reined in alongside him. 'Uncle and nephew are alike. They send other men to do their fighting for them.'

Damen was silent. What he felt in his chest was a hardness like anger. He looked at the elegant silken city and thought about men dying on the field at Charcy.

Some kind of herald's greeting party was riding towards them. He gripped the Regent's bloody, torn banner in his hand.

'Just me,' said Damen, and put his heels into his horse.

About halfway across the field, he was met by the herald, who arrived with an anxious party of four attendants saying something urgent about protocol. Damen listened to four words of it.

'Don't worry,' said Damen. 'He's expecting me.'

Inside the encampment, he swung down off his horse and tossed the reins to a passing servant, ignoring the flurry of activity that his arrival provoked, the heralds cantering in desperately behind him.

Without even pulling off his gauntlets, he strode to the tent. He knew its high scalloped folds; he knew the starburst pennant. No one stopped him. Not even when he reached the tent and dismissed the soldier at the entrance with a single order: 'Go.' He didn't bother to see if his order was obeyed. The soldier let him through: of course he did; this had all been planned. Laurent was ready for him whether he came docilely behind the herald or, as he did now, the dirt and the sweat of the battle still on him, blood dried in the places where a cursory swipe with a cloth had not reached it.

He swept the tent flap back with an arm, and stepped inside.

Silken privacy, as the tent flap settled behind him. He stood in a pavilion tent, its high ceiling canopied like a flowerhead, supported by six thick interior poles wrapped in spiralled silk. It was enclosing despite its size, the fall of the flap enough to mute the sounds from outside.

This was the place Laurent had chosen. He made himself acquainted with it. There were a few furnishings, low seats, cushions, and in the background a trestle table hung with its own coverings, and set with shallow bowls of sugared pears and oranges. As though they were going to nibble at sweetmeats.

He lifted his gaze from the table to the exquisitely attired figure leaned with a single shoulder against the tent pole, watching him.

Laurent said, 'Hello, lover.'

It was not going to be simple. Damen forced himself to take it in. He forced himself to take it all in, and to stroll himself inside the tent, so that he stood in the elegant surrounds in full armour, crushing delicate embroidered silks under his muddied feet.

He threw the Regent's banner down onto the table. It clattered, in a mess of mud and stained silk. Then turned his eyes to Laurent. He wondered what Laurent saw when he looked at him. He knew he looked different.

'Charcy is won.'

'I thought it would be.'

He made himself breathe through that. 'Your men think you're a coward. Nikandros thinks that you deceived us. That you sent us to Charcy, and left us there to die by your uncle's sword.'

'And is that what you think?' said Laurent.

'No.' Damen said, 'Nikandros doesn't know you.'

'And you do.'

Damen looked at the arrangement of Laurent's weight, the careful way he was holding his body. Laurent's left hand was still casually resting against the tent pole.

Deliberately, he stepped forward, and clasped Laurent's right shoulder.

Nothing, for a moment. Damen tightened his grip, and ground in with his thumb. Harder. He watched Laurent turn ashen. Finally, Laurent said, '*Stop.*'

He let go. Laurent had wrenched back and was clutching his shoulder, where the blue of his doublet had darkened. Blood, welling up from some newly bandaged, subterranean place, and Laurent was staring at him, his eyes oddly wide.

'You wouldn't break an oath,' said Damen, past the feeling in his chest. 'Even to me.'

He had to force himself back. The tent was large enough to accommodate the movement, four paces between them.

Laurent didn't answer. He still had a hand clutched to his shoulder, his fingers sticky with blood.

Laurent said, 'Even to you?'

He made himself look at Laurent. The truth was an awful presence in his chest. He thought of the single night they had spent together. He thought of Laurent, giving himself, dark-eyed and vulnerable, and of the Regent, who knew how to break a man.

Outside, two armies were poised to fight. The moment was here, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He remembered the Regent's constant suggestion: *Bed my nephew*. He had done that, wooed him, won him.

Charcy, he saw, hadn't mattered to the Regent. It hadn't meant anything. The Regent's real weapon against Laurent had always been Damen himself.

'I've come to tell you who I am.'

Laurent was so keenly familiar, the shade of his hair, the strapped down clothing, the full lips that he held tense or cruelly repressed, the ruthless asceticism, the unbearable blue eyes.

'I know who you are, Damianos,' said Laurent.

Damen heard it, as the interior of the tent seemed to change, so that all of the objects in it took on a different shape.

'Did you think,' said Laurent, 'I wouldn't recognise the man who killed my brother?'

Each word was an ice chip. Painful, sharp; a shard. Laurent's voice was perfectly steady. Damen stepped back blindly. His thoughts swam.

'I knew in the palace, when they dragged you in front of me,' said Laurent. The words continued, steady, relentless. 'I knew in the baths when I ordered you flayed. I knew—'

'At Ravenel?' said Damen.

Drawing breath with difficulty, he faced Laurent while the seconds passed.

'If you knew,' said Damen, 'how could you—'

'Let you fuck me?'

His own chest hurt, so that he almost didn't notice the signs of it in Laurent, the control, the face, pale at any time, now white.

'I needed a victory at Charcy. You provided it. It was worth enduring,' Laurent spoke the terrible, lucid words, 'your fumbling attentions for that.'

It hurt so much it took the breath from his throat. 'You're lying.' Damen's heart was pounding. 'You're lying.' The words were too loud. 'You thought I

was leaving. You practically threw me out.’ He said it, as the realisation blossomed inside him. ‘You knew who I was. You knew who I was the night we made love.’

He thought of Laurent surrendering, not the first time, but the second, the slower, sweeter time, the tension in him, the way he had—

‘You weren’t making love to a slave, you were making love to *me*.’ And he couldn’t think that through clearly but he could catch a glimmer of it, a glimmer of the edge of it. ‘I thought you wouldn’t, I thought you’d never—’ He took a step forward. ‘Laurent, six years ago, when I fought Auguste, I—’

‘*Don’t you say his name.*’ The words were forced out of Laurent. ‘Don’t you ever say his name, you *killed my brother.*’

Laurent was breathing shallowly, almost panting as he spoke, his hands rigid on the edge of the table behind him.

‘Is that what you want to hear, that I knew who you were and I still let you fuck me, my brother’s killer, who cut him down like an animal on the field?’

‘No,’ said Damen, his stomach clenching with cramp, ‘that isn’t—’

‘Shall I ask you how you did it? What he looked like when your sword went in?’

‘*No,*’ said Damen.

‘Or shall I tell you about the illusion of the man who gave me good counsel. Who stood by me. Who never lied to me.’

‘*I never lied to you.*’

The words were awful in the silence that followed them.

“‘Laurent, I am your slave’?” said Laurent.

He felt the breath forced out from his lungs.

‘Don’t,’ he said, ‘talk about it like—’

‘Like?’

‘Like it was cold-blooded; like I controlled it. Like we didn’t both close our eyes and pretend I was a slave.’ He made himself say the exposing words. ‘I was your slave.’

‘There was no slave,’ said Laurent. ‘He never existed. I don’t know what manner of man stands before me now. All I know is that I am facing him for the first time.’

‘He is here.’ His flesh ached as if he had been prised open. ‘We are the same.’

‘Kneel then,’ said Laurent. ‘Kiss my boot.’

He looked into Laurent's excoriating blue eyes. The impossibility of it was like a sharp pain. He couldn't do it. He could only gaze at Laurent across the distance between them. The words hurt.

'You're right. I'm not a slave,' he said. 'I am the King.' He said, 'I killed your brother. And now I hold your fort.'

As he spoke, Damen drew out a knife. He felt rather than saw all of Laurent's attention swing to it. The physical signs were small: Laurent's lips parted, his body tensed. Laurent didn't look at the knife. He kept his eyes on Damen, who looked right back at him.

'So you will parley with me as with a king, and you will tell me why you called me here.'

Deliberately, Damen tossed the knife onto the floor of the tent. Laurent's eyes didn't follow its path. His gaze held steady.

'Didn't you know?' said Laurent. 'My uncle is in Akielos.'

CHAPTER FOUR

‘LAURENT,’ HE SAID, ‘*what have you done?*’

‘Does it bother you to think of him hurting your country?’

‘You know it does. Are we playing now with the fate of nations? It won’t bring your brother back.’

There was a violent silence.

‘You know, my uncle knew who you were,’ said Laurent. ‘He spent this whole time waiting for us to fuck. He wanted to tell me who you were himself, and watch it wreck me. Oh, had you guessed that? You just thought you’d fuck me anyway? Couldn’t help yourself?’

‘You ordered me to your rooms,’ said Damen, ‘and pushed me down on the bed. I said, “*Don’t do this*”.’

‘You *said*, “Kiss me”,’ said Laurent, each word enunciated clearly. ‘You said, “Laurent, I need to be inside you, you feel so good, Laurent,”’ He switched to Akielon, as Damen had, at the climax, “it’s never felt like this, I can’t hold on, I’m going to—”’

‘*Stop*,’ said Damen. He was breathing in quick, shallow breaths, as he might after heavy exertion. He stared at Laurent.

‘Charcy,’ said Laurent, ‘was a distraction. I have it from Guion. My uncle sailed for Ios three days ago, and by now he has made landfall.’

Damen moved three steps away, to let that information sink in. He found himself with his hand braced on one of the tent poles.

‘I see. And my men are to die fighting him for you, the way that they did at Charcy?’

Laurent’s smile was not pleasant. ‘On that table is a list of supplies and troops. I will give it to you, in support of your campaign to the south.’

‘In exchange for,’ said Damen, steadily.

‘Delpha,’ said Laurent in the same tone.

He felt the shock that made him remember that this was Laurent, and not any other young man of twenty. The province of Delpha belonged to Nikandros, his friend and supporter, who had pledged to him in trust. It was

valuable in its own right, richly fertile, with a strong seaport. It had symbolic value too, as the site of Akielos's greatest victory, and Vere's greatest defeat. Its return would strengthen Laurent's position, but weaken his own.

He had not come here prepared to negotiate. Laurent had. Laurent was here as the Prince of Vere facing the King of Akielos. Laurent had known who he was all along. The list, written in Laurent's own hand, had been prepared before this meeting.

The thought of the Regent in his country was a danger that was almost sickening in its intensity. The Regent already controlled the Akielon palace guard, which had been his gift to Kastor. Now the Regent himself was in Ios, his troops poised at any moment to take the capital on his command—and Damen was here, hundreds of miles away, facing Laurent and his impossible ultimatum.

He said, *'Did you plan this from the beginning?'*

'The hard part was getting Guion to let me into his fort.' Laurent said it steadily, the private edge to his voice a little more private than usual.

Damen said, 'In the palace you had me beaten, drugged, whipped. And you ask me to give up Delpha? Why don't you tell me instead why I shouldn't simply hand you over to your uncle, in exchange for his aid against Kastor?'

'Because I knew who you were,' said Laurent, 'and when you killed Touars and humiliated my uncle's faction, I sent the news of it echoing to every corner of my country. So that if you ever crawled back onto your throne there would be no possibility of an alliance between you and my uncle. Do you want to play this game against me? I will take you apart.'

'Take me apart?' Damen said deliberately. 'If I opposed you, the remaining scrap of land you hold would have a different enemy on each side, and your efforts would be split in three directions.'

'Believe me,' said Laurent, 'when I say that you would have my undivided attention.'

Damen let his eyes pass over Laurent slowly, where he stood.

'You're alone. You don't have allies. You don't have friends. You've proven true everything your uncle ever said about you. You made deals with Akielos. You even bedded an Akielon—and by now, everyone knows it. You're clinging to independence with a single fort and the tatters of a reputation.'

He gave every word its weight. 'So let me tell you the terms of this alliance. You will give me everything on this list, and in return I will aid you

against your uncle. Delpha remains with Akielos. Let's not pretend you have anything here worth a bargain.'

There was a silence after he spoke. He and Laurent stood three paces from one another.

'There's something else I have,' said Laurent, 'that you want.'

Laurent's cool blue eyes were on him, his pose relaxed where he stood, with all the filtered light of the tent in his lashes. Damen felt those words working on him, his body reacting almost against his will.

'Guion,' said Laurent, 'has agreed to testify in writing to the details of the deal that he brokered between Kastor and my uncle during his time as Ambassador.'

Damen flushed. It was not what he had expected Laurent to say, and Laurent knew it. For a moment, what was unsaid hung thickly between them.

'Please,' said Laurent, 'insult me further. Tell me more about my tattered reputation. Tell me all the ways that bending over for you has damaged my position. As if being fucked into the mattress by the King of Akielos could be anything other than demeaning. I am dying to hear it.'

'Laurent—'

'Did you think,' said Laurent, 'that I would come here without the means to enforce my terms? I hold the only proof of Kastor's treachery that extends beyond your word.'

'My word is enough to the men that matter.'

'Is it? Then by all means, reject my offer. I will execute Guion for treason and hold the letter over the nearest candle.'

Damen's hands became fists. He felt fundamentally outmanoeuvred—even as he could see that Laurent was bargaining alone, with very little, for his political life. Laurent had to be desperate to propose fighting alongside Akielos; alongside Damianos of Akielos.

'Are we going to play another kind of pretend?' Damen said. 'That it never happened?'

'If you are concerned it will go unmentioned between us, never fear. Every man in my camp knows that you served me in bed.'

'And that is how it is to be between us?' said Damen. 'Mercenary? Cold?'

'How did you think it would be?' said Laurent. 'You'd take me to your bed for the public consummation?'

It hurt. Damen said, 'I won't do this without Nikandros, and he won't give up Delpha.'

'He will when you give him Ios.'

It was too neat. He hadn't thought as far as Kastor's defeat, or who would become kyros in Ios, the traditional seat of the King's closest adviser. Nikandros was the ideal candidate.

'I see you've thought of everything,' said Damen, bitterly. 'It didn't have to be—you could have come to me, and asked for my help, I would have—'

'Killed the rest of my family?'

Laurent said it standing straight-backed before the table, his gaze unwavering. Thickly, Damen remembered running his sword through the man he'd believed was the Regent; as if killing the Regent would be his expiation. It wouldn't.

He thought of all Laurent had done here, every piece of impersonal leverage, to control this meeting, to ensure it played out on his terms.

'Congratulations,' said Damen. 'You've forced my hand. You have what you want. Delpha, in exchange for your aid in the south. Nothing given freely, nothing done out of feeling, everything coerced, with bloodless planning.'

'Then I have your agreement? Say it.'

'You have my agreement.'

'Good,' said Laurent. He took a step back. Then, as if a pillar of control had finally collapsed, Laurent surrendered his full weight to the table behind him, his face drained of all colour. He was trembling, his hairline pricked with the sweat of injury. He said: 'Now get out.'

* * *

The herald was speaking to him.

Damen heard it as if from very far away and understood, at length, that there was a small party of his own men here to ride with him back to his camp. He spoke words to the herald, or thought he did, because the herald went away and left him to mount his horse.

He put his hand on the saddle before he mounted, and for a moment closed his eyes. Laurent had known who he was, and had still made love to him. He wondered what mix of yearning and self-delusion had allowed Laurent to do that.

He was battered by what had happened, bruised and aching, his whole body throbbed. He had not felt the blows struck against him in battle until now, when they all came together. The unsteady physical exhaustion of the melee was on him; he couldn't move; he couldn't think.

If he'd imagined it, it was as a single, cataclysmic event, an unmasking that, whatever followed, would be over. Violence would have been both punishment and release. He had never imagined that it would instead go on and on; that the truth had been known; that it had been painfully absorbed; that it would be this crushing pressure that wouldn't leave his chest.

Laurent had tamped down the smothered emotion in his eyes, and would endure an alliance with his brother's killer, though he felt nothing but aversion. If he could do it, Damen could do it. He could make impersonal negotiations, speak in the formal language of kings.

The ache of loss didn't make sense, because Laurent had never been his. He had known that. The delicate thing that had grown between them had never had a right to exist. It had always had an end date, the moment that Damen reassumed his mantle.

Now he had to return with these men to his own camp. The ride back was brief, less than a half mile separated their armies. He made it, with his duty firm in his mind. If it hurt, it was fitting; it was simply kingship.

* * *

There was still one thing that he had to do.

When he finally dismounted, an Akielon city of tents had risen up to mirror the Veretian one, on his orders. He slid down from the saddle and passed off his reins to a soldier. He was very tired by now in a purely physical way that he felt as an effort of concentration. He had to put aside the tremor in his muscles, in his arms and legs.

On the eastern side of the camp was his own tent, which offered sheets, a pallet, a place to close his eyes, and rest. He didn't enter it. He called Nikandros to the command tent instead, raised in the centre of the army encampment.

It was now night, and the entrance of the tent was lit by torch posts that flamed orange at waist height. Inside, six braziers made jumping shadows out of the table, the chair set to face the entrance, an audience throne.

Even making camp so close to a Veretian troop had the men on edge. They had superfluous patrols and galloping hornsmen with every nerve on alert. If a Veretian threw a pebble, the entire army would launch into action.

They didn't know yet why they were making camp here; they had simply obeyed his orders. Nikandros would be the first to hear the news.

He remembered Nikandros's pride the day that Theomedes had given him Delpha. It had meant more than the bestowal of lands, or stone and mortar. It had been proof to Nikandros that he had honoured the memory of his father. Now Damen was going to take it from him, in a piece of cold-blooded statesmanship.

He waited, not turning away from what it meant, now, to be King. If he could give Laurent up, he could do this.

Nikandros came into the tent.

It wasn't pleasant, the offer or the price. Nikandros couldn't completely hide the hurt as he searched for understanding that he didn't find. Damen gazed back at him, unbending and unflinching. They had played together as boys, but now Nikandros faced his King.

'The Veretian Prince is to be given my home, and he is to be your primary ally in this war?'

'Yes.'

'And you have made up your mind?'

'I have.'

Damen remembered hoping for a homecoming where it could be between them as it was in the old days. As if friendship of that kind could survive statesmanship.

'He's playing us against each other,' said Nikandros. 'This is calculated. He is trying to weaken you.'

Damen said, 'I know. It's like him.'

'Then—' Nikandros stopped, and turned away in frustration. 'He kept you as a slave. He *left us* at Charcy.'

'There was a reason for that.'

'But I am not to know it.'

The list of supplies and men Laurent was offering them lay on the table. It had been more than Damen would have expected, but it was also finite. It was roughly the size of Nikandros's contribution, equal to the addition of another kyros, perhaps, to his side.

It was not worth Delpha. He could see that Nikandros knew it, as Damen had known it.

‘I would make this easier,’ said Damen, ‘if I could.’

Silence, while Nikandros kept his words in check.

Damen said, ‘Who will I lose?’

‘Makedon,’ said Nikandros. ‘Straton. The northern bannermen, maybe. In Akielos, you’ll find your allies less helpful, the commoners less welcoming, even hostile. There will be problems with troop cohesion on the march, and more problems in battle.’

He said, ‘Tell me what else.’

‘The men will talk,’ said Nikandros. He was pushing the words out with distaste, he did not want to say, ‘About—’

Damen said, ‘No.’

And then, as though Nikandros couldn’t help the words that came out next, ‘If you would at least take off the cuff—’

‘No. It stays.’ He refused to lower his eyes.

Nikandros turned away and put his palms flat on the table, resting his weight there. Damen could see the resistance in Nikandros’s shoulders, bunched across his back, his palms still flat on the table.

Into the painful silence, Damen said, ‘And you? Will I lose you?’

It was all he allowed himself. It came out in a steady enough voice, and he made himself wait, and say nothing more.

As though the words were coming up from the depths of him, against his will, Nikandros said, ‘I want Ios.’

Damen let out a breath. Laurent, he realised suddenly, wasn’t playing them against one another. He was playing to Nikandros. There was a dangerous expertise in all of this; in knowing how far Nikandros’s loyalty might be stretched, and what would keep it from snapping. Laurent’s presence in the room was almost tangible.

‘Listen to me, Damianos. If you have ever valued my counsel, listen. He is not on our side. He is Veretian, and he’ll be bringing an army into our country.’

‘To fight his uncle. Not to fight us.’

‘If someone kills your family you don’t rest until they are dead.’

The words dropped between them. He remembered Laurent’s eyes in the tent as he had procured this alliance for himself.

Nikandros was shaking his head. 'Or do you really think he's forgiven you for killing his brother?'

'No. He hates me for it.' He said it steadily, without flinching. 'But he hates his uncle more. He needs us. And we need him.'

'You need him enough that you would strip me of my home, because he asked you to?'

'Yes,' said Damen.

He watched Nikandros struggle with that.

'I'm doing this for Akielos,' said Damen.

Nikandros said, 'If you're wrong there is no Akielos.'

* * *

He spoke to a few soldiers on his way back to his tent, a word or two here or there as he moved through the camp, a habit since his first command at seventeen. The men came to attention as he passed, and said only, 'Exalted,' if he spoke. It was not like sitting around a campfire swilling wine, exchanging low tales and ribald speculations.

Jord and the other Veretians from Ravenel had been sent back to Laurent to rejoin his army in the extravagant tents at Fortaine. Damen hadn't seen them go.

It was a warm night, with no need for fires other than for cooking and for light. He knew his way because the rigorous lines of the Akielon camp were easy to follow even in torchlight. The drilled, disciplined troops had done quick and efficient work, the weapons were cleaned and stored, the fires were lit, the stout tent pegs were hammered into the ground.

His tent was made of plain white canvas. There was not much to distinguish it other than its size and the two guards standing armed at the entrance. They came to attention, honour-flushed at the duty; it showed more in the younger guard Pallas than the older Aktis, but was evident in the stance of both. Damen made sure he gave a brief sign of his appreciation as he passed, as was fitting.

He lifted the tent flap, let it settle behind him.

Inside, the tent was an austere open space, lit with grease candles on spikes. The privacy was like a blessing. He didn't have to hold himself up, he could let the weight of exhaustion bear him down to rest. His body ached for it. He wanted only to prise his armour from himself and close his eyes.

Alone, he didn't have to be King. He stopped and went cold, an awful feeling passing over him, an unsteadiness that was like nausea.

He wasn't alone.

She was naked, at the base of the stark pallet, her full breasts hanging downwards, her forehead to the floor. She didn't have palace training, and so could not quite disguise the fact that she was nervous. Her fair hair was caught back from her face in a fragile clasp, a northern custom. She was perhaps nineteen or twenty, her body trained and ready for him. She had prepared a bath in an unadorned wooden tub, so that if he pleased he might make use of it; or of her.

He had known that there were slaves with Nikandros's army, following behind with the carts and the supplies. He had known that when he returned to Akielos there would be slaves.

'Get up,' he heard himself say, awkwardly, a wrong order for a slave.

There was a time when he would have expected this, and known how to behave around it. He would have appreciated the charm of her rustic northern skills, and bedded her, if not tonight then certainly in the morning. Nikandros knew him, and she was his type. She was Nikandros's best, that was evident; a slave from his personal retinue, perhaps even his favourite, because Damen was his guest and his King.

She got up. He didn't speak. She had a collar around her neck, and metal cuffs around her small wrists that were like the one that he—

'Exalted,' she said, quietly. 'What is wrong?'

He let out a strange, unsteady breath. He realised that his breathing had been unsteady for some time, that his flesh was unsteady. That the silence had been stretching out between them too long.

'No slaves,' said Damen. 'Tell the Keeper. Send no one else. For the length of the campaign I will be dressed by an adjutant, or a squire.'

'Yes, Exalted,' she said, obedient and confused and hiding it, or trying to, making for the tent entrance, her cheeks red.

'Wait.' He couldn't send her naked through the camp. 'Here,' he unpinned his cloak, and whirled it around her shoulders. He felt the wrongness of it, pushing against every protocol. 'The guard will escort you back.'

'Yes, Exalted,' she said, because she could not say anything else, and she left him thankfully alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRST IMPACT of the alliance having fallen on Nikandros, the morning's announcement was less personal, but more difficult, and done on a grander scale.

Heralds had been galloping back and forth between their camps since before dawn. The preparations for this announcement had been developed before the camp stirred in grey light. Meetings of this kind could take months to arrange; the speed at which it happened now was dizzying, if you did not know Laurent.

Damen summoned Makedon to the command pavilion, and called for his army to form up before him for an address. He sat on the audience throne, with a single oak seat empty beside him and Nikandros standing behind him. He watched the army wheel into place, fifteen hundred men in disciplined lines. Damen's view commanded the whole sweep of the fields, his army arrayed in a two-block formation before him, with a clear path through their centre that led right to the base of Damen's throne beneath its pavilion.

It had been Damen's choice not to tell Makedon independently, but to gather him here for the address, as unaware of what was coming as the soldiers. It was a risk, and every aspect of it must be managed carefully. Makedon of the notched belt held the largest provincial army of the north, and though technically a bannerman under Nikandros's command, he was a power in his own right. If he left in anger with his men, he would end Damen's chances at a campaign.

Damen felt Makedon react when the Veretian herald came galloping back into their camp. Makedon was dangerously volatile. He had disobeyed kings before. He had broken the peace treaty only weeks earlier, launching a personal counterattack on Vere.

'His Highness, Laurent, Prince of Vere and Acquitart,' called the herald, and Damen felt the men in the tent around him react further. Nikandros kept his outward appearance unvarying, even if Damen could feel the tension in him. Damen's own heartbeat sped up, though he kept his face impersonal.

When prince met prince there were protocols to observe. You did not greet each other alone in a diaphanous tent. Or thrown to the ground in chains in a palace viewing chamber.

The last time Akielon and Veretian royalty had met ceremonially had been six years ago, at Marlas, when the Regent had surrendered to Damen's father, King Theomedes. Out of respect to the Veretians, Damen had not been present, but he remembered the satisfaction of knowing that Veretian royalty was bending its knee to his father. He had liked it. He had probably liked it, he thought, about as much as his men disliked what was happening today, and for the same reasons.

The Veretian banners were visible, streaming across the field, six abreast, and thirty-six in length, with Laurent riding at their head.

Damen waited, sitting powerfully on the oak throne, his arms and thighs bare in the Akielon style, his army stretching out before him in immaculate, unmoving lines.

It was not like the ecstatic entries Laurent had made into the towns and villages of Vere. No one swooned or cheered or threw flowers at his feet. The camp was silent. The Akielon soldiers watched him ride through the centre of their ranks towards the pavilion, marked out in sunlight, their own armour and sharpened blades and points of spears glinting; polished after having been so recently used to kill.

But the pure, insolent grace was the same, his bright head uncovered. He was not wearing armour, or any symbol of rank save for the gold circlet on his forehead, but when he swung down off his horse and tossed the reins to a servant, no pair of eyes looked anywhere else.

Damen stood up.

The whole tent reacted, the men standing, shifting, lowering their eyes for the King. Laurent strolled in, beautifully; he seemed sublimely unaware of the reaction that his presence was causing. He came down the path that was cleared for him, as though walking unmolested through an Akielon camp was simply his right. Damen's own men watched as a man might watch his enemy sauntering into his house, unable to prevent it.

'My brother of Akielos,' said Laurent.

Damen met his eyes without flinching. Everyone knew that in the Akielon language, princes of foreign nations addressed each other in the fraternal.

'Our brother of Vere,' said Damen.

He was half aware of Laurent's entourage, liveried servants and some unidentified men outside, and several courtiers from Fortaine in attendance. He recognised Laurent's Captain, Enguerran. He recognised Guion, the Regent's most loyal Councillor, who, sometime in the last three days, had switched sides.

Damen lifted his hand, offering it palm up, with fingers outstretched. Laurent lifted his own hand calmly, resting it atop Damen's. Their fingers met.

He could feel the eyes of every Akielon in the tent on him. They proceeded slowly. Laurent's fingers rested infinitesimally above his own. He felt the moment when the men around him realised what was going to happen.

Reaching the dais, they sat, facing outward, the twin oak seats now twin thrones.

Shock; it travelled like a wave over the men and women in the tent; out, over the gathered ranks of soldiers. Everyone could see where Laurent and Damen sat: side by side.

He knew what it meant. This was the status of a compeer. It announced equality.

'We have called you here today to witness our accord,' said Damen, in a clear voice that carried over the noise. 'Today we mark the alliance of our nations against those pretenders and usurpers who seek to assail our thrones.'

Laurent settled in as though the place had been made for him, and adopted the posture he typically favoured, one leg straight out before him, a fine-boned wrist balanced on the arm of the throne.

Explosions of outrage, furious exclamations, there were hands on the hilts of swords. Laurent did not look particularly concerned by this, or anything.

'In Vere, it is customary to bestow a gift on a favoured companion,' said Laurent in Akielon. 'Vere therefore offers this gift to Akielos, as a symbol of our alliance, now and in all the days to come.' His fingers lifted. A Veretian servant came forward, a cushion resting like a platter on his outstretched forearms.

Damen felt the tent fade away before his eyes.

He forgot the men and women watching. He forgot the need to keep his army and his generals from revolt. He only saw what lay on the cushion that the servant bore towards the dais.

Coiled and personal, Laurent's gift was a Veretian whip, made of gold.

Damen recognised it. It had a carved golden handle, with a ruby or garnet inset distinctively into its base, held in the jaws of a great cat. He remembered the handler's rod with the same carvings, with its long filigree chain that had affixed to the collar around his neck. The great cat resembled the lion symbol of his own house.

He remembered Laurent's hand giving a little tug on the rod, infuriating, more than that. He remembered having his legs kicked apart, his hands bound, the thick wood of the post against his chest, the lash about to fall on his back. He remembered Laurent, arranging himself against the opposite wall, settling his shoulders there, positioning himself to watch every slightest expression on Damen's face.

His gaze swung to Laurent. He knew he had flushed, he could feel the heat in his own cheeks. In front of the gathered generals, he couldn't say, *What have you done?*

Outside the tent, something had started happening.

Veretian attendants were placing a series of ten ornamental whipping blocks at even intervals outside the pavilion. Ten men were pulled like sacks of grain from their horses by Veretian handlers, stripped, then bound.

Inside the tent, Akielon men and women were looking at one another questioningly, others craning their necks to see.

In front of the gathered army, the ten captives were shoved towards the blocks, stumbling a little, their balance precarious, their hands tied behind their backs.

'These are the men who attacked the Akielon village of Tarasis,' said Laurent. 'They are clan mercenaries, paid for by my uncle, who killed your people in an attempt to wreck the peace between our nations.'

He had the attention of the tent now. The eyes of every Akielon were on him, from the soldiers to the officers—even the generals. Makedon and his soldiers, in particular, had seen the destruction at Tarasis first-hand.

'The whip and the men are Vere's gift to Akielos,' said Laurent, and then he turned his melting blue eyes on Damen. 'The first fifty lashes are my gift to you.'

He couldn't have stopped it, even if he had wanted to. The atmosphere in the pavilion was thick with satisfaction and approval. His men wanted it, appreciated it, appreciated Laurent for it, the golden youth who could order men torn apart, and watch it, unflinching.

The Veretian handlers were hammering the whipping blocks into the earth, and then jerking at them to test that they would hold weight.

A part of Damen's mind recognised how perfectly this gift had been judged, the exquisite virtuosity of it: Laurent was delivering him a backhanded blow with one hand, and with the other, caressing his generals as a man scratches a dog under the chin.

Damen heard himself say, 'Vere is generous.'

'After all,' Laurent held his gaze, 'I remember what you like.'

The stripped men were tied down.

The Veretian handlers took up position, each standing by one of the bound prisoners, each holding a whip. The call went out. Damen felt his pulse speed up as he realised he was going to watch Laurent have ten men flayed alive in front of him.

'Furthermore,' said Laurent, his voice pitched to carry, 'Fortaine's bounty is yours. Its physicians will tend to your wounded. Its storehouses will feed your men. The Akielon victory at Charcy was hard-won. All that Vere gained while you fought is yours, and it is deserved. I will not profit from any hardship that befalls the rightful King of Akielos or his people.'

You will lose Straton. You will lose Makedon, Nikandros had said, but he hadn't counted on the fact that Laurent would arrive, and begin, dangerously, to control everything.

It took a long time. Fifty lashes, brought with effort of shoulder and arm down onto a man's unprotected back, was a protracted undertaking. Damen made himself watch it all. He didn't look at Laurent. Laurent, he knew intimately, could level that endless blue gaze forever while watching a man flayed. He remembered in exact detail what it felt like to be whipped with Laurent's eyes on on him.

Bloody and pulped, the men, who were no longer men, were cut from the whipping blocks. That took time too, because more than one handler was needed to lift each man, and no one was quite certain which of the men were unconscious and which were dead.

Damen said, 'We have a personal gift too.'

The eyes of those in the tent turned to him. Laurent's gift had forestalled any open revolt, but there was still a rift between Akielos and Vere.

Last night, in the evening darkness of the tent, he had pulled this gift from his packs and looked down at it, feeling its weight in his hands. Once or twice before, he had thought about this moment. In his most private thoughts,

he'd imagined it happening with the two of them alone together. He hadn't imagined it like this, the private made public, and painful. He didn't have Laurent's ability to hurt with what mattered most.

It was his turn to cement the alliance between their nations. And there was only one way to do that.

'Every man here knows that you kept us as a slave,' said Damen. He said it loudly enough that all those gathered in the pavilion tent could hear. 'We wear your cuff on our wrist. But today, the Prince of Vere will prove himself our equal.'

He gestured and one of his squires came forward. It was still wrapped in cloth. He felt the sudden tension in Laurent, though there was no outward change.

Damen said, 'You asked for it, once.'

The squire drew back the cloth to reveal a gold cuff. He felt rather than saw the tightness in Laurent. The cuff, unmistakably, was the twin to the one Damen wore, altered last night by a blacksmith for Laurent's finer wrist.

Damen said, 'Wear it for me.'

For a moment he thought Laurent wasn't going to do it. But in public, Laurent had no recourse to refusal.

Laurent extended his hand. And then waited, palm outstretched, his eyes lifting to meet Damen's.

Laurent said, 'Put it on me.'

Every pair of eyes in the tent was on him. Damen took Laurent's wrist in his hand. He would have to unlace the fabric and push the sleeve back.

He could feel the devouring gazes of the Akielons in the tent, as hungry for this as they had been for the whipping. Rumours of Damen's enslavement in Vere had spread like fire through the camp. To see the Veretian Prince wear the gold cuff of a palace bed slave in turn was shocking, intimate, a symbol of Damen's ownership.

Damen felt the hard, curved edge of the cuff when he lifted it. Laurent's blue eyes remained cool, but under Damen's thumb, Laurent's pulse was rabbit fast.

'My throne for your throne,' Damen said. He pushed back the fabric. It was more bare skin than Laurent had ever shown in public, on display to the entire tent. 'Help me regain my kingdom, and I'll see you King of Vere.' Damen fitted the cuff to Laurent's left wrist.

‘I’m overjoyed to wear a gift that reminds me of you,’ said Laurent. The cuff locked into place. He didn’t withdraw his wrist, just left it leaned on the arm of the throne, laces open and gold cuff in full view.

Horns were blown the length of the ranks, and refreshments were brought. All that had to happen now was for Damen to endure the rest of the welcoming ceremony, and at the end, sign their treaty.

A series of display fights were performed, marking the occasion with disciplined choreography. Laurent watched with polite attention, and underneath that, possibly real attention, as it would suit him to catalogue Akielon fighting techniques.

Damen could see Makedon watching them with an impassive face. Across from Makedon, Vannes was taking refreshments. Vannes had been the Regent’s Ambassador to the all-female court of the Vaskian Empress, who it was said ripped men apart with her leopards for public sport.

He thought of the delicate dealings with the Vaskian clans that Laurent had engineered, all along their ride south.

He said, ‘Are you going to tell me what won Vannes to your side?’

Laurent said, ‘It’s no secret. She is to be the first member of my Council.’

‘And Guion?’

‘I threatened his sons. He took it seriously. I had already killed one of them.’

Makedon was approaching the thrones.

There was an air of expectancy as Makedon came forward, the men in the tent shifting to see what he would do. Makedon’s hatred of Veretians was well known. Even if Laurent had forestalled open rebellion, Makedon would not accept the leadership of a Veretian prince. Makedon bowed to Damen, then stood without showing any respect to Laurent. He looked out briefly at the Akielon choreographed fights, then his eyes travelled over Laurent, slowly and arrogantly.

‘If this is truly an alliance between equals,’ said Makedon, ‘it’s a pity we can’t see a display of Veretian fighting.’

You are seeing one right now and you don’t even know it, thought Damen. Laurent kept his attention on Makedon.

‘Or a contest,’ Makedon said. ‘Veretian against Akielon.’

‘Are you proposing to challenge Lady Vannes to a duel?’ said Laurent.

Blue eyes met brown. Laurent was relaxed on the throne, and Damen was too aware of what Makedon saw: a youth, less than half his age; a princeling

who shirked battle; a courtier with lazy, indoor elegance.

‘Our King has a reputation on the field,’ said Makedon, his eyes passing over Laurent slowly. ‘Why not a demonstration fight between you both?’

‘But we are like brothers.’ Laurent smiled. Damen felt Laurent’s fingertips touch his; their fingers slid into one another. He knew from long experience when Laurent was repressing everything into a single hard kernel of distaste.

Heralds brought the document, ink on paper, written in two languages, side by side so that neither one was atop the other. It was simply worded. It did not contain endless clauses and subclauses. It was a brief declaration: Vere and Akielos, united against their usurpers, allied in friendship and common cause.

He signed it. Laurent signed it. *Damianos V* and *Laurent R*, with a big loopy L.

‘To our wondrous union,’ said Laurent.

And then it was done, and Laurent was rising, and the Veretians were departing, a blue stream of banners riding out in a long, receding procession across the field.

* * *

And the Akielons were filing out too, the officers and the generals, the dismissed slaves, until he was alone with Nikandros, whose eyes were on him, furious, and with all the flat knowledge of an old friend.

‘You gave him Delpha,’ said Nikandros.

‘It wasn’t—’

‘A bedding gift?’ said Nikandros.

‘You go too far.’

‘Do I? I remember Ianestra. And Ianora,’ said Nikandros. ‘And Eunides’s daughter. And Kyra the girl from the village—’

‘That’s enough. I won’t talk about this.’ He had turned his eyes away, fixing on the goblet in front of him, which, after a moment, he lifted. He took his first mouthful of wine. It was a mistake.

‘You don’t need to talk, I have *seen him*,’ said Nikandros.

‘I don’t care what you’ve seen. It’s not what you think.’

‘I think he is beautiful and unobtainable, when your whole life, you’ve never had a refusal,’ said Nikandros. ‘You have committed Akielos to an

alliance because the Prince of Vere has blue eyes and blond hair.’ And then, in a terrible voice, ‘How many times does Akielos have to suffer because you can’t keep your—’

‘I said that’s *enough*, Nikandros.’

Damen was angry, he wanted to smash the glass beneath his fingers. To let the pain of the glass cut into him.

‘Do you think—for a moment that I’d . . . Nothing,’ he said, ‘is more important to me than Akielos.’

‘He is the Prince of Vere! He doesn’t care about Akielos! Are you saying you aren’t swayed by the thought of having him? Open your eyes, Damianos!’

Damen pushed himself up from the throne and moved to the wide open mouth of the pavilion. He had an unimpeded view across the fields to the Veretian camp. Laurent and his retinue had disappeared inside of it, though the elegant encampment of Veretian tents still faced him, with every silk pennant waving.

‘You want him. It’s natural. He looks like one of the statues Nereus has in his garden, and he’s a prince of your own rank. He dislikes you, but dislike can have its own appeal,’ said Nikandros. ‘So bed him. Satisfy your curiosity. Then, when you have seen that mounting one blond is much like mounting another, move on.’

The silence went on a moment too long.

He felt Nikandros’s reaction behind him. He kept his eyes on the goblet. He had no intention of putting any of it in words. *I told him I was a slave, and he pretended to believe me. I kissed him on the battlements. He had his servants bring me to his bed. It was our last night together, and he gave himself to me. He knew all the while it happened that I was the man who killed his brother.*

When he turned, Nikandros’s expression was awful.

‘So it really was a bedding gift.’

‘Yes I lay with him,’ said Damen. ‘It was one night. He barely relaxed the whole time. I will admit I—wanted him. But he is the Prince of Vere and I am the King of Akielos. This is a political alliance. He approaches it without emotion. So do I.’

Nikandros said, ‘Do you think it relieves my mind to hear that he is beautiful and clever and cold?’

He felt all the breath leave him. Since Nikandros had arrived, they had not talked about the summer night in Ios when Nikandros had given him a

different warning.

‘It’s not the same.’

‘Laurent is not Jokaste?’

He said, ‘I am not the man who trusted her.’

‘Then you’re not Damianos.’

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘Damianos died in Akielos when he would not heed your warnings.’

He remembered Nikandros’s words. *Kastor has always believed that he deserved the throne. That you took it from him. And his own reply, He wouldn’t hurt me. We are family.*

‘Then heed them now,’ said Nikandros.

‘I do. I know,’ said Damen, ‘who he is, and that it means I cannot have him.’

‘No. Listen Damianos. You trust blindly. You see the world in absolutes—if you believe someone a foe, nothing will dissuade you from arming up to fight. But when you give your affections . . . When you give a man your loyalty, your faith in him is unswerving. You would fight for him with your last breath, you would hear no word spoken against him, and you would go to the grave with his spear in your side.’

‘And are you so different?’ said Damen. ‘I know what it means that you are riding with me. I know that if I am wrong you will lose everything.’

Nikandros held his gaze, then let out a breath and passed his hand over his face, massaging it briefly. He said, ‘*The Prince of Vere.*’ When he looked at Damen again, it was a sidelong glance under his raised brows, and for a moment they were boys again, on the sawdust, throwing spears that fell six feet short of the men’s hide targets.

‘Can you imagine,’ said Nikandros, ‘what your father would say if he knew?’

‘Yes,’ said Damen. ‘Which girl from the village was called Kyra?’

‘They all were. Damianos. You can’t trust him.’

‘I know that.’ He finished the wine. Outside, there were hours of daylight left, and work to be done. ‘You’ve spent a morning with him and you’re warning me off. Just wait,’ said Damen, ‘until you’ve spent a full day with him.’

‘You mean that he improves with time?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Damen.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DIFFICULTY WAS that they could not ride out straight away.

Damen ought to have been used to working with a divided troop, having had, by now, a great deal of practice. But this was not a small band of mercenaries, this was two powerful forces that were traditional enemies, headed by volatile generals on both sides.

Makedon rode into Fortaine for their first official meeting with his mouth turned down. In the audience room Damen found himself waiting, tense, for Laurent's arrival. Damen watched Laurent enter with his first adviser Vannes and his Captain Enguerran. He was frankly uncertain whether it was going to be a morning of invisible needling, or a series of unbelievable remarks that left everyone's jaw on the floor.

In fact, it was impersonal and professional. Laurent was exacting, focused, and spoke entirely in Akielon. Vannes and Enguerran had less of the language and Laurent took the lead in discussion, using Akielon words like phalanx as though he had not learned them from Damen only two weeks earlier, and giving the calm overall impression of fluency. The little brow furrows as he searched for vocabulary, the 'How do you say—?' and 'What is it called when—?' were gone.

'It's lucky for him he speaks our language so well,' said Nikandros, as they returned to the Akielon camp.

'Nothing involving him has anything to do with luck,' said Damen.

When he was alone, he looked out of his tent. The spreading fields looked peaceful but soon the armies would move. The red outline of the horizon would grow nearer, the rising ground that contained all that he had ever known. He tracked it with his eyes and when he was done he turned from the view. He did not look at the burgeoning new Veretian encampment, where coloured silks lifted on the breeze, and the occasional sound of laughter or lilting carried across the springy grass of the field.

Their camps, they agreed, would be kept separate. Akielons, seeing the Veretian tents begin to spring up in the fields, with their pennants and silks

and multicoloured panels, were scornful. They did not want to fight alongside these new, silky allies. In that respect, Laurent's absence at Charcy had been a disaster. His first true tactical misstep, from which they were all still trying to recover.

The Veretians were scornful too, in a different way. Akielons were barbarians who kept company with bastards and walked around half naked. He heard the snatches of what was said on the edges of their camp, the ribald calls, the jeers and taunts. When Pallas walked past, Lazar wolf-whistled.

And that was before the more specific rumours, the murmurings among the men, the sidelong speculation that had Nikandros in the warm summer evening, saying, 'Take a slave.'

Damen said, 'No.'

He buried himself in work, and in physical exercise. During the day he threw himself into the logistics and planning, the tactical groundwork that would facilitate a campaign. He plotted routes. He set up supply lines. He commanded drills. At night he went alone from the camp, and when there was no one around him, he took out his sword and practised until he was dripping with sweat, until he could no longer raise his sword but only stand, his muscles trembling, the tip of his blade pointed to the ground.

He went to bed alone. He undressed and sluiced himself down, and only used squires to perform those menial tasks without intimacy.

He told himself that this was what he had wanted. There was a working relationship between himself and Laurent. There was no longer—friendship—but that had never been possible. He had known it would not be some stupid fantasy of showing Laurent his country; of Laurent leaning against the marble balcony at Ios, turning to greet him in the cool air overlooking the sea, his eyes bright with the splendour of the view.

So he worked. There were tasks to do. He sent out a stream of correspondence to the kyroi of his homeland to announce his return. Soon he would know the initial extent of his support in his own country, and he could begin to settle the routes and advances that would secure him a victory.

He came to his tent after three hours of solitary weapons practice, his body damp with sweat that would be wiped down by body squires, since he had dismissed all his slaves. He sat down to write letters instead. The candles flickered low around him, but it was enough light for what must be done. He wrote by his own hand the personal missives to those he knew. He didn't tell any of them the details of what had happened to him.

Across the evening fields, Jord, Lazar and the other members of the Prince's Guard were somewhere in the Veretian encampment, working under the new regimen. He thought about Jord, staying in the fort that had been Aimeric's home. He remembered Jord saying, *You ever wonder what it would feel like to find out you'd spread for your brother's killer? I think it would feel like this.*

The silence was one of hollow hours filling up all the space in his tent, alone with the muted night-time activity of an army, when he found his final letter done.

To Kastor, he sent only a single message: I come. He didn't watch that messenger depart.

It's not naive to trust your family.

He had said that, once.

* * *

Guion was in a room that looked a lot like the room where Aimeric had bled out, though Guion had little physical resemblance to his son. There was no sign of the polished curls or the obstinate, long-lashed gaze. Guion was a man in his late forties, with an indoor figure. When he saw Damen, Guion bowed in the same way that he would have bowed to the Regent: deeply, sincerely.

'Your Majesty,' said Guion.

'And just like that, you've changed sides.'

Damen looked at him with distaste. Guion was not, as far as Damen could discern, under any kind of arrest. He had free rein of the fort and was still, in many respects, the fort's figurehead, even if Laurent's men now held power. Whatever bargain Guion had struck with Laurent, he had received a great deal in exchange for his cooperation.

'I have a lot of sons,' said Guion, 'but the supply isn't infinite.'

If Guion wanted to run, Damen supposed, his options were limited. The Regent wasn't a forgiving man. Guion had little choice but to receive Akielons into his chambers with geniality. What was galling was the ease with which he seemed to have adjusted to this change—the luxury of his apartments, the lack of all consequence for anything that he had done.

He thought of the men who had died at Charcy, and then he thought of Laurent, surrendering his weight to the table in the tent, his hand clasped to

his shoulder, his face white with the last real expression he had shown.

Damen had come here to learn what he could of the Regent's plans, but there was only one question rising to his lips.

'Who hurt Laurent at Charcy? Was it you?'

'He didn't tell you?'

Damen had not spoken alone to Laurent since that night in the tent. 'He doesn't betray his friends.'

'It's not a secret. I captured him on his way to Charcy. He was brought to Fortaine, where he negotiated with me for his release. By the time he and I came to our arrangement, he had spent some time as a prisoner in the cells and had suffered a little accident to the shoulder. The true casualty was Govart. The Prince dealt him a tremendous blow to the head. He died a day later, cursing physicians and bed boys.'

'You put Govart,' said Damen, 'in a cell with Laurent?'

'Yes.' Guion spread his hands. 'Just as I helped to bring about the coup in your country. Now, of course, you need my testimony to win back your throne. That is politics. The Prince understands that. It is why he has allied with you.' Guion smiled. 'Your Majesty.'

Damen made himself speak very calmly, having come here to learn from Guion what he could not learn from his own men.

'Did the Regent know who I was?'

'If he did, having you sent to Vere was rather a miscalculation on his part, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' said Damen. He didn't lift his eyes from Guion. He watched the blood rise and mottle Guion's cheeks.

'If the Regent knew who you were,' said Guion, 'then he hoped that when you arrived in Vere, the Prince would recognise you, and be provoked into a blunder. Either that, or he wanted the Prince to take you into his bed. The realisation of what he'd done then would kill him. How lucky for you that didn't happen,' Guion said.

He looked at Guion, sick, suddenly, of doublespeak, and double-dealing.

'You swore a sacred duty to hold the throne in trust for your Prince. Instead you turned on him, for power, for personal gain. What has that won you?'

For the first time he saw something genuine flicker in Guion's expression.

'He killed my son,' said Guion.

‘You killed your son,’ said Damen, ‘when you threw him into the path of the Regent.’

* * *

Damen’s experience with a divided troop meant he already knew what to look for: food going astray; weapons destined for one or other faction rerouted; essentials for daily tasks within the camp missing. He had dealt with it all on the ride from Arles to Ravenel.

He had not dealt with Makedon. Round one came when Makedon refused to accept the extra rations available to his troops from Fortaine. Akielons didn’t need pampering. If Veretians wished to indulge in all this extra food, they could do so.

Before Damen could open his mouth to respond, Laurent announced that he would likewise change the provisions among his own troops, so that there would not be a disparity. In fact, everyone from soldiers to captains to kings across both troops would receive the same portion, and that portion would be determined by Makedon. Would Makedon inform them now what that portion was to be?

Round two was the skirmish that broke out in the Akielon encampment: an Akielon with a bleeding nose, a Veretian with a broken arm, and Makedon smiling and saying that it had been no more than a friendly competition. Only a coward feared competition.

He said it to Laurent. Laurent said that from this moment on, any Veretian who struck an Akielon would be executed. He trusted the honour of the Akielons, he said. Only a coward hit a man who wasn’t allowed to hit back.

It was like watching a boar try to take on the endless blue of the sky. Damen remembered how it felt to be coerced to Laurent’s will. Laurent had never needed to use force to make men obey him, just as he had never needed men to like him in order to get his way. Laurent got his way because when men tried to resist him, they found, sweetly outmanoeuvred, that they couldn’t.

And indeed, it was only the Akielons who murmured in dissent. Laurent’s men had swallowed the alliance. In fact, the way Laurent’s men talked about their Prince now was not substantially different to the way that they had talked about him before: cold, ice-cold, except now he was cold enough to have fucked his brother’s killer.

‘The pledge should be made in the traditional manner,’ said Nikandros. ‘A night feast for the bannermen, and the ceremonial sports, the display fighting, and the okton. We gather at Marlas.’ Nikandros stuck another token into the sand tray.

‘A strong location,’ Makedon was saying. ‘The fort itself is all but impregnable. Its walls have never been breached, only surrendered.’

No one was looking at Laurent. It wouldn’t have mattered if they had been. His face showed nothing.

‘Marlas is a large-scale defensive fort, not dissimilar to Fortaine,’ Nikandros said to Laurent, later. ‘Big enough to house both our men and yours, with substantial interior barracks. You’ll see its potential when we get there.’

‘I’ve been there before,’ said Laurent.

‘Then you’re familiar with the area,’ said Nikandros. ‘That makes it easier.’

‘Yes,’ said Laurent.

After, Damen took his sword out to the edges of the camp to practise, finding the clearing that he preferred in a thicket of trees, and beginning the series of exercises that he performed every night.

Here there were no barriers to his skill. He could drive himself hard, strike, turn, force himself faster. In the warm night, his skin quickly pricked with sweat. He pushed himself harder to the ceaseless movements, action and reaction that anchored everything to the flesh.

He poured all he felt into the physical, the emulation of fighting. He couldn’t shake it off. He felt it like an unceasing pressure. The closer they came to it, the stronger it grew.

Would they stay at Marlas, in adjoining apartments, receiving Akielon bannermen during the evening from twin thrones?

He wanted . . . he didn’t know what he wanted. For Laurent to have looked at him when Nikandros had announced that they would travel to the place where, six years ago, Damen had killed his brother.

He heard a sound to the west.

Panting, he stopped. Sweat-covered, he heard it again, the slight smothered laughter, and then the whistle and thunk, the jeers, a low moan. Instantly he recognised the danger: a spear thrown. Yet the laughter was too incautious, too loud for an enemy scout. Not an attack. A small party breaking

army discipline, who had snuck out at night to hunt or tryst in the woods. He had thought his troops more disciplined than that.

He went to investigate, quietly, watchfully, past a series of dark tree trunks. A rueful flicker of guilt: he knew that these men breaking curfew would not expect their King to appear and admonish them personally. His presence was ludicrously disproportionate to their crime, he thought.

Until he reached the clearing.

A group of five Akielon soldiers had indeed left the camp to practise spear throwing. They had brought a bundle of spears and a wooden target from the camp. The spears lay on the ground in easy reach. The target was set against the trunk of a tree. They were taking turns throwing from a mark toed into the earth. One of them was taking his place at the mark and hefting a spear.

Pale, rigid with fear beyond terror, there was a boy spread-eagled on the wooden target board, tied at the wrists and ankles. From his torn, half-unlaced shirt, the boy was clearly a Veretian, and young—eighteen or nineteen—his light-brown hair a matted tangle, his skin mottled with a bruise that covered one eye.

A few spears had already been thrown at him. They stuck from the target like pins. One protruded from the space between his arm and side. One to the left of his head. The boy's eyes were glassy, and he held himself motionless. It was clear from the number of spears—and their position—that the aim of this contest was to throw as close to the boy as possible, without hitting him. The thrower drew back his arm.

Damen could only stand and watch as the thrower's arm whirled, the spear loosing and beginning its clear pure arc—unable to intervene in case it caused a misthrow that killed the boy. The spear sheared through the air, and hit exactly where it had been intended, between the boy's legs, just shy of his flesh. It stuck out from the target, grotesquely lewd. The laughter was ribald.

‘And who will throw next?’ said Damen.

The thrower of the spear turned, his taunting expression changing to one of shock and disbelief. All five of them stopped and flattened themselves to the ground.

‘Stand,’ said Damen, ‘like the men you think you are.’

He was angry. The men, standing, perhaps did not recognise that. They didn't know the slow way that he came forward, or the calm tone of his voice.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘what it is you are doing here.’

‘Practising for the okton,’ said a voice, and Damen looked them over but couldn’t see who had spoken. Whoever it was had paled after he said it because they were all pale, and nervous-looking.

They wore the notched belts that marked them as Makedon’s men—one notch for each kill. They might even have expected to get approbation from Makedon for what they had done. There was an uneasy expectancy in their postures, as though they were uncertain of their King’s reaction, and had some hope they might be praised, or let off with no admonishment.

He said, ‘Do not speak again.’

He went to the boy. The boy’s shirt sleeve was pinned to the tree by a spear. His head was bleeding where a second spear had grazed it. Damen saw the boy’s eyes darken in terror as he approached, and anger was like acid in his veins. He wrapped his hand around the spear between the boy’s legs and pulled it out. Then he pulled out the spear by his head, and the one pinning his shirt sleeve. He had to draw his sword to cut the boy’s ropes, and at the sound of metal, the boy’s breathing went high and strange.

The boy was badly bruised, and he could not stand under his own weight once the ropes were cut. Damen lowered him to the ground. More had been done to him than target practice. More had been done to him than a beating. They had put an iron cuff around his left wrist, like the gold cuff around his own—like the gold cuff around Laurent’s. Damen knew with a sickening feeling in his stomach exactly what had been done to this boy, and why.

The boy didn’t speak Akielon. He had no idea what was happening, or that he was safe. Damen began to speak to him in Veretian, slow, calming words, and after a moment the boy’s glazed eyes focused on him with something like understanding.

The boy said, ‘Tell the Prince I didn’t fight back.’

Damen turned and said in a steady voice to one of the men, ‘Bring Makedon. Now.’

The man went. The other four stood in place while Damen went to one knee and addressed the boy on the ground again. In a soft, low voice Damen kept him talking. The other men didn’t watch because they were too low-ranked to be allowed to look a king in the face. Their eyes were averted.

Makedon did not come alone. Two dozen of his men came with him. Then came Nikandros, with two dozen men of his own. Then a stream of torchbearers, turning the dim clearing into orange light and leaping flame.

The grim expression Nikandros wore showed that he was here because Makedon and his men might need a counterweight.

Damen said, 'Your soldiers have broken the peace.'

'They will be executed.' Makedon said it after a cursory glance at the bleeding Veretian boy. 'They have dishonoured the belt.'

That was genuine. Makedon didn't like Veretians. He didn't like his men dishonouring themselves in front of Veretians. Makedon wanted no whiff of Veretian moral superiority. Damen could see that in him, as he could see that Makedon blamed the Veretians for the attack, for the behaviour of his men, for being called to account by his King.

The orange torchlight was unsparing. Two of the five men struggled, and were taken from the clearing unconscious. The others were roped together with pieces of the tough fibrous rope that had bound the Veretian boy.

'Take the boy back to our camp,' Damen said to Nikandros, because he knew exactly what would happen if Akielon soldiers bore the bleeding, bruised boy back to the Veretians. 'Send for Paschal, the Veretian physician. Then inform the Prince of Vere what has happened here.' A sharp nod of obedience. Nikandros departed with the boy and a section of the torches.

Damen said, 'The rest of you are dismissed. Not you.'

The light receded, and the sound, disappearing through the trees until he was alone with Makedon in the night air of the clearing.

'Makedon of the north,' said Damen. 'You were a friend to my father. You fought with him for almost twenty years. That means a great deal to me. I respect your loyalty to him, as I respect your power and need your men. But if your soldiers harm a Veretian again, you will face me at the end of a sword.'

'Exalted,' said Makedon, bowing his head to hide his eyes.

'You walk a fine line with Makedon,' Nikandros said, on his return to camp.

'He walks a fine line with me,' said Damen.

'He is a traditionalist, and supports you as the true King, but he will only be pushed so far.'

'I'm not the one pushing.'

He didn't retire. He took himself instead to the tent in his camp where the Veretian boy was being tended. He dismissed the guards there, too, and waited outside for the physician to come out.

At night the camp was quiet and dark, but this tent was marked by a torch flaming outside, and he could see the lights from the Veretian camp to the west. He was aware of the oddness of his own presence—a king waiting outside a tent like a hound for its master—but he stepped forward quickly when Paschal emerged from the tent.

‘Your Majesty,’ said Paschal, surprised.

‘How is he?’ He said it into the odd silence, facing Paschal in the light from the torches.

‘Bruising, a broken rib,’ said Paschal. ‘Shock.’

‘No, I meant—’

He broke off. After a long moment, Paschal said, slowly, ‘He is well. The knife wound was clean. He lost a lot of blood but there is no permanent damage. He has healed quickly.’

‘Thank you,’ said Damen. He heard himself continue, ‘I don’t expect—’ He stopped. ‘I know that I betrayed your trust, and lied to you about who I am. I don’t expect you to forgive me for that.’

He could feel the incongruity of the words, falling awkwardly between them. He felt strange, his breathing shallow.

He said, ‘Will he be able to ride tomorrow?’

‘You mean to Marlas?’ said Paschal.

There was a pause.

‘We all do what we have to,’ said Paschal.

Damen said nothing. Paschal continued after a moment.

‘You should prepare yourself, too. It’s only deep in Akielos that you’ll be able to confront the Regent’s plans.’

A cool night breeze passed over his skin. ‘Guion claimed not to know what the Regent plans to do in Akielos.’

Paschal looked at him with his steady brown eyes.

‘Every Veretian knows what the Regent plans to do in Akielos.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Rule,’ said Paschal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FIRST MILITARY coalition of Vere and Akielos launched from Fortaine in the morning, after the execution of Makedon's men. There were very few problems, the public killings having been good for the soldiers' morale.

They hadn't been good for Makedon's morale. Damen watched the general swing himself into the saddle, then tug hard on a rein. Makedon's men were a line of red cloaks stretching across fully half the length of the column.

The horns sounded. The banners went up. The heralds took up their position. The Akielon herald was to the right, the Veretian herald to the left, their banners carefully matched to be the same height. The Veretian herald was named Hendric and he had very strong arms, because banners were heavy.

Damen and Laurent were to ride alongside one another. Neither one of them had the better horse. Neither one of them had the more expensive armour. Damen was taller, but nothing could be done about that, Hendric had said with an impenetrable expression. Hendric, Damen was learning, had something in common with Laurent, in that it was never a simple matter to tell when he was joking.

He brought his horse alongside Laurent's at the head of the column. It was a symbol of their unity, the Prince and the King riding side by side, as friends. He kept his eyes on the road.

'At Marlas, we'll stay in adjacent chambers,' said Damen. 'It's protocol.'

'Of course,' said Laurent, his eyes also on the road.

Laurent showed no sign of distress, and sat upright in the saddle, as though nothing at all had happened to his shoulder. He spoke charmingly to the generals and even made pleasant conversation in response to Nikandros, when Nikandros spoke to him.

'I hope the injured boy was returned to you safely.'

'Thank you, he returned with Paschal,' said Laurent.

For a salve? Damen opened his mouth to say, and didn't.

Marlas was a day-long ride, and they set a good pace. The air was loud with sound, a line of soldiers, outriders ahead, servants and slaves behind. When the column passed near, the birds took off, a herd of goats fled over the side of the hill.

It was afternoon when they reached the small checkpoint manned by Nikandros's soldiers and overseen by an Akielon signal tower. They rode through.

The landscape on the other side looked no different; rich grass fields, green from a spring of generous rain, bruised at the edges from their passing. In the next moment, the horns rang out, triumphant and lonely at the same time, the pure sound absorbed by the sky and the wide open landscape around them.

'Welcome home,' Nikandros said.

Akielos. He drew in a breath of Akielon air. In months of captivity he had thought of this moment. He couldn't help glancing next to him at Laurent, his posture and expression easy.

They rode through the first of the villages. This close to the border, larger farms had rudimentary outer walls of stone, and some were like improvised forts, with lookouts or well-tried defence systems. The passing of the army wouldn't be a surprise, and Damen was prepared for the people of his country to react to it in various ways.

He had forgotten that Delpha had become an Akielon province only six years ago, and that before that, for the span of their entire lives, these men and women had been citizens of Vere.

The silent faces gathered, women and men, children, in doorways, under awnings, standing together as the army passed.

Tense, afraid, they had come out of their homes to watch the first Veretian banners flying here in six years. One of them had fashioned a crude starburst, with sticks. A child held it up, like the image she saw.

The starburst banner means something here on the border, Laurent had said.

Laurent said nothing, riding straight-backed at the head of the column. He did not acknowledge his people, with their Veretian language, customs and allegiances, making their small living on the border. He was riding with an army of Akielons who wholly controlled this province. He kept his gaze

ahead; so did Damen, feeling the everlasting pressure of their destination with every step.

* * *

He remembered exactly how it had looked, and that was why he didn't recognise it at first: the forest of broken spears was gone, and there were no gouged ruts in the earth, no men face down in the churned mud.

Marlas was now a tumble of grass and wildflowers in the blowy, sweet summer weather, shifting back and forth in the gentle air. Here and there an insect droned, a drowsy sound. A dragonfly dipped and darted. Their horses waded, fording long grass. They joined the wide road, sunlight dappling their path.

As their column crossed the fields, Damen found himself searching for some mark of what had happened. There was nothing. No one remarked on it. No one said, *It was here*. It got worse as they got closer, as though the only evidence of the battle was the feeling in his chest.

And then the fort itself came into view.

Marlas had always been beautiful. It was a Veretian fort in the grand style, with high-flung battlements and crenelles, its elegant arches presiding over green fields.

It still looked like that, from a distance. It was an outline of Veretian architecture, promising an interior of high open galleries, banded in carving, filigree gilt and decorative tile.

Damen remembered, suddenly, the day of the victory ceremonies, the cutting down of the tapestries, the slashing of the flags.

Akielons thronged near the gates, men and women straining for a glimpse of their returned King. Akielon soldiers filled the inner courtyard, and Akielon banners hung from every vantage, gold lions on red.

Damen looked at the courtyard. The parapets were broken down and reshaped. The stonework hacked off. The stone itself carted off for use in new building, the splendid rooftops and towers levelled into an Akielon style.

Damen told himself he thought Veretian ornamentation wasteful. In Arles, his eyes had begged for relief; he had wished daily for a stretch of plain wall. All he could see now was the empty floor with its tiles pulled up, the ruined ceiling, the bare, painfully stripped stone.

Laurent swung down from his horse, thanking Nikandros for the welcome. He walked past the rows of Akielon soldiers in flawless formation.

Indoors, the fort's household gathered, excited and proud, to meet and serve their King. Damen and Laurent were jointly presented to those household officials who would serve them during their time here. They moved from the first set of rooms to the second, rounding the corner and coming into the viewing hall.

Lining the hall were two dozen slaves.

They were arrayed in two rows, prostrated, their foreheads to the floor. All were male, ranging in age from perhaps nineteen to twenty-five, with different looks and different colouring, their eyes and lips accentuated by paint. Beside them, the Keeper of Slaves stood waiting.

Nikandros frowned. 'The King has already made his preference for no slaves known.'

'These slaves are provided for use of our King's guest, the Prince of Vere.' Kolnas, the Keeper of Slaves, bowed respectfully. Laurent strolled forward.

'I like that one,' said Laurent.

The slaves were dressed in the northern style, in light gauzy silks that threaded through the link on their collar and covered very little. Laurent was indicating to the third slave to the left, a dark, bowed head.

'An excellent choice,' said Kolnas. 'Isander, step forward.'

Isander was olive-skinned and lithe as a fawn, with dark hair and eyes: Akielon colouring. He shared that with Nikandros; with Damen. He was younger than Damen, nineteen or twenty. Male, either in deference to Veretian customs, or to suit Laurent's assumed preferences. He looked like Nikandros's best, Damen thought. It was probably rare that he was given out to guests. No; he was new, unbedded. Nikandros would never offer royalty anything less than a slave's First Night.

Damen frowned. Isander was flushing deeply with the honour of being chosen. Shyness radiating from him, he rose, and then went to his knees a body length in front of the others, offering himself with all the sweet grace of a palace slave, too well trained to place himself ostentatiously in front of Laurent.

'We will have him prepared and brought to you this evening for his First Night,' Kolnas said.

'First Night?' said Laurent.

‘Slaves are trained in the arts of pleasure, but they do not lie with another until their First Night,’ Kolnas said. ‘Here we use the same strict, classical training that is used in the royal palace. Skills are learned through instruction, and practised with indirect methods. The slave remains wholly untouched, kept pure for the first use of the Exalted.’

Laurent’s eyes lifted to Damen’s.

‘I never did learn how to command a bed slave,’ said Laurent. ‘Teach me.’

‘They cannot speak Veretian, Your Highness,’ Kolnas explained. ‘In the Akielon language, using the plain form of address is appropriate. To command any act of service is to honour a slave. The more personal the service, the greater the honour.’

‘Really? Come here,’ said Laurent.

Isander rose for the second time, a faint tremor in his body as he came as close as he dared before dropping to the ground again, his cheeks bright red. He looked a little dazed by the attention. Laurent extended the tip of his boot.

‘Kiss it,’ he said. His eyes were on Damen.

His boot was beautifully turned, his clothing immaculate even after the long ride. Isander kissed the toe tip, then the ankle. Damen thought, that’s where skin would be if he was wearing a sandal. Then, in a moment of unspeakable daring, Isander leaned in and rubbed his cheek against the leather of the boot at Laurent’s calf, a sign of exceptional intimacy and the desire to please.

‘Good boy,’ said Laurent, reaching down to pet Isander’s dark curls, while Isander’s eyes closed and he flushed over.

Kolnas preened, pleased that his selection was appreciated. Damen could see that the fort’s household around them was also pleased, having gone to great lengths to make Laurent feel welcome. They had considered with intense thoughtfulness Veretian culture and Veretian practices. All the slaves were highly attractive, and all were male, so that the Prince might use them in bed without offending Veretian custom.

It was pointless. There were two dozen slaves here, while the number of times Laurent had had sex in his life could probably be counted on one hand. Laurent was just going to be dragging twenty-four young men back to his rooms to sit around doing nothing. They wouldn’t even be able to unlace Veretian clothing.

‘Can he also serve me in the baths?’ said Laurent.

‘And at the feast for the bannermen this evening when they give their pledge, if that pleases you, Your Highness,’ said Kolnas.

‘It pleases me,’ said Laurent.

* * *

Home was not supposed to have felt like this.

His squires wrapped him in the traditional garment. Cloth wound around his waist and over his shoulder, the sort of ceremonial Akielon garb that you could unreel from a person by taking hold of one end and pulling while they rotated. They brought sandals for his feet and the laurel for his head, performing the ritual motions in silence while he stood still for it. It was not appropriate that they speak or look at his person.

Exalted. He could feel their discomfort, their need to debase themselves; this sort of proximity to royalty permitted only the extreme submissiveness of slaves.

He had sent away the slaves. He had sent them away as he had sent them away in the camp, and after he had stood in the silence of his suite waiting for his squires.

Laurent, he knew, was rooming in the adjoining suite, separated from him by a single wall. Damen was in the King’s chambers, which any lord who built a fort installed, in the hope the King would stop there. But even the former lord of Marlas’s optimism had not stretched to the idea that the heads of two royal families would visit simultaneously. To preserve their arrangements of scrupulous equality, Laurent was in the Queen’s chambers, beyond that wall.

Isander was probably tending him, gamely doing his best with the laces. He would have to unhook the lacings on the back of the neck of Laurent’s riding leathers before drawing them through their eyelets. Or Laurent had taken Isander into the baths, to be undressed by him there. Isander would be flushed with pride at being chosen for the task. *Attend me.* Damen felt his hands curl into fists.

He turned his mind to political matters. He and Laurent would now meet the smaller northern provincial leaders in the hall, where there would be wine and feasting and Nikandros’s bannermen would come, one by one, to make their pledge, swelling the ranks of their army.

When the last laurel leaf was arranged, the last piece of fabric wound into place, Damen proceeded with his squires into the hall.

Men and women reclined on couches, amid scattered low tables or on low, cushioned benches. Makedon leaned, selecting a slice of peeled orange. Pallas, the handsome officer-champion, reclined with the easy posture that spoke to his aristocratic blood. Straton had hitched his skirts up and drawn his legs onto the couch, crossing them at the ankles. Everyone whom rank or office entitled to be here was assembled, and with every northerner of standing gathered to give their pledge, the hall was packed full.

The Veretians present were mostly vertical, standing awkwardly in small groups, one or two perched gingerly on the edge of a seat.

And all through the hall, there were slaves.

Slaves in hip cloths carried delicacies on small platters. Slaves fanned reclined Akielon guests with woven palm leaves. A male slave filled a shallow wine cup for an Akielon nobleman. A slave held out a finger bowl of rose water, and an Akielon woman dipped her fingers in it without even glancing at the slave. He heard the plucked strings of a kithara, and glimpsed the measured steps of a slave's dance, just for a moment, before he walked through the doors.

When Damen entered, the hall fell silent.

There was no trumpet flourish or herald's announcement, as there would have been in Vere. He just walked in, and everyone went to the floor. Guests rose from their couches, then dropped, foreheads to the stone. Slaves went to their stomachs. In Akielos, kings did not elevate their status. It was up to those around him to lower themselves.

Laurent didn't rise. He wasn't required to. He just watched from his reclining couch, as the hall prostrated itself. He had cultivated an elegant sprawl, with his arm draped over his couch back, and his leg drawn up, revealing the arc of an exquisitely clad thigh. His fingers dangled. Silk rucked around his knee.

Isander was prostrated, an inch from Laurent's casually draped fingertips, his lithe body bare. He wore a brief garment like a Vaskian man's cloth. His collar fit him like a second skin. Laurent sat relaxed, every line of his body arranged tastefully against the couch.

Damen made himself stroll forward through the silence. Their twin couches were next to each other.

'Brother,' Laurent said, pleasantly.

The eyes of everyone in the hall were on him. He felt their gazes, their underfed curiosity. He heard the murmurs—*it really is him, Damianos, alive and here*—accompanied by the brazen looks, looking at him, looking at the gold cuff on his wrist, looking at Laurent in his Veretian clothes like an exotic ornament—*so that is the Veretian Prince*. And beneath that the speculation that was never spoken aloud.

Laurent was scrupulously correct in the face of it, his behaviour immaculate, even his use of the slave was an act of unimpeachable etiquette. In Akielos it pleased the host for a guest to make use of his hospitality. And it pleased the Akielon people for their royal family to take slaves, a sign of virility and power, and a cause of great pride.

Damen sat, too aware of Laurent beside him. He could see the sweep of the hall from this vantage, a sea of bowed heads. He gestured, indicating that the hall should rise from their prostrations. He saw Barieus of Mesos, the first of the bannermen after Makedon, a man in his forties with dark hair and a close-cut beard. He saw Aratos of Charon, who had come to Marlas with six hundred men. Euandros of Itys, here with a small cadre of archers, stood with his arms folded across his chest at the back of the hall.

‘Bannermen of Delpha. By now, you have seen the evidence that Kastor killed the King, our father. You know of his alliance with the usurper, the Regent of Vere. Even now, the Regent has troops stationed in Ios, ready to take Akielos. Tonight, we call for your pledge to fight them alongside us, and alongside our ally, Laurent of Vere.’

There was an uneasy pause. Makedon and Straton had pledged to him in Ravenel, but that was before his alliance with Laurent. These men were being asked to accept Laurent and Vere at first sight, less than a generation out from the war.

Barieus stepped forward. ‘I want assurances that Vere does not hold undue influence over Akielos.’

Undue influence. ‘Speak plainly.’

‘They say the Prince of Vere is your lover.’

Silence. No one would have dared speak that way in his father’s court. It was a sign of the volatility of these warlords, their hatred of Vere—of his own position, newly precarious. Anger rose at the question.

‘Who we take to our bed is not your concern.’

‘If our King takes Vere to his bed, it is our concern,’ said Barieus.

‘Shall I tell them what really happened between us? They want to know,’ Laurent said.

Laurent began to unlace the cuff of his sleeve, drawing the ties through the eyelets, then opening the fabric to expose the fine underside of his wrist—and then the unmistakable gold of the slave cuff.

Damen felt the shocked buzz go around the hall, felt its prurient undercurrent. Hearing that the Prince of Vere wore an Akielon slave cuff was different to seeing it. The scandal was immense, the gold cuff a symbol of the ownership of the Akielon royal family.

Laurent leaned his wrist elegantly on the curved arm of the couch, the open sleeve reminiscent of a delicate open shirt collar, its laces trailing.

‘Do I have the question clear?’ said Laurent, speaking in Akielon. ‘You are asking if I lay with the man who killed my own brother?’

Laurent wore the slave cuff with utter disregard. He had no owner, the aristocratic arrogance of his posture said that. Laurent had always possessed an essential quality of the untouchable. He cultivated a faultless grace on the reclining couch, his chiselled profile and marble-chip eyes those of a statue. The idea that he would let anyone fuck him was impossible.

Barieus said, ‘A man would have to be ice-cold to sleep with his brother’s killer.’

‘Then you have your answer,’ said Laurent.

There was a silence, in which Laurent’s gaze held that of Barieus.

‘Yes, Exalted.’

Barieus bowed his head, and unconsciously used the Akielon *Exalted*, rather than the Veretian titles *Highness* or *Majesty*.

‘Well, Barieus?’ said Damen.

Barieus knelt two steps before the dais. ‘I will pledge. I see that the Prince of Vere stands with you. It’s right that we swear to you here, on the site of your greatest victory.’

He got through the pledges.

He performed his thanks to the bannermen and when the food came, signalling the end of the oaths and the commencement of the feast, he displayed his gratification.

Slaves brought the food. Squires served Damen, since he had made his preferences clear. It was an awkward arrangement that displeased everyone in the hall.

Isander served Laurent. Isander was utterly in love with his master. He strove continuously to do well, selecting each delicacy for Laurent to sample, bringing him only the best, in small, shallow dishes, refreshing the water bowl for Laurent to clean his fingers. He did it all with perfect form, discreetly attentive, and never drawing attention to himself.

His eyelashes drew attention to themselves. Damen made himself look elsewhere.

Two slaves were taking up position in the centre of the hall, one with a kithara, the other standing beside him, an older slave, chosen for his skill in recitation.

Laurent said, 'Play *The Fall of Inachtos*,' and a murmur of approval passed over the hall. Kolnas, the Keeper of Slaves, congratulated Laurent on his knowledge of Akielon epics. 'It's one of your favourites, isn't it?' said Laurent, transferring his gaze to Damen.

It was one of his favourites. He had called for it countless times, on evenings like this, in the marble halls of his home. He had always liked the depiction of Akielons cutting down their enemies, as Nisos rode out to kill Inachtos, and take his walled city. He didn't want to hear it now.

*Cut off from his brothers
Inachtos strikes too short at Nisos
Where a thousand swords
Have failed, Nisos raises one*

The stirring notes of the battle song drew a burst of great approval from the bannermen, and their appreciation of Laurent grew with every stanza. Damen picked up a wine cup. Found it empty. Signalled.

The wine came. As he took up the cup, he saw Jord approaching the place where Guion sat with his wife, Loyse, to Damen's left. It was Loyse and not Guion that Jord was approaching. She gave him a cursory look. 'Yes?'

There was an awkward pause. 'I just wanted to say . . . that I'm sorry for your loss. Your son was a good fighter.'

'Thank you, soldier.'

She gave him the token attention a lady might give to any servant, and turned back to her conversation with her husband.

Before he realised it, Damen had lifted his hand and summoned Jord over. Approaching the dais, Jord made the three prostrations as ungracefully as a man wearing a new armour suit.

‘You have good instincts,’ Damen heard himself say.

It was the first time that he had spoken to Jord since the battle at Charcy. He felt how different this was to the nights they’d sat around a campfire swapping stories. He felt how different everything was. Jord gazed at him for a long moment, then indicated Laurent with his chin.

‘I’m glad you two are friends,’ said Jord.

The light was very bright. He drained his wine cup.

‘I thought when he found out about you, he’d swear revenge,’ said Jord.

‘He knew all along,’ said Damen.

‘It’s good that you could trust each other,’ said Jord. And then: ‘I think before you came, he didn’t really trust anyone.’

Damen said, ‘He didn’t.’

Laughter grew louder, as it came in bursts across the hall. Isander was bringing Laurent a sprig of grapes in a small dish. Laurent said something approving, and gestured for Isander to join him on the reclining couch. Isander glowed, shyly besotted. As Damen watched, Isander picked a single grape from the sprig, and lifted it to Laurent’s lips.

Laurent leaned in. He twined a finger around a curl of Isander’s hair and allowed himself to be fed, grape by grape, a prince with a new favourite. Across the hall, Damen saw Straton tap the shoulder of the slave serving him, a signal that Straton wished to discreetly retire, and enjoy the slave’s attentions in private.

He lifted the wine blindly. The cup was empty. Straton wasn’t the only Akielon departing with a slave; men and women throughout the hall were availing themselves. The wine, and the slaves enacting the battle were breaking down inhibitions. Akielon voices grew loud, emboldened by wine.

Laurent leaned in further to murmur something intimately into Isander’s ear, and then, as the recitation reached its climax, the clash of swords like the hammering in his chest, Damen saw Laurent tap Isander’s shoulder, and rise.

I’d wager you never thought a prince could be jealous of a slave. At this moment I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat. Torveld’s words.

He said, ‘Excuse me.’

The entire court around him rose as he pushed up from his couch-throne. Trying to follow Laurent out, he got tangled in ceremony, the hall a stifling press of bodies and noise, and, as a blond head disappeared towards the doorway, he was stopped by party after party blocking his path. He ought to

have brought a slave of his own, then the crowd would have melted away, understanding: the King wished privacy.

The corridor was empty when he strode out into it. His heart was pounding. He turned the first corner into a section of the passage, half expecting to catch Laurent's retreating figure. Instead, he saw a stark, empty arch with all its Veretian lattice stripped away.

Under the arch was Isander, standing with his fawn eyes, looking confused and abandoned.

His confusion was such that for a moment he just stared at Damen with wide eyes before he seemed to understand what was happening, and folded to the floor, forehead to the stone.

Damen said, 'Where is he?'

Isander was well trained, even if nothing was happening as he had expected tonight; and even if, rather mortifyingly, he was being asked to report this fact to his King.

'His Highness of Vere has gone for a ride.'

'A ride where?'

'At the stables a handler might know his destination. This slave can inquire.'

A ride, at night, alone, leaving a feast in his honour.

'No,' said Damen. 'I know where he's gone.'

* * *

At night, nothing looked the same. It was a landscape of memory. Of old stone and ancient hanging rock, of fallen kingdoms.

Damen left the castle and rode out to the field that he remembered, where ten thousand Akielon men had faced the Veretian army. He guided his horse carefully where the ground dipped and swelled. A listing stone slab, a fragment of stairs; strewn across Marlas were the ruins of something older; older than the battle, a silent witness of broken arches and crumbled, moss-covered walls.

He remembered these stone blocks that were half part of the earth, he remembered the way that fronts had had to ford and split around them. They predated the battle, and they predated Marlas, the remnants of a long-dead empire. They were a lodestar to the memory, a marker of the past on a field that might have erased everything.

Closer; the approach was difficult because it was sharp with memory. Here was the place where their left flank had fallen. Here was the place where he had ordered men to attack the lines that would not fall, the starburst banner that did not falter. Here was the place where he had killed the last of the Prince's Guard, and come face to face with Auguste.

He dismounted from his horse, looping its reins over the cracked stone column of an overgrown pillar. The landscape was old, and the pieces of stone were old; and he remembered this place, remembered the torn soil and the desperation of the fight.

Clearing a last jut of stone, he saw the curve of a shoulder in the moonlight, the white of a loose shirt, his outer garments stripped, all wrists and exposed throat. Laurent was sitting on a stone outcrop. His jacket was discarded uncharacteristically. He was sitting on it.

A stone slid under his heel. Laurent turned. For a moment, Laurent looked at him wide-eyed, young, and then the look in his eyes changed, as though the universe had fulfilled an ineluctable promise. 'Oh,' he said, 'perfect.'

Damen said, 'I thought you might want—'

'Want?'

'A friend,' said Damen. He used Jord's word. His chest felt tight. 'If you'd prefer me to leave, I will.'

'Why cavil?' said Laurent. 'Let's fuck.'

He said it with his shirt unlaced, the wind teasing the opening there. They faced each other.

'That isn't what I meant.'

'It might not be what you meant, but it's what you want.' Laurent said, 'You want to fuck me.'

Anyone else would have been drunk. Laurent was dangerously sober. Damen remembered the feel of a palm against his chest, pushing him back on the bed.

'You've been thinking about it since Ravenel. Since Nesson.'

He knew this mood. He should have expected it. He made himself say the words. 'I came because I thought you might want to talk.'

'Not particularly.'

He said, 'About your brother.'

'I never fucked my brother,' said Laurent, with a strange edge to the words. 'That is incest.'

They were standing in the place where his brother had died. With a disorientating sensation Damen realised they weren't going to talk about that. They were going to talk about this.

'You're right,' said Damen. 'I've been thinking about it since Ravenel. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it.'

'Why?' said Laurent. 'Was I that good?'

'No. You fucked like a virgin,' said Damen, 'half the time. The rest of the time—'

'Like I knew what to do?'

'Like you knew what you were used to.'

He saw the words impact. Laurent swayed, like he'd been dealt a blow.

Laurent said, 'I'm not certain I can take your particular brand of honesty just at the moment.'

Damen said, 'I don't prefer sophistication in bed, if you were wondering.'

'That's right,' said Laurent. 'You like it simple.'

All the breath left his throat. He stood, stripped, unready for it. *Will you use even that against me?* he wanted to say, and didn't. Laurent's breathing was shallow too, holding his ground.

'He died well,' Damen made himself say. 'He fought better than any man I've known. It was a fair fight, and he felt no pain. The end was quick.'

'Like gutting a pig?'

Damen felt like he was reeling. He barely heard the rumbling of sound. Laurent jerked around to look into the dark, where the sound was growing louder—hoof beats, thundering closer.

'You sent your men out to look for me too?' said Laurent, his mouth twisting.

'No,' said Damen, and pushed Laurent hard out of sight, into the shelter of one of the huge, crumbling blocks of stone.

In the next second, the troop was on them, at least two hundred men, so that the air was thick with the passage of horses. Damen pressed Laurent firmly into the rock, and held him in place with his body. The riders didn't slow, even on this uncertain ground in the dark, and any man in their path would be trampled, tumbled, kicked from hoof to hoof. Discovery was a real threat, the rock cool under his palms, the dark shuddering with the pounding of hooves and heavy lethal horseflesh.

He could feel Laurent against him, the barely contained tension, adrenalin mixed with his dislike of the proximity, the urge in him to prise himself out and away, stifled by necessity.

He had a sudden thought for Laurent's jacket, lying exposed on the outcrop, and for their horses, tied up a little way off. If they were discovered, it might mean capture or worse. They couldn't know who these men were. His fingers bit into the stone, feeling the moss and the crumbled pieces beneath. Horses plunged all around them like the rushing of a stream.

And then they were gone, passing them as quickly as they had arrived, disappearing across the fields towards a destination in the west. The hoof beats receded. Damen didn't move, their chests pressed to each other, Laurent's shallow breath against his shoulder.

He felt himself shoved back as Laurent pushed himself out to stand with his back to him, breathing hard.

Damen stood with his hand against the stone, and looked after him across the landscape of strange shapes. Laurent didn't turn back to him, just stood holding himself still. Damen could see him once again as a pale outline in a thin shirt.

'I know you're not cold,' said Damen. 'You weren't cold when you ordered me tied to the post. You weren't cold when you pushed me down on your bed.'

'We need to leave.' Laurent spoke without looking at him. 'We don't know who those riders were, or how they got past our scouts.'

'Laurent—'

'A fair fight?' said Laurent, turning back to him. 'No fight's ever fair. Someone's always stronger.'

And then the bells from the fort began to ring, the sound of a warning, their sentries belatedly reacting to the presence of unknown riders. Laurent reached down to snag up his jacket, shrugging into it, laces hanging loose. Damen brought over their horses, unhooking his reins from the stone column. Laurent swung up wordlessly into his saddle and put his heels into his horse, both of them riding hard back to Marlas.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT MIGHT HAVE been nothing, simply an incursion. It was Damen's decision to follow the riders, which meant dragging men up to ride out in the dim light of pre-dawn. They streamed out of Marlas and rode west, out through the long fields. But they found nothing, until they came to the first village.

They smelled it first. The thick, acrid smell of smoke, blown in from the south. The outer farms were deserted and blackened with fire, which still smouldered in places. There were large patches of scorched earth that spooked the horses with their startling heat when they passed.

It was worse when they rode into the clustered village itself. An experienced commander, Damen knew what happened when soldiers rode through populated lands. Given warning, the old and the young, the women and the men would make for the surrounding countryside, taking shelter in the hills with their best cow, or provisions. If not given warning, they were at the mercy of the troop's leader, the most benevolent of whom would make his men pay for the provisions they took, and the daughters and sons they enjoyed. At first.

But that was different to the vibration of hooves at night, to rousing in confusion with no chance to escape, only time to bar the doors. Barricading themselves inside would have been instinctive but not useful. When the soldiers set fire to the houses, they would have had to come out.

Damen swung down off his horse, his heels crunching on the blackened earth, and looked at what was left of the village. Laurent was reining in behind him, a pale, slender shape beside Makedon and the Akielon men riding with him in the thin dawn light.

There was grim familiarity on both Veretian and Akielon faces. Breteau had looked like this. And Tarasis. This was not the only unprotected village ruined as a salvo in this fight.

'Send a party to follow the riders. We stop here to bury the dead.'

As he spoke, Damen saw a soldier let a dog loose from the chain it strained at. Frowning, he watched it streak across the village, stopping at one

of the far outbuildings, scrabbling at the door.

His frown deepened. The outbuilding was set away from the cluster of homes. It stood intact. Curiosity drew him closer, boots turning grey with ash. The dog was whining, a high, tinny sound. He put his hand on the door of the outbuilding and found it unyielding. It was latched, from the inside.

Behind him, a girl's unsteady voice said, 'There's nothing there. Don't go inside.'

He turned. It was a child of about nine, of indeterminate gender, only maybe a girl. White-faced, she had pushed herself out of the pile of firewood stacked against the building wall.

'If there's nothing there, why not go inside?' Laurent's voice. Laurent's calm, invariably infuriating logic, as he arrived, also on foot. With him were three Veretian soldiers.

She said, 'It's just an outbuilding.'

'Look.' Laurent dropped to one knee in front of the girl, and showed her the starburst on his ring. 'We are friends.'

She said, 'My friends are dead.'

Damen said, 'Break it in.'

Laurent held back the girl. It took two impacts of a soldier's shoulder before the door splintered. Damen transferred his hand from sword hilt to knife hilt, and led the way into the confined space.

The dog rushed in beside him. Inside, there was a man lying on the straw-strewn dirt floor, with the broken end of a spear protruding from his stomach, and a woman, standing between him and the door, armed with nothing but the other end of the spear.

The room smelt of blood. It had soaked into the straw, where, ashen, the man's face was transforming with shock.

'My Liege,' he said, and with a spear in his stomach, he was trying to push himself up on one arm to rise for his Prince.

He wasn't looking at Damen. He was looking past him, at Laurent, who was standing in the doorway.

Laurent said without looking around, 'Call for Paschal.' He stepped into the crude space, moving past the woman, simply putting his hand on the spear shaft she held and drawing it out of the way. Then he dropped to his knees on the dirt floor, where the man had collapsed back onto the straw. He was gazing up at Laurent with recognition.

'I couldn't hold them off,' the man said.

‘Lie back,’ said Laurent. ‘The physician comes.’

The man’s breath rattled. He was trying to say that he was some old retainer from Marlas. Damen looked around the small, mean room. This old man had fought for these villagers against young, mounted soldiers. Perhaps he had been the only one here with any training, though any training that he’d had would have been from his past; he was old. Still, he had fought. This woman and her daughter had tried to help him, then to hide him. It didn’t matter. He was going to die from that spear.

All of this was in Damen’s mind as he turned. He could see the trail of blood. The woman and the girl had dragged the old man in here from outside. He stepped over the blood and knelt as Laurent had in front of the girl.

‘Who did this?’ She said nothing at first. ‘I swear to you, I will find them and make them pay.’

She met his eyes. He thought he’d hear fear-darkened flashes, a truncated description, that he’d learn, at best, the colour of a cloak. But the girl said the name clearly, like she’d carved it into her heart.

‘Damianos,’ she said. ‘Damianos did this. He said it was his message to Kastor.’

* * *

Outside, when he pushed outside, the landscape lost colour, greying out.

He had his hand braced against the trunk of a tree when he came back to himself, and his body shook with anger. Soldiers shouting his name had ridden in here in the dark. They had cut down villagers with swords, burned them in their houses, a planned move meant to injure him politically. His stomach had heaved as though he had been sick. He felt in himself something dark and unnamed at the tactics of those he fought.

A breeze rustled the leaves. Looking around, half blindly, he saw that he had come to a small cluster of trees, as if seeking to escape the village. It was far enough removed from the ruined outbuildings that he had not directed any of his own men here, so that he was the first to see it. He saw it before his head really cleared.

There was a corpse near the tree line.

It wasn’t the corpse of a villager. Face down, it was a man, sprawled at an unnatural angle, in armour. Damen shoved away from the tree and approached, his heart pounding with anger. Here was the answer, a

perpetrator. Here was one of the men who had attacked this village, who had crawled out here to die, unnoticed by his fellows. Damen rolled the stiffened corpse with the toe of his boot, so that it lay face up, exposing itself to the sky.

The soldier had the features of an Akielon, and around his waist was a notched belt.

Damianos did this. He said it was his message to Kastor.

He moved before he was aware of it. He went past the outbuildings, past his men digging pits for the dead, the charred ground underfoot still surprisingly warm. He saw a man wiping his ash-streaked, sweating face with his sleeve. He saw a man dragging something lifeless towards the first of the open pits. He had his fist in the fabric at Makedon's neck and was flinging him backwards before he thought.

'I will give you the honour of trial by combat that you do not deserve,' said Damen, 'before I kill you for what you have done here.'

'You would fight me?'

Damen drew his sword. Akielon soldiers were gathering, half of them Makedon's men, all wearing the belt.

As the corpse had done. As every soldier who had killed in this village had done.

'Draw,' said Damen.

'For what?' Makedon gave a scornful look at his surroundings. 'Dead Veretians?'

'Draw,' said Damen.

'This is the Prince's doing. He has turned you against your own people.'

'Don't speak,' said Damen, 'unless it's in contrition, before I kill you.'

'I won't pretend remorse for Veretian dead.'

Makedon drew.

Damen knew that Makedon was a champion, the undefeated warrior of the north. Older than Damen by more than fifteen years, it was said that Makedon only notched his belt once for every hundred kills. Men from all over the village were dropping shovels and buckets and gathering.

Some of them—Makedon's men—knew their general's skill. Makedon's face was that of the elder about to school the upstart. It changed as their swords met.

Makedon favoured the brutal style popular in the north, but Damen was strong enough to meet his massive two-handed attacks and match them, not

even needing to draw on his superior speed or technique. He met Makedon strength against strength.

The first clash sent Makedon staggering back. The second ripped his sword out of his hands.

The third came, death in steel shearing through Makedon's neck.

'Stop!'

Laurent's voice cut across the fight, ringing with unmistakable command.

Makedon was gone. Laurent was there instead. Laurent had wrenched Makedon backwards to hit the dirt, and Damen's sword was driving towards Laurent's exposed neck.

If Damen had not obeyed, his whole body reacting to that ringing command, he would have severed Laurent's head from his body.

But the instant that he heard Laurent's order, instinct reacted, wrenching every sinew. His sword stopped a hair's breadth from Laurent's neck.

Damen was breathing hard. Laurent had pushed his way alone onto the makeshift battleground. His men, racing after him, had stopped on the perimeter of onlookers. The steel slid against the fine skin of Laurent's neck.

'Another inch and you rule two kingdoms,' said Laurent.

'Get out of my way, Laurent.' Damen's voice ground in his throat.

'Look around you. This attack is cold-blooded planning, designed to discredit you with your own people. Does Makedon think like that?'

'He killed at Breteau. He wiped out a whole village at Breteau, just like this.'

'That was retaliation for my uncle's attack on Tarasis.'

'You would defend him?' said Damen.

Laurent said, 'Anyone can notch a belt.'

His grip tightened on his sword, and for a moment he wanted it to cut into Laurent. The feeling rose in him, thick and hot.

He slammed the sword back into its sheath. His eyes raked Makedon, who was breathing unevenly, looking from one to the other of them. They had been speaking quickly, in Veretian.

Damen said, 'He just saved your life.'

'I should give him my thanks?' Makedon said it, sprawled in the dirt.

'No,' said Laurent, in Akielon. 'If it were left to me, you'd be dead. Your blunders play into my uncle's hands. I saved your life because this alliance needs you, and I need this alliance to overthrow my uncle.'

The air smelled like charcoal. From the deserted patch of high ground that he strode to, Damen could see the whole sweep of the village. A blackened ruin, it looked like a scar on the earth. On the eastern side, smoke was still rising from rubble-strewn dirt.

There was going to be a reckoning for this. He thought of the Regent, safe in the Akielon palace at Ios. *This is cold-blooded planning designed to discredit you with your own people. Does Makedon think like that?* Kastor didn't think like that either. This was someone else.

He wondered if the Regent felt the same furious determination that he did. He wondered how he could be confident that he could deliver cruelty like this, over and over again, without consequences.

He heard footsteps approaching, and let them draw up beside him. He wanted to say to Laurent, *I always thought I knew what it felt like to fight your uncle. But I didn't. Until today, it was never me he was fighting.* He turned to say it.

It wasn't Laurent. It was Nikandros.

Damen said, 'Whoever did this wanted me to blame Makedon, and lose the support of the north.'

'You don't think it was Kastor.'

Damen said, 'Neither do you.'

'Two hundred men cannot ride for days in open country without anyone noticing,' said Nikandros. 'If they did this without alerting our scouts or our allies, where did they launch from?'

It was not the first time he had seen an attack designed to frame Akielons. It had happened in the palace, when assassins had gone after Laurent with Akielon knives. He remembered with clarity the provenance of the knives.

Damen looked back at the village, and from it to the thin, winding road leading south. He said, 'Sicyon.'

* * *

The indoor training arena at Marlas was a long, wood-panelled room, eerily similar to the training arena at Arles, with packed sawdust floors and a thick wooden post at one end. At night, it was lit by torches that flickered light across walls ringed with benches, and covered over with mounted weaponry: knives sheathed and bare, crossed spears, and swords.

Damen dismissed the soldiers, the squires and the slaves. Then he pulled the heaviest sword from the wall. He liked the weight as he lifted it, and, setting his body to the task, began to wield it, over and over again.

He was in no mood to hear arguments, or to speak to anyone. He had come to the one place where he could give what he felt physical expression.

Sweat soaked into white cotton. He stripped from the waist up, used the garment to wipe off his face, the back of his neck. Then he flung it aside.

It was good to push; hard. To feel exertion in every sinew, to gather every muscle to a single task. He needed the feeling of grounding and certainty amid these repellent tactics, these deceptions, these men who fought with words and shadows and treachery.

He fought, until he was only his body, the burn of flesh, the pounding of blood, the hot slick of sweat, until everything concentrated into one simple focus, the power of heavy steel, that could bring death. In the moment when he paused—stopped—there was only silence and the sound of his own breath. He turned.

Laurent was standing in the doorway, watching him.

He didn't know how long Laurent had been there. He had been practising now for an hour or longer. Sweat sheened his skin, his muscles oiled with it. He didn't care. He knew they had unfinished business. As far as he was concerned, it could stay unfinished.

'If you're this angry,' said Laurent, 'you should fight a real opponent.'

'There's no one—' Damen stopped, but the unspoken words hung, dangerous with the truth. There was no one good enough to fight him. Not in this mood. In this mood, angry and unable to hold back, he would kill them.

'There's me,' said Laurent.

* * *

It was a bad idea. He felt the thrumming in his veins that told him it was a bad idea. He watched Laurent draw a sword of his own from the wall. He remembered watching Laurent's sword work in his duel against Govart, his own fingers itching to pick up a sword. He remembered other things too. The tug he had felt on his gold collar from the leash in Laurent's hand. The fall of the lash on his back. The driving fist of a guard as he was thrown down onto his knees. He heard his own voice, thick and heavy.

'You want me to put you on your back in the dirt?'

‘You think you can?’

Laurent had cast his sword-sheath to the side. It lay disregarded in the sawdust as he calmly stood with an open blade.

Damen hefted his own sword in his hand. He was not feeling careful.

He had warned Laurent. That was advance notice enough.

He attacked, a ringing three-stroke sequence that Laurent countered, circling so that his back was no longer to the door, but to the length of the training arena. When Damen attacked again, Laurent used the space behind him, moving back.

And further back. Damen quickly grasped that he was progressing through the same set of experiences that had derailed Govart: expecting the fight to be more straightforward than it was, and finding that instead Laurent was difficult to pin down. Laurent’s blade teased, slipping away without follow-through. Laurent enticed, then stepped back.

It was irritating. Laurent was a good swordsman, who was not exerting himself. Tap, tap, tap. They had by now travelled almost the full length of the training area, and were drawing alongside the post. Laurent’s breathing was undisturbed.

The next time Damen engaged, Laurent ducked and swung around the post, so that he had the length of the training area again at his back.

‘Are we just going to go up and down? I thought you’d push me at least a little,’ said Laurent.

Damen unleashed a strike, full strength and with brutal speed, giving Laurent no time to do anything but bring up his sword. He felt blade catch blade with a screech of metal, and watched the force of the impact travel through Laurent’s wrists and shoulders, watched it wrench the sword almost out of his hands, and throw him, satisfyingly, out of a balanced stance to stagger three paces back.

‘You mean like that?’ said Damen.

Laurent recovered well, moving back another step. He was looking at Damen with narrowed eyes. There was something different in his posture, a new wariness.

‘I thought I’d let you go up and down a few times,’ said Damen, ‘before I take you.’

‘I thought you were down here because you couldn’t take me.’

This time when Damen attacked, Laurent put his whole body into weathering it, and as one blade raked shudderingly down the length of the

other, he came up under Damen's guard, so that Damen was forced into a startled defence and only with a flurry of steel flung him back.

'You *are* good,' said Damen, hearing the pleased sound of his own voice.

Laurent's breathing was showing a little exertion now, and that pleased Damen too. He pressed forward, not allowing Laurent time to disengage or recover. Laurent was forced to bring all his strength to bear to block his attacks, the barrage jarring down Laurent's wrist to his forearm and shoulder. Consistently now, Laurent was parrying two-handed.

Parrying, and countering in a deadly flash. He was agile and could turn on a hair, and Damen found himself drawn in, engrossed. He did not attempt to force Laurent into mistakes—yet—that would come later. Laurent's swordsmanship was fascinating, like a puzzle made up of filigree strands, complicated, delicately woven but without obvious openings. It almost seemed a shame to win the fight.

Damen disengaged, walking a circle around his opponent as he gave him space to recover. Laurent's hair was starting very slightly to darken with sweat and his breath was quick. Laurent shifted his grip on his sword minutely, flexing his wrist.

'How's your shoulder?' Damen said.

'My shoulder and I,' said Laurent, 'are waiting to be shown a real fight.'

Laurent swept his blade up, ready for the attack. It satisfied Damen to force some real sword work from him. Damen drove into those exquisite counters, forcing them into patterns that he half remembered.

Laurent was not Auguste. He was cast from a different mould physically, with a more dangerous calibre of mind. Yet there was a resemblance: the echo of a similar technique, a similar style; perhaps learned from the same master, perhaps the result of the younger brother emulating the older in the training yard.

He could feel it between them as he could feel everything between them. The deceptive sword work that was too much like the traps that Laurent laid for everyone, the lies, the prevarications, the avoidance of a straightforward fight in favour of tactics that used those around him to achieve his ends; like a consignment of slaves; like a village of innocents.

He swept Laurent's blade out of the way, slammed the hilt of his sword into Laurent's stomach, then threw Laurent down, his body landing hard enough on the sawdust to knock the wind out of his lungs.

'You can't beat me in a real fight,' said Damen.

His sword pointed to the line of Laurent's Adam's apple. Laurent was sprawled on his back with spread legs and one knee raised. His fingers slid into the sawdust beneath him. His chest was rising and falling under the thin shirt. The tip of Damen's sword travelled from his throat down to his delicate belly.

'Yield,' he said.

A burst of darkness and grit exploded in his vision; Damen squeezed his eyes shut reflexively and shifted his sword point back a critical half-inch as Laurent whirled his arm and flung a handful of sawdust into his face. When Damen's eyes opened, Laurent had rolled, and come up holding his sword.

It was a juvenile boy's trick that had no place in a man's fight. Wiping the sawdust away with his forearm, Damen looked across at Laurent, who was breathing hard and wearing a new expression.

'You fight with the tactics of a coward,' said Damen.

'I fight to win,' said Laurent.

'Not well enough for that,' said Damen.

The look in Laurent's eyes was the only warning before Laurent swung at him with killing force.

Damen swerved sideways and abruptly back, brought his sword up and still found himself giving ground. There was a moment of pure concentration, edged silver all around him that he must focus on completely. Laurent was attacking with everything he had. There were no more elegant engagements, no more insouciant parries. Being thrown onto his back had broken some barrier in Laurent, and he was fighting with open emotion in his eyes.

And with exhilaration, Damen met the onslaught, took on Laurent's best sword work, and began, step by step, to drive him back.

And this—it was nothing like Auguste, who had called to his men to stand back. Laurent's sword cut through a holding rope and Damen had to push away before the shelf of mounted armoury it supported came crashing down on his head. Laurent shoved at a bench with his leg and sent it careening into Damen's path. The armour that had spilled from the wall onto the sawdust became an obstacle course to force uneven footwork.

Laurent was throwing everything at him, drawing every part of their surroundings desperately into the fight. And he was still unable to hold ground.

At the post, Laurent ducked instead of parrying, and Damen's sword swung hard through thin air and then thunked into the wooden beam, lodging

there so deeply that he had to let go the hilt and duck a swing of his own before he could pull it out.

In those seconds, Laurent bent, snatched up a knife that had scattered from one of the overturned benches and threw it, with deadly accuracy, at Damen's throat.

Damen knocked it out of the air with his sword and kept advancing. He attacked and steel met steel, sliding all the way up to the tang. Laurent's shoulder shuddered, and Damen pressed harder, forcing Laurent's sword from his hand.

He slammed Laurent into the panelled wall. Laurent made a sound of raw, guttural frustration as his teeth clicked together and the breath was knocked out of him. Damen pressed in, jammed his forearm to Laurent's neck and cast his own sword aside as Laurent's outflung hand dragged a knife from its hanging display on the wall and brought it driving towards Damen's unprotected side.

'No you don't,' said Damen, and with his free hand caught Laurent's wrist and knocked it hard against the wall, once, twice, until Laurent's fingers opened and he dropped the knife.

Laurent's whole body thrashed against him then, trying to wrench from his hold, a moment of violent animal struggle that pushed their hot, sweat-dampened bodies together. Damen rode it out—shoved them both in against the wall—tightly enough to prohibit movement, but Laurent punched him in the throat with his free arm, hard enough that he choked and shifted, and then, with all the hard violence in him, Laurent drove his knee in.

Blackness exploded across his vision, but fighter's instinct pushed through it. He dragged Laurent away from the wall and flung him to the ground, where Laurent hit, body impacting hard on the sawdust. It knocked the wind out of Laurent for a moment, but he was already pushing himself dazedly up, his eyes venomous on Damen's. Laurent was going for the knife again, his fingers closing around it, too late.

'That's enough,' said Damen, driving his knee hard into Laurent's stomach, then throwing him onto his back and following him down. He had Laurent's wrist in his grip, and he slammed it back against the sawdust, so that Laurent released the knife. His body was an arc over Laurent's, pinning Laurent with his weight, with his hands on Laurent's wrists, Laurent taut beneath him. He could feel the hot rise and fall of Laurent's chest. He tightened his grip.

Finding himself with no way out from under Damen's body, Laurent made a last, desperate sound, and only then finally went still, panting, his eyes furious with bitterness and frustration.

They were both panting. Damen could feel the resistance in Laurent's body.

'Say it,' said Damen.

'I *yield*.' It was gritted out. Laurent's head turned away to one side.

'I want you to know,' he said, the words thick and heavy as they pushed out of him, 'that I could have done this any time when I was a slave.'

Laurent said, '*Get off me.*'

He thrust himself away. Laurent was the first to lever himself off the floor. He stood with his hand on the post for support. Flecks of sawdust were clinging to his back.

'You want me to say it? That I could never have beaten you?' Laurent's voice twisted up. 'I could never have beaten you.'

'No, you couldn't have. You're not good enough. You would have come for revenge, and I would have killed you. That's how it would have been between us. Is that what you would have wanted?'

'Yes,' said Laurent. 'He was everything I had.'

The words hung between them.

'I know,' said Laurent, 'that I was never good enough.'

Damen said, 'Neither was your brother.'

'You're wrong. He was—'

'What?'

'Better than I am. He would have—'

Laurent cut himself off. He pressed his eyes closed, with a breath of something like laughter. 'Stopped you.' He said it as though he could hear the ludicrousness of it.

Damen picked up the discarded knife, and when Laurent's eyes opened, he put it in Laurent's hand. Braced it. Drew it to his own abdomen, so that they stood in a familiar posture. Laurent's back was to the post.

'Stop me,' said Damen.

He could see it in Laurent's expression, as he fought an internal battle with his desire to use the knife.

He said, 'I know what that feels like.'

'You're unarmed,' said Laurent.

So are you. He didn't say it. It didn't make any sense. He felt the moment changing. His grip on Laurent's wrist was changing. The knife thudded to the sawdust.

He forced himself to step back before it happened. He was staring at Laurent from two paces away, his breathing roughened, and not from exertion.

Around them, the training arena was strewn with the disorder of their fight: benches overturned, armour pieces scattered across the floor, a banner half torn from the wall.

Damen said, 'I wish—'

But he couldn't speak the past away, and Laurent wouldn't thank him if he did. He took up his sword and left the hall.

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEXT MORNING, they had to sit next to each other. Damen assumed his place beside Laurent on the erected dais, looking out at the green oblong of meadow that formed the arena, wanting nothing more than to arm up and ride to take the fight to Karthas. The games felt wrong when they should be marching south.

The joint thrones today were under a silk awning, raised to protect Laurent's milkmaid skin from the sun. It was a superfluous measure, since almost every part of Laurent was covered. The sun shone beautifully over the field, and the tiered stands and the grassy side slopes, stage for a contest of excellence.

Damen's own arms and thighs were bare. He wore the short chiton, pinned once at his shoulder. Next to him, Laurent was an unchanging profile, fixed as a coin stamp. Beyond Laurent sat the Veretian nobility: Lady Vannes murmuring into the ear of a new female pet, Guion and his wife Loyse, Enguerran the Captain. Beyond that was the Prince's Guard, Jord, Lazar and the others in blue livery, standing arrayed, the starburst banners waving above them.

To Damen's right sat Nikandros, and beside him the conspicuously empty seat meant for Makedon.

Makedon wasn't the only one absent. The grassy slopes and tiered stands were missing Makedon's soldiers, depleting them of half their men. His anger of yesterday having passed, Damen could see that, in the village, Laurent had risked his life to stop exactly this from happening. Laurent had stood in front of a sword to try to prevent Makedon's defection.

A part of Damen acknowledged, a little guiltily, that Laurent probably hadn't deserved to get thrown around the training arena as a result.

Nikandros said, 'He's not coming.'

'Give him time,' said Damen. But Nikandros was right. There was no hint of an arrival.

Nikandros said, without looking next to him, 'Your uncle has wiped out half of our army with two hundred men.'

'And a belt,' said Laurent.

Damen looked out at the half-filled stands and the banks of grass, where Veretian and Akielon alike gathered for best vantage, a long, scrolling look that took in the tents by the royal stands, where slaves prepared foods, and then further tents, where attendants prepared the first of the athletes for competition.

Damen said, 'At least someone else has a chance to win at javelin.'

He stood. Like a rippling wave, all those around him stood, and all those gathered from the tiered stands to the meadow. He lifted his hand, his father's gesture. The men might be a ragtag group of northern fighters, gathered around a makeshift provincial arena, but they were his. And these were his first games as King.

'Today we pay homage to the fallen. We fight together, Veretian and Akielon. Compete with honour. Let the games begin.'

* * *

Target shooting created a few disputes, which everybody enjoyed. To the surprise of the Akielons, Lazar won the archery. To the satisfaction of the Akielons, Aktis won the spear throwing. Veretians whistled at Akielon bare legs, and sweated in their long sleeves. In the stands, slaves rhythmically raised and lowered fans and brought shallow cups of wine that everyone drank except Laurent.

An Akielon called Lydos won at trident. Jord won at long sword. The young soldier Pallas won at short sword, and then he won at spear, and then he stepped onto the field to try for a third victory, at wrestling.

He came forward naked, as was the custom in Akielos. He was a handsome youth with the physique of a champion. Elon, his opponent, was a young man from the south. The two men scooped oil from the receptacle brought to them by the stewards, anointed their bodies with it, then they slung their arms around one another's shoulders, and, on the signal, heaved.

The crowd cheered, the men grappled, their bodies straining against each other in slippery hold after slippery hold, until Pallas finally had Elon panting, on the grass, the sounds an eruption from the crowd.

Pallas rose to the dais, victorious, his hair a little tangled with oil. The spectators hushed with expectation. It was an ancient and much-loved custom.

Pallas dropped to his knees in front of Damen, almost glowing with the distinction of what his three victories allowed him to do.

‘If it please my lords and ladies,’ said Pallas, ‘I claim the honour of combat with the King.’

There was a swell of approbation from the crowd. Pallas was a rising star, and everyone wanted to see the King fight. Connoisseurs of combat, many of those here lived for these types of matches, when the best of the best took on the kingdom’s established champion.

Damen rose from the throne, and put his hand to the gold brooch at his shoulder. His garment dropped and the crowd roared its approval. The attendants took up his garment from where it fell, as he descended the dais and came out onto the field.

On the grass, he reached his cupped hands into the receptacle held by the steward, and scooped out the oil, smearing it over his naked body. He nodded to Pallas, who he could see was excited, nervous, euphoric; and he put his hand on Pallas’s shoulder, felt Pallas’s hand on his own.

He enjoyed it. Pallas was a worthy opponent, and it was a pleasure to feel the strain and heave of a highly trained body against his own. The bout lasted almost two minutes, before Damen locked his arm around Pallas’s neck and held him down, absorbing every surge, every struggle, until Pallas was stiff with strain, then shaking with it, then spent, and the match was won.

Gratified, Damen stood still while the attendants scraped the oil from his body, and towelled him down. He returned to the dais, where he spread his arms for the attendants to re-pin his clothing.

‘Good fight,’ he said, taking his place again on the throne beside Laurent. He waved over some wine. ‘What is it?’

‘Nothing,’ said Laurent, and found somewhere else to put his eyes. They were clearing the field for the okton.

‘What can we expect next? I really feel,’ said Vannes, ‘it might be anything.’

On the field the okton targets were being set at spaced intervals. Nikandros stood up.

‘I’m going to inspect the spears that will be used in the okton. I would be honoured,’ said Nikandros, ‘if you would join me.’

He said it to Damen. Checking over his equipment in meticulous detail before an okton had been Damen's habit since boyhood, and it appealed to Damen that during the lull between events, the King should tour the tents, view the weaponry, and greet the stewards and those men who would be his competitors and were outfitting themselves for the ride.

He stood. On their way to the tent, they reminisced about past contests. Damen was undefeated in the okton, but Nikandros was his closest competitor and excelled at throws made from a turn. Damen's spirits rose. It would feel good to compete again. He lifted the tent flap and stepped inside.

There was no one in the tent. Damen turned to see Nikandros advancing on him.

'What—'

A rough, painful grip closed on his upper arm. Startled, he let it happen, never thinking for a moment of Nikandros as a threat. He allowed himself to be pushed backwards, allowed Nikandros to take hold of a fistful of fabric at his shoulder, and yank it, hard.

'Nikandros—'

He was staring at Nikandros in confusion, with his clothing hanging from his waist, and Nikandros was staring back at him.

Nikandros said, 'Your back.'

Damen flushed. Nikandros was staring at him as if he had needed to see it up close to believe it. The exposure was a shock. He knew . . . He knew there was scarring. He knew it extended across his shoulders, down to his mid-back. He knew the scars had been well taken care of. They didn't pull. They didn't twinge, even during the most strenuous sword work. The smelly salves that Paschal had administered had seen to that. But he had never taken himself to a mirror and looked at them.

Now his mirror was Nikandros's eyes, the stark horror in his expression. Nikandros turned him, put his hands on Damen's body, spreading them over Damen's back, as if touch would confirm what his eyes wouldn't believe.

'Who did this to you?'

'I did,' Laurent said.

Damen turned.

Laurent stood in the entryway of the tent. He was arranged with elegant grace and his lazy, blue-eyed attention was all on Nikandros.

Laurent said, 'I meant to kill him, but my uncle wouldn't let me.'

Nikandros took an impotent step forward but Damen already had a restraining hand on his arm. Nikandros's hand had gone to the hilt of his sword. His eyes were on Laurent furiously.

Laurent said, 'He sucked my cock too.'

Nikandros said, 'Exalted, I beg permission to challenge the Prince of Vere to a duel of honour for the insult that he has done to you.'

'Denied,' said Damen.

'You see?' said Laurent. 'He has forgiven me for the small matter of the whip. I have forgiven him for the small matter of killing my brother. All praise the alliance.'

'You flayed the skin from his back.'

'Not personally. I just watched while I had my man do it.'

Laurent said it with a fronded, long-lashed gaze. Nikandros looked physically sick with the effort of repressing his anger.

'How many lashes was it? Fifty? One hundred? He might have died!'

Laurent said, 'Yes, that was the idea.'

'That's enough,' said Damen, catching Nikandros as he stepped forward again. And then, 'Leave us. Now. *Now*, Nikandros.'

Angry as he was, Nikandros wouldn't disobey a direct order. His training was too deeply ingrained. Damen stood in front of Laurent with most of his clothing bunched in his hand.

'Why would you do that? He'll defect.'

'He's not going to defect. He is your most loyal servant.'

'So you push him to breaking point?'

'Should I have told him I didn't enjoy it?' said Laurent. 'But I did enjoy it. I liked it most near the end, when you broke down.'

They were alone. He could count the number of times they had been alone together since the alliance. Once in the tent, when he'd learned that Laurent was alive. Once at Marlas, outside in the night. Once inside, over swords.

Damen said, 'What are you doing here?'

'I came to collect you,' said Laurent. 'Nikandros was taking too long.'

'You didn't have to come here. You could have sent a messenger.'

In the pause that followed, Laurent's gaze shifted involuntarily sideways. A strange prickling passing over his skin, Damen realised that Laurent was looking at the polished mirror behind him at the reflection of his scars. Their eyes met again. Laurent wasn't often caught out, but a single glance had betrayed him. They both knew it.

Damen felt the hard ache of it. ‘Admiring your handiwork?’

‘You’re due back in the stands.’

‘I’ll join you after I’ve dressed. Unless you want to step closer. You can help stick in the pin.’

‘Do it yourself,’ said Laurent.

* * *

The course for the okton was almost fully marked out by the time they returned, seating themselves side by side, wordlessly.

The fever pitch of the crowd was bloodthirsty. The okton brought that out in them, the danger, the threat of maiming. The second of two targets was hammered onto its struts, and the attendants gave the all clear. In the heat of the day, anticipation was an insect buzz, rising to a commotion on the southwestern side of the field.

Makedon’s arrival, mounted, armed, with a cadre of men behind him, caused a burst of activity in the stands. Nikandros was half rising from his seat, three of his guards placing their hands on the hilts of their swords.

Makedon wheeled his horse in front of the stands, to face Damen directly. Damen said, ‘You missed the javelin.’

‘A village was attacked in my name,’ said Makedon. ‘I want the chance for requital.’

Makedon had a voice made for generalship that echoed across the stands, and he used it now, making sure he was heard by every spectator gathered for the games.

‘I have eight thousand men who will fight with you in Karthas. But we won’t fight under a coward or a green leader who has yet to prove himself on the field.’

Makedon looked across at the course laid out on the field for the okton, and then he looked right back at Laurent.

‘I will pledge,’ said Makedon, ‘if the Prince will ride.’

Damen heard the reaction of those around him. The Veretian Prince was, at a glance, Damen’s athletic inferior. Certainly, he avoided the training fields. No Akielon had ever seen him fight, or take exercise. He had not participated in any of today’s contests. He had done nothing more than sit, elegant and relaxed, as now.

‘Veretians do not train in the okton,’ said Damen.

‘In Akielos, the okton is known as the sport of kings,’ said Makedon. ‘Our own King will take the field. Does the Prince of Vere lack the courage to ride against him?’

Humiliating as it was to refuse, it would be worse to accept—to have his inadequacy made explicit on the field. Makedon’s eyes said that was exactly what he wanted: his return to the fold conditional on the discrediting of Laurent.

Damen waited for Laurent to sidestep, to evade, to find, somehow, the words to extricate himself from the situation. The flags fluttered loudly. The stands were silent, to a man.

‘Why not?’ said Laurent.

* * *

Mounted, Damen faced the course, holding his horse ready at the starting line. His mount shifted, fractious, eager for the horn that would signal his start. Two horses down from his own, he could see Laurent’s bright head.

Laurent’s spears were tipped in blue. Damen’s in red. Of the other three competitors, Pallas, already triple-crowned, carried spears tipped in green. Aktis, who had won the spear throwing on the flat, had white. Lydos black.

The okton was a competitive display in which spears were thrown from horseback. Called the sport of kings, it was a test of marksmanship, athleticism, and skill with the horse: competitors must ride between two targets in a constant figure eight, throwing spears. Then, amid the deadly flash of hooves, each rider must bend seamlessly to pick up new spears, launching back in for another circuit without stopping—riding eight circuits in total. The challenge was to achieve as many bullseyes with the spear as possible, while evading the flying spears of the other riders.

But the true challenge of the okton was this: if you missed, your spear might kill your opponent. If your opponent missed, you were dead.

Damen had ridden the okton often as a boy. But the okton was not something that you simply vaulted onto a horse and attempted, no matter how good you were with a spear. He had practised with instructors for months on horseback in the training arena before he had been allowed to compete on the field for the first time.

Laurent, he knew, was good at riding. Damen had seen him race over uneven countryside. He had seen him turn his horse on air in battle, while

killing with precision.

Laurent could also throw a spear. Probably. The spear wasn't a Veretian war weapon, but it was the weapon Veretians used in boar hunting. Laurent would have thrown a spear from horseback before.

But all of that meant nothing in the face of the okton. Men died during the okton. Men fell, men suffered permanent injury—from a spear; from hooves after a fall. Out of the corner of his eye, Damen could see the physicians, including Paschal, who waited on the sidelines, ready to patch and sew. There was a great deal at stake for the lives of the physicians, with royalty from two countries on the field. There was a great deal at stake for everyone.

Damen could not aid Laurent in the contest. With two armies watching, he must win to defend his own status and position. The other three Akielon riders would have even fewer scruples, likely wanting nothing more than to beat the Veretian Prince at the sport of kings.

Laurent took up his first spear and faced the course with a calm aspect. There was something intellectual in the way he assessed the field, and it set him apart from the other riders. For Laurent, physical pursuits were not instinctive, and for the first time it occurred to Damen to wonder if Laurent even enjoyed them. Laurent had been bookish as a boy, before he had reformed himself.

There was no time to think more than that. The starts were staggered, and it was Laurent who had drawn first. The horn sounded; the crowd hollered. For a moment Laurent was racing alone across the field, with the eyes of every spectator on him.

It was quickly apparent that if Makedon had hoped to prove Veretians inferior, in this, at least, he had hoped in vain. Laurent could ride. Slender and balanced, the beautiful proportions of his body were in effortless communication with his horse. His first spear soared, blue-tipped: a bullseye. Everyone screamed. And then the second horn sounded, and Pallas was off, riding hard behind Laurent, and then the third, and Damen flung his own horse into a gallop.

With royalty from rival countries on the field, the okton became one of the noisiest events imaginable. In his peripheral vision, Damen glimpsed the arc of a blue spear (Laurent taking his second bullseye), and a green (Pallas likewise). Aktis's spear landed to the right of centre. Lydos's throw was short, spearing the grass, forcing Pallas's horse to swerve.

Damen avoided Pallas expertly, his eyes on the field; he didn't need to watch his own spears land to know that they were hitting dead-centre. He knew the okton well enough to know he must keep his attention on the field.

By the end of the first circuit, it was clear where the true competition lay: Laurent, Damen and Pallas were hitting bullseyes. Aktis, practised on the flat, did not have the same ability from horseback; nor did Lydos.

Reaching the apex, Damen dipped to snatch up his second set of spears without slowing. He risked a glance at Laurent, saw him take his horse inside Lydos's to take his shot, ignoring Lydos's own throw as it passed a half-foot from him. Laurent dealt with the danger of the okton by simply behaving as though it did not exist.

Another bullseye. Damen could feel the excitement of the crowd, tension rising with every throw. It was rare for anyone to ride a perfect okton, let alone three riders in the same match, but Damen, Laurent and Pallas had yet to miss a throw. He heard the thud as a spear hit the target to his left. Aktis. Three more circuits. Two. One.

The course was a stream of surging horseflesh, of deadly spears and hooves that flung up turf. They thundered into the final circuit, buoyed by the elation, the ecstasy of the crowd. Damen, Laurent and Pallas were dead-even in score, and for a moment it seemed flawless, balanced, as though they were all part of a single whole.

It was a mistake anyone might have made. A simple miscalculation: Aktis threw his spear too early. Damen saw it; saw the spear leave Aktis's hand, saw its trajectory, saw it hit with a sickening thunk not the target, but the crucial support strut that was holding the target up.

At galloping speed, all five riders had a momentum that could not be halted. Lydos and Pallas loosed their spears. Both throws were straight and true, but the target, swaying and collapsing without its strut, was no longer there.

Lydos's spear, shearing through air on the other side of the course, was going to hit either Pallas, or Laurent, who was riding alongside him.

But Damen could do no more than shout a warning that was whipped from his mouth by the wind, because the second spear, Pallas's spear, was aimed right for him.

He couldn't dodge it. He didn't know where the other riders were positioned, couldn't risk his own evasion causing the spear to harm one of them.

Instinct reacted before thought. The spear was driving towards his chest; Damen caught it out of the air, his hand closing hard around the shaft, the momentum of it wrenching his shoulder back. He absorbed it, tightening his grip with his thighs to keep himself in the saddle. He caught a flash of Lydos's stunned face beside him, heard the cries of the crowd. He was barely thinking of himself or what he had done. All his attention was on the other spear, flying towards Laurent. His heart jammed in his throat.

On the other side of the course, Pallas was frozen. In that stricken moment of choice, Pallas could only decide whether to dodge and risk his cowardice killing a prince, or stand his ground and receive a spear to the throat. His fate was tied to Laurent's, and unlike Damen, he had no recourse for what to do.

Laurent knew it. Like Damen, Laurent had seen it early—had seen the strut collapse, had judged the outcome. In the handful of extra seconds that this afforded him, Laurent acted without hesitation. He released his reins—and as Damen watched, as the spear flew right for him—he jumped, not out of the way, but into the path of the spear, leaping from his horse to Pallas's, dragging them both to the left. Pallas swayed, shocked, and Laurent bodily kept him down low in the saddle. The spear sailed past them and landed in the tufted grass like a javelin.

The crowd went wild.

Laurent ignored it. Laurent reached down and neatly filched Pallas's last spear for himself. And, keeping Pallas's horse at a gallop—as the sounds of the crowd swelled to a crescendo—he threw it, sending it flying right into the centre of the final target.

Completing the okton one spear ahead of Pallas and of Damen, Laurent drew his horse up in a little circle, and met Damen's gaze, his pale brows rising, as if to say, 'Well?'

Damen grinned. He hefted the spear he had caught, and from where he was on the far side of the course, threw; let it go sailing over the full, impossible length of the field, to thunk into the target alongside Laurent's spear, where it rested, quivering.

Pandemonium.

* * *

After, they crowned each other with laurels. They were borne to the dais by the thronging crowd, surrounded by cheers. Damen dipped his head to

receive the prize from Laurent's fingers. Laurent eschewed his gold circlet in favour of the ring of leaves.

Drink flowed. The new camaraderie was a heady ambrosia, and it was too easy to get carried away by it. There was a warmth in his chest whenever he looked at Laurent. He didn't look often for that reason.

As the afternoon deepened into evening, they moved inward, to end the day to the accompaniment of shallow cups of Akielon wine and the soft sounds of a kithara. There was a fragile feeling of fellowship solidifying among the men, which they had needed from the beginning, and which gave him hope—real hope—for tomorrow's campaign.

The games had been a success and that had meant something, at least. Their men would ride out unified, and if there was a crack down the centre, no one knew about it. He and Laurent were good at pretending.

Laurent took his place on one of the lounging couches like he was born to it. Damen sat alongside him. The new-lit candles illuminated the expressions of the men around them, and the evening lighting faded the rest of the hall into a pleasant, hazy gloom.

Out of the gloom came Makedon.

He was flanked by a small retinue, two soldiers in their notched belts, and an attending slave. He came straight across the hall, and stopped right in front of Laurent.

The whole room went silent. Makedon and Laurent faced one another. The silence stretched out.

'You have the mind of a snake,' Makedon said.

'You have the mind of an old bull,' said Laurent.

They stared at one another.

After a long moment, Makedon waved at the slave, who came forward with a fat-bellied bottle of Akielon spirits and two shallow cups.

'I will drink with you,' said Makedon.

Makedon's expression did not change. It was like the offer of a door from an impermeable wall. Shock rippled over the room, and every eye in the hall turned to Laurent.

Damen knew the amount of pride that Makedon had swallowed to make this offer, a gesture of friendship to an indoor princeling half his age.

Laurent glanced at the wine that the slave had poured, and Damen knew with absolute certainty that if it was wine, Laurent wasn't going to drink.

Damen braced himself for the moment when every scrap of goodwill that Laurent had garnered for himself was thrown away—as every tenet of Akielon hospitality was insulted, and Makedon swept forever out of the hall.

Laurent picked up the cup in front of him, drained it, then returned it to the table.

Makedon gave a slow nod of approval, lifted his own cup, downed it. And said, ‘Again.’

* * *

Later, when a great many overturned cups scattered the low table, Makedon leaned forward and told Laurent he must try griva, the drink from his own region, and Laurent downed it and said it tasted like swill, and Makedon said, ‘Ha, ha, true!’ Later, Makedon told the story of his first games, when Ephagin won the okton, and the bannermen grew misty-eyed, and everyone had another drink. Later, everyone roared when Laurent was able to balance three empty cups on top of each other, while Makedon’s cups fell over.

Later, Makedon leaned in and gave Damen this serious advice: ‘You shouldn’t judge the Veretians so harshly. They drink well.’

Later, Makedon took Laurent by the shoulder and told him about the hunting in his own region, where there were no longer lions as in days of old, but still great beasts befitting a king’s hunt. Hunting reminiscences went on for several more cups and brought out a great deal of fellow feeling. Everyone was toasting lions by the time Makedon clasped Laurent by the shoulder again in a way that indicated his farewell, and rose, making for bed. The bannermen followed him, weaving.

Laurent maintained a scrupulous posture until they were all gone, his eyes dilated, his cheeks slightly flushed. Damen spread his arm over the back of his own seat and waited.

After a long moment, Laurent said, ‘I’m going to need some help standing up.’

* * *

He wasn’t expecting to receive Laurent’s full weight, but he did, a warm arm slung around his neck, and he was suddenly breathless with the feeling of Laurent in his arms. His hands came up to steady Laurent’s waist, his heart

behaving strangely. It was sweetly, impossibly illicit. He felt the ache in his chest.

Damen said, 'The Prince and I are retiring,' and waved the lingering slaves out.

'It's this way,' said Laurent. 'Probably.'

The hall was strewn with the last bits of the gathering, wine cups and empty couches. They passed Philoctus of Eilon, sprawled out on one of them, his head on his arms, sleeping as deeply as if in his own bed. He was snoring.

'Is today the first time you've been beaten in an okton?'

'Technically, it was a draw,' said Damen.

'Technically. I told you I was quite good at riding. I used to beat Auguste all the time when we raced at Chastillon. It took me until I was nine to realise he was letting me win. I just thought I had a very fast pony. You're smiling.'

He was smiling. They stood in one of the passages, wells of moonlight from the open archways to their left.

'Am I talking too much? I can't hold alcohol at all.'

'I can see that.'

'It's my fault. I never drink. I should have realised I'd need to, with men like these, and made an effort to . . . build up some sort of tolerance . . .' He was serious.

'Is that how your mind works?' said Damen. 'And what do you mean, you never drink? I think you're protesting a little much. You were drunk the first night I met you.'

'I made an exception,' said Laurent, 'that night. Two and a half bottles. I had to force myself to get it down. I thought it would be easier drunk.'

'You thought what would be easier?' said Damen.

'“What”?' said Laurent. 'You.'

Damen felt the hairs rise over his whole body. Laurent said it softly, and as though it was obvious, his blue eyes a little hazy, his arm still around Damen's neck. They were gazing at one another, halted in the half-light of the passage.

'My Akielon bed slave,' said Laurent, 'named for the man who killed my brother.'

Damen drew in a painful breath. 'It's not much further,' he said.

They went through passages, past the high archways and the windows along the northern side with their Veretian grilles. It wasn't unusual for two young men to wander the halls together, swaying, after a revel—even among princes—and Damen could pretend for a moment that they were what they seemed to be: brothers in arms. Friends.

The guards on either side of the entrance were too well trained to react to the presence of royalty leaning all over each other. They passed through the outer doors to the innermost chamber. Here, the low, reclining bed was in the Akielon style, the base carved in marble. It was simple, open to the night from its base to its curved headrest.

'No one is to enter,' Damen ordered the guards.

He was aware of the implication—Damianos entering a bedchamber with a young man in his arms and ordering everyone out—and he ignored it. If Isander suddenly had a startling reason why the frigid Prince of Vere had foregone his services, so be it. Laurent, intensely private, would not want his household present while he dealt with the effects of a night's worth of drinking.

Laurent was going to wake with a blinding headache fuelling his corrosive tongue, and pity anyone who ran into him then.

As for Damen, he was going to give Laurent a push in the small of his back and send him staggering the four steps to the bed. Damen unlooped Laurent's arm from his neck, disengaged himself. Laurent took a step under his own power, and lifted a hand to his jacket, blinking.

'Attend me,' Laurent said, unthinkingly.

'For old time's sake?' said Damen.

It was a mistake to say that. He stepped forward and put his hands on the ties of Laurent's jacket. He began to draw the ties from their moorings. He felt the curve of Laurent's ribcage as the tie threaded through its eye.

The jacket tangled at Laurent's wrist. It took some effort to get it off, disordering Laurent's shirt. Damen stopped, his hands still inside the jacket.

Under the fine fabric of Laurent's shirt, Paschal had bound Laurent's shoulder to strengthen it. He saw it with a pang. It was something Laurent would not have let him see sober, a keen breach of privacy. He thought of sixteen spears thrown, with a constant effort of arm and shoulder, after rough exertion the day before.

Damen took a step back, said: 'Now you can say you were served by the King of Akielos.'

‘I could say that anyway.’

Lamp-lit, the room was filled with orange light, revealing its simple furnishings, the low chairs, the wall table with its bowl of fresh-picked fruit. Laurent was a different presence in his white undershirt. They were gazing at each other. Behind Laurent, the light concentrated on the bed, where oil flamed in a low, burnished container, and illumination fell on tumbled pillows, and the carved marble base of the bed.

‘I miss you,’ said Laurent. ‘I miss our conversations.’

It was too much. He remembered being strapped to the post and half killed; sober, Laurent had made the line very clear, and he was aware that he had crossed it, they both had.

‘You’re drunk,’ said Damen. ‘You’re not yourself.’ He said, ‘I should take you to bed.’

‘Then, take me,’ said Laurent.

He manoeuvred Laurent determinedly over to the bed, half pushed, half poured him onto it, as any soldier would help his drunk friend to the pallet in his tent.

Laurent lay where Damen put him, on his back in a half-open shirt, his hair tumbled, his expression unguarded. His knee was pushed out to the side, his breathing was slow as one in sleep, the thin fabric of his shirt lay against his skin, rising and falling with it.

‘You don’t like me like this?’

‘You’re really . . . not yourself.’

‘Aren’t I?’

‘No. You’re going to kill me when you sober up.’

‘I tried to kill you. I can’t seem to go through with it. You keep overturning all my plans.’

Damen found a water pitcher and poured water into a shallow cup that he brought to the low table by Laurent’s bed. Then he emptied the fruit bowl of fruit and put it on the floor alongside, to be used as a drunk soldier might use an empty helmet.

‘Laurent. Sleep it off. In the morning, you can punish us both. Or forget this ever happened. Or pretend to.’

He did all of this quite adeptly, though he found that before he poured the water it took him a moment to catch his breath. He put both his hands on the table and leaned his weight on it, only a little breathless. He put Laurent’s jacket over a chair. He closed the shutters so that the morning sun would not

intrude. Then he made his way to the door, turning once he reached it for a last glance at the bed.

Laurent, falling through scattered thoughts into sleep, said, 'Yes, uncle.'

CHAPTER TEN

DAMEN WAS SMILING. He lay on his back, his arm over his head, the sheet pooled over his lower body. He had been awake for perhaps an hour in the early light.

The events of last night, endlessly complicated in the candlelit privacy of Laurent's bedchamber, had resolved into a single, blissful fact this morning.

Laurent missed him.

He felt a flutter of illicit joy when he thought of it. He remembered Laurent gazing up at him. *You keep overturning all my plans*. Laurent was going to be furious when he arrived at the morning meeting.

'You're in a good mood,' Nikandros said, as he came into the hall. Damen clapped him on the shoulder, and took up his place at the long table.

'We're going to take Karthas,' said Damen.

He had summoned each of the bannermen to this meeting. This would be their first attack on an Akielon fort, and they were going to win it, swiftly and definitively.

He called for the sand tray that he preferred. Scoured with deep, quick strokes, the strategy was visible without bumping heads while leaning in to peer at the ink lines of a map. Straton arrived with Philoctus, arranging their skirts as they sat. Makedon was already present, along with Enguerran. Vannes arrived and took her seat, arranging her skirts similarly.

Laurent entered, an edge to his grace, like a leopard with a headache, around whom one must tread very, very carefully.

'Good morning,' said Damen.

'Good morning,' said Laurent.

This was said after an infinitesimal pause, as if maybe for once in his life the leopard wasn't quite certain what to do. Laurent sat on the throne-like seat of oak beside Damen, and kept his eyes carefully on the space in front of him.

'Laurent!' said Makedon, greeting Laurent warmly. 'I am glad to take up your invitation to hunt with you in Acquitart when this campaign is over.' He

clapped Laurent on the shoulder.

Laurent said, 'My invitation.'

Damen wondered whether he had ever been clapped on the shoulder in his life.

'I sent a messenger to my homestead this very morning to tell them to begin preparing light spears for chamois.'

'You hunt with Veretians now?' said Philoctus.

'One cup of griva and you slept like the dead,' said Makedon. He clapped Laurent's shoulder again. 'This one had six! Can you doubt the power of his will? The steadiness of his arm in the hunt?'

'Not your uncle's griva,' said a horrified voice.

'With two such as us on the ride, there won't be a chamois left in the mountains.' Another shoulder clap. 'We go now to Karthas to prove our worth in battle.'

This provoked a wave of soldierly camaraderie. Laurent did not typically engage in soldierly camaraderie, and did not know what to do.

Damen felt almost reluctant to step forward to the sand tray.

'Meniados of Sicyon sent a herald to hold talks with us. At the same time, he launched attacks on our village, which were intended to sow dissent and disable our army,' Damen said, as he scoured a mark in the sand. 'We've sent riders to Karthas to offer him the choice to surrender or to fight.'

This he had done before the okton. Karthas was a classical Akielon fort designed to anticipate attacks, its approach guarded by a series of watchtowers, in the traditional style. He was confident of success. With every watchtower that fell, Karthas's defences would lessen. That was both the strength and the weakness of Akielon forts: they dispersed resources, rather than consolidating them behind a single wall.

'You've sent riders to announce your plans?' said Laurent.

'This is the Akielon way,' said Makedon, as he might to a favoured nephew a bit slow at learning. 'An honourable victory will impress the kyroi and gain the favour that we need at the Kingsmeet.'

'I see, thank you,' said Laurent.

'We attack from the north,' said Damen, 'here, and here,' sand marks, 'and bring the first of the watchtowers under our control before we make our assault on the fort.'

The tactics were straightforward, and the discussion progressed quickly to its conclusion. Laurent said very little. The few questions the Veretians

had regarding Akielon manoeuvres were raised by Vannes, and answered to her satisfaction. Having received their orders for the march, the men rose to depart.

Makedon was explaining the virtues of iron tea to Laurent, and when Laurent massaged his own temple with finely bred fingers, Makedon remarked, rising, 'You should have your slave fetch you some.'

'Fetch me some,' Laurent said.

Damen rose. And stopped.

Laurent had gone very still. Damen stood there, awkwardly. He could think of no other reason why he had stood up.

He looked up and his eyes met those of Nikandros, who was staring at him. Nikandros was with a small group to one side of the table, the last of the men in the hall. He was the only one to have seen and heard. Damen just stood there.

'This meeting is over,' Nikandros announced to the men around him, too loudly. 'The King is ready to ride.'

* * *

The hall cleared. He was alone with Laurent. The sand tray was between them, the march on Karthas laid out in granular detail. The acidulous blue of Laurent's gaze on him had nothing to do with the meeting.

'Nothing happened,' said Damen.

'Something happened,' said Laurent.

'You were drunk,' said Damen. 'I took you back to your rooms. You asked me to attend you.'

'What else?' said Laurent.

'I did attend you,' said Damen.

'*What else?*' said Laurent.

He had thought having the upper hand over a hungover Laurent would be a rather enjoyable experience, except that Laurent was beginning to look like he was going to vomit. And not from the hangover.

'Oh, stand down. You were too drunk to know your own name, let alone who you were with or what you were doing. Do you really think I'd take advantage of you in that condition?'

Laurent was staring at him. 'No,' he said awkwardly, as if, only now giving the question his full attention, he was coming to realise the answer. 'I

don't think you would.'

His face was still white, his body in tension. Damen waited.

'Did I,' Laurent said. It took him a long time to push the words out. 'Say anything.'

Laurent held himself taut, as if for flight. He lifted his eyes to meet Damen's.

'You said you missed me,' said Damen.

Laurent flushed, hard, the change in colour startling.

'I see. Thank you for—' He could see Laurent taste the edges of the statement. '—resisting my advances.'

In the silence, he could hear voices beyond the door that had nothing to do with the two of them, or the honesty of the moment that almost hurt, as if they stood again in Laurent's chambers by the bed.

'I miss you too,' he said. 'I'm jealous of Isander.'

'Isander's a slave.'

'I was a slave.'

The moment ached. Laurent met his gaze, his eyes too clear.

'You were never a slave, Damianos. You were born to rule, as I was.'

* * *

He found himself in the old residential quarters of the fort.

It was quieter here. The sounds of the Akielon occupation were muted. The thick stone hushed all the noises, and there was only the building itself, the bones of Marlas, its tapestries and trellises torn down, exposed before him.

It was a beautiful fort. He saw that, the ghost of its Veretian grace; of what it had been; of what it could be again, perhaps. For his part, this was farewell. He wouldn't return here, or if he did, as a visiting King, it would be different, restored as it should be to Veretian hands. Marlas, so hard-won, he would simply give back.

That was strange to think. Once a symbol of Akielon victory, it seemed now a symbol of all that had changed in him, the way that when he looked now, he saw with new eyes.

He came to an old door, and stopped. There was a soldier at the door, a formality. Damen waved him aside.

It was a comfortable, well-lit set of rooms with a fire burning in the hearth, and a series of furnishings including Akielon reclining seats, a wooden chest with cushions, and a low table in front of the fire, with a game and game pieces set up on it.

The girl from the village sat, squat and pale, opposite an older lady in grey skirts, bright coins used in a child's game strewn out on the table between them. At Damen's entry the girl scrambled up, the coins knocked to the floor with a chink.

The older lady also stood. The last time Damen had seen her she had been warding him away from a bed with the broken end of a spear.

'What happened to your village . . . I swore that I would find out who was responsible, and make them pay for it. I meant it,' said Damen in Veretian. 'You both have a place here if you want it, among friends. Marlas will belong to Vere again. That is my promise to you both.'

The woman said, 'They told us who you were.'

'Then you know I have the power to keep my promises.'

'You think if you give us—' The woman stopped.

She stood beside the girl, the two of them a wall of white-faced resistance. He felt the incongruity of his presence.

'You should go,' said the girl into the silence. 'You're scaring Genevot.'

Damen looked back at Genevot. Genevot was trembling. She wasn't scared. She was furious. She was furious at him, at his presence here.

'It wasn't fair what happened to your village,' Damen said to her. 'No fight is fair. Someone's always stronger. But I'll give you justice. That I swear.'

'I wish Akielons had never come to Delfeur,' said the girl. 'I wish someone had been stronger than you.'

She turned her back on him after she said it. It was an act of bravery, a girl in front of a king. Then she went and picked up a coin from the floor.

'It's all right, Genevot,' said the girl. 'Look, I'll teach you a trick. Watch my hand.'

Damen's skin prickled as he recognised it, the echo of another presence, the achingly familiar self-possession that the girl mimicked as she closed her hand over the coin, holding her fist out in front of her.

He knew who had been here before him, who had sat with her, taught her. He had seen this trick before. And though her eight-year-old sleight of hand

was a little clumsy, she managed to push the coin into her sleeve, so that when she opened her hand again, it was empty.

* * *

In the field stretching out before Marlas, the joint armies were gathered, and all the adjuncts to an army, the outriders, the heralds, the supply wagons, the livestock, the physicians, and the aristocrats, including Vannes, Guion and his wife Loyse, who in a pitched battle would need to be separated, camped and made comfortable while the soldiers fought.

Starbursts and lions. They stretched out as far as the eye could see, so many banners aloft that they looked more like a fleet of ships than a marching column. Damen looked out at the marshalling vista from his horse, and readied himself to take his place at its head.

He saw Laurent, also mounted, a frowning spicule with blond hair. Rigidly upright in the saddle, his polished armour gleamed, his eyes impersonal with command. With the head that Laurent had from griva, it was probably a good thing that he would soon be killing people.

When Damen looked back Nikandros's eyes were on him.

There was a different look on Nikandros's face than there had been this morning, and it was not just that Nikandros had witnessed Damen standing at Laurent's order at the end of the meeting. Damen pulled on a rein.

'You've been listening to slave gossip.'

'You spent the night in the Prince of Vere's rooms.'

'I spent ten minutes in his rooms. If you think I fucked him in that time you underrate me.'

Nikandros didn't move his horse out of the way.

'He played Makedon at that village. He played him perfectly, as he played you.'

'Nikandros—'

'No. Listen to me Damianos. We're riding into Akielos because the Prince of Vere has chosen to take his fight into your country. It's Akielos that will be hurt in this conflict. And when the battles are done, and Akielos is exhausted by the fight, someone will step in to take the reins of the country. Make sure it's you. The Prince of Vere is too good at commanding people, too good at manipulating those around him in order to get his way.'

'I see. You're warning me again not to bed him?'

‘No,’ said Nikandros. ‘I know you’re going to bed him. I’m saying that when he lets you, think about what he wants.’

Damen was left then to spur his horse alongside Laurent’s as they took up positions, side by side. Laurent was straight-backed in the saddle beside him, a figure of polished metal. There was no sign of the hesitant young man of this morning. There was just an implacable profile.

The horns blew. The trumpets trumpeted. The whole vista of the united armies began to move, two rivals riding together, blue alongside red.

* * *

The watchtowers were empty.

That’s what the scouts were shouting, when they came pounding back on lathered horses with their uneasy news. Damen shouted back. Everyone had to shout to be heard over the cacophony of sound: the wheels, the horses, the metallic tramp of armour, the rumble of earth, the ear-splitting blow of horns that was their army on the march. The column stretched from hilltop to horizon, a line of sectioned squares that moved over fields and hills. His whole army was poised to descend in attack on the watchtowers of Karthas.

But the watchtowers were empty.

‘It’s a trap,’ said Nikandros.

Damen ordered a small group to peel off from the main army and take the first tower. He watched from the hillside. They cantered towards it, then dismounted, took up a wooden ram, and forced the door. The watchtower was a weird block shape against the horizon, with no activity in it; lifeless stone that should have habitation, and instead had none. Unlike a ruin, reclaimed by nature to form part of the landscape, the empty watchtower was incongruous, a signal of wrongness.

He watched his men, small as ants, enter the watchtower without resistance. There was a strange, eerie silence of minutes in which nothing happened. Then his men came out, mounted, and trotted back to the group to report.

There were no traps. There were no defences. There were no faulty floors to hurtle them downwards, no vats of heated oil, no hidden archers, no men with swords springing out from behind doors. It was simply empty.

The second tower was empty, and the third, and the fourth.

The truth was dawning on him, as his eyes passed over the fort itself, the lower walls of thick grey limestone, the fortifications above in mud brick. The low, two-storey tower was tile-roofed, and built to house archers. But the arrow slits were dark and did not fire. There were no banners. There were no sounds.

He said, 'It's not a trap. It's a retreat.'

'If it is, they were running from something,' said Nikandros. 'Something that had them terrified.'

He looked out at the fort atop its rise, and then at his army stretching behind him, a mile of red alongside dangerous, glittering blue.

'Us,' said Damen.

They rode past the jagged rocks, up the steep knoll to the fort. They passed unimpeded through the open forecourt gateway, which itself was four short towers, looming above them in a silent cul-de-sac. The short towers were designed to rain down enfilading fire, trapping an army on their approach to the gate. They were still and quiet as Damen's men applied the wooden ram, and broke open the great doors into the main fort.

Inside, the unnatural quality of the quiet increased, the columned atrium was deserted, the still water of the simple, elegant fountain no longer running. Damen saw an abandoned overturned basket, lolling on the marble. An underfed cat darted across the wall.

He was not a fool, and he warned his men against traps, and contaminated stores, and poisoned wells. They progressed systematically inward, through the empty public spaces, to the private residences of the fort.

Here the signs of retreat were more evident, furnishings disordered, contents hurriedly taken, a favourite hanging gone from the wall here while another remained there. He could see in the disrupted living areas the final moments, the desperate war council, the decision to flee. Whoever had ordered it, the attack on the village had backfired. Instead of turning Damianos against his general, it had forged his army into a single powerful force and sent fear of his name sweeping across the countryside.

'Here!' called a voice.

In the innermost part of the fort, they had found a barricaded door.

He signalled his men to caution. It was the first sign of resistance, the first indication of danger. Two dozen soldiers gathered, and he gave the nod, approving them to proceed. They took the wooden ram, and splintered the doors open.

It was a light, airy solar still adorned with its exquisite furnishings. From the elegant reclining couch with its scrolling carved base to the small bronze tables, it was intact.

And he saw what was waiting for him in the empty fort of Karthas.

She sat on the reclining couch. Around her, she had seven women in attendance, two of them slaves, one an elderly maidservant, the others of good birth, part of her household. Her brows had risen at the crash as at some minor, distasteful breach of etiquette.

She had never made it to the Triptolme to give birth. She must have planned the attack on the village to stop him or stall him, and when it had backfired, she had been left behind, abandoned. The birth had come on her too soon. Sometime very recently, judging by the faint sepia smudges under her eyes. It would explain, too, why she had been left behind, too weak to travel while the others fled, with only those of her women willing to stay with her.

He was surprised to see that there were so many women. Maybe she had coerced them: stay, or have your throat slit. But no. She had always been able to inspire loyalty.

Her blonde hair fell in a coil over her shoulder, her lashes were pressed, her neck was as elegant as a column. She was a little pale, with slight new creases on her forehead, which did nothing to harm its high, classical perfection, and seemed only to enhance her, like the finish on a vase.

She was beautiful. As ever with her, it was something you noticed initially and then forcefully discarded because it was the least dangerous aspect of her. It was her mind, deliberate, calculating, that was the threat, regarding him from behind a pair of cool blue eyes.

‘Hello, Damen,’ said Jokaste.

He made himself look at her. He made himself remember every part of her, the way she had smiled, the slow approach of her sandalled feet as he had hung in chains, the touch of her elegant fingers against his bruised face.

Then he turned to the low-level foot soldier to his right, delegating a trivial task that was beneath him, and now meant nothing.

‘Take her away,’ he said. ‘We have the fort.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HE FOUND HIMSELF in the women's solar, with its light, airy fittings and the reclining couch, carved with a simple design, now standing empty. The window had a view of the approach all the way to the first tower.

She would have watched his army arrive from here, cresting the far hill and drawing nearer, watched every step of its progress to the fort. She would have watched her own people depart, taking food and wagons and soldiers, fleeing until the road was empty, until stillness descended, until the second army appeared, far enough away to be silent, but drawing closer.

Nikandros came to stand beside him. 'Jokaste is confined in a cell in the east wing. Do you have further orders?'

'Strip her and send her to Vere as a slave?' Damen didn't move from the sill.

Nikandros said, 'You don't really want that.'

'No,' he said. 'I want it to be worse.'

He said it with his eyes on the horizon. He knew he would not allow her to be treated with anything less than respect. He remembered her picking her way across cool marble towards him in the slave baths. He could see her hand in the attacks on the village, in the framing of Makedon.

'No one is to speak with her. No one is to enter her cell. Give her every comfort. But do not let her get a hold on any of the men.' He was not a fool anymore. He knew her abilities. 'Put your best soldiers on her door, your most loyal, and choose them from among those who have no taste for women.'

'I'll post Pallas and Lydos.' Nikandros nodded, and departed to do his bidding.

Familiar with war, Damen knew what came next, but still felt a grim satisfaction when the first of his alerts from the watchtowers began to sound, the entire warning system flaring to life: horns in the inner towers sounding, his men shouting orders, taking up positions on the battlements, streaming out to man the gates. Right on schedule.

Meniados had fled. Damen had control of both this fort and of a powerful political prisoner in Jokaste. And he and his armies were on their way south. The Regent's heralds had come to Karthas.

* * *

He knew what Veretian eyes saw when they looked at him: a barbarian in savage splendour.

He did nothing to lessen the impression. He sat on the throne in armour, his thighs and arms heavy with bared muscle. He watched the Regent's herald enter the hall.

Laurent sat beside him on an identical twin throne. Damen let the Regent's herald see them—royalty flanked by Akielon soldiers in warlike armour made for killing. He let him take in this bare stone hall of a provincial fort, bristling with the spears of soldiers, where the Akielon prince-killer sat beside the Veretian Prince on the dais, dressed in the same crude leather as his soldiers.

He let him see Laurent too, let him see the picture they presented, royalty united. Laurent was the only Veretian in a hall filled with Akielons. Damen liked it. He liked having Laurent beside him, liked letting the Regent's herald see that Laurent had Akielos alongside him—had Damianos of Akielos, now in his favoured arena of war.

The Regent's herald was accompanied by a party of six, four ceremonial guards and two Veretian dignitaries. Walking through a hall of armed Akielons had them nervous, though they approached the thrones insolently, without bending a knee, the herald coming to a halt at the steps of the dais and arrogantly meeting Damen's eyes.

Damen settled his full weight into the throne, sprawled on it comfortably, and watched all of this happen. In Ios, his father's soldiers would have taken the herald by the arm and forced him down, forehead to the floor, with a foot atop his head.

He slightly lifted his fingers. The imperceptible gesture halted his men from doing the same now. Last time, Damen vividly recalled, the Regent's herald had been received in a flurry in a courtyard, Laurent white-faced, pounding in on horseback, wheeling his mount to face his uncle's herald down. He remembered the herald's arrogance, his words, and the hessian sack pinned to his saddle.

It was the same herald. Damen recognised his darker hair and complexion, his thickened eyebrows and the embroidered pattern on his laced Veretian jacket. His party of four guards and two officials came to a halt behind him.

‘We accept the Regent’s surrender at Charcy,’ said Damen.

The herald flushed. ‘The King of Vere sends a message.’

‘The King of Vere is seated beside us,’ said Damen. ‘We do not recognise his uncle’s false claim to the throne.’

The herald was forced to pretend that those words had not been spoken. He turned from Damen to Laurent.

‘Laurent of Vere. Your uncle extends his friendship to you in good faith. He offers you a chance to restore your good name.’

‘No head in a bag?’ said Laurent.

Laurent’s voice was mild. Relaxed on the throne, one leg extended out in front of himself, a wrist draped elegantly on the wooden arm, the shift in power was evident. He was no longer the rogue nephew, fighting alone on the border. He was a significant, newly established power, with lands and an army of his own.

‘Your uncle is a good man. The Council has called for your death, but your uncle will not hear them. He will not accept the rumours that you have turned on your own people. He wants to give you the chance to prove yourself.’

‘Prove myself,’ said Laurent.

‘A fair trial. Come to Ios. Stand before the Council and plead your case. And if you are found innocent, all that is yours will be returned to you.’

‘All that is mine’,’ Laurent repeated the herald’s words for the second time.

‘Your Highness,’ said one of the dignitaries, and Damen was startled to recognise Estienne, a minor aristocrat from Laurent’s faction.

Estienne had the good manners to sweep off his hat. ‘Your uncle has been fair to all those who count themselves your supporters. He simply wants to welcome you back. I can assure you that this trial is only a formality to appease the Council.’ Estienne spoke with his hat held earnestly in his hands. ‘Even if there have been some . . . minor indiscretions, you only need to show repentance and he will open his heart. He knows just as your supporters know that what they are saying about you in Ios is not . . . cannot be true. You are no traitor to Vere.’

Laurent only regarded Estienne for a moment, before he turned his attention back to the herald. “All that is mine will be returned to me”? Were those his words? Tell me his exact words.’

‘If you come to Ios to stand trial,’ said the herald, ‘all that is yours will be returned to you.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘If you refuse, you will be executed,’ said the herald. ‘Your death will be a public traitor’s death, your body displayed on the city gates for all to see. What is left will receive no burial. You will not be entombed with your father and brother. Your name will be struck from the family register. Vere will not remember you, and all that is yours will be cast asunder. That is the King’s promise, and my message.’

Laurent said nothing; an uncharacteristic silence, and Damen saw the subtle signs, the tension across his shoulders, the muscle sliding in his jaw. Damen turned the full weight of his gaze on the herald.

‘Ride back to the Regent,’ said Damen, ‘and tell him this. All that is rightfully Laurent’s will return to him when he is King. His uncle’s false promises do not tempt us. We are the Kings of Akielos and Vere. We will keep our state, and come to him in Ios when we ride in at the head of armies. He faces Vere and Akielos united. And he will fall to our might.’

‘Your Highness,’ said Estienne, his grip on the hat now anxious. ‘Please. You can’t side with this Akielon, not after everything that’s said about him, everything he’s done! The crimes he’s accused of in Ios are worse than your own.’

‘And what is it I am accused of?’ said Damen with utter scorn.

It was the herald who answered, in clear Akielon and a voice that carried to every corner of the hall.

‘You are a patricide. You killed your own father, King Theomedes of Akielos.’

As the hall dissolved into chaos, Akielon voices shouting in fury, onlookers leaping up from their stools, Damen looked at the herald and said in a low voice, ‘Get him out of my sight.’

* * *

He thrust up from his throne and went to one of the windows. It was too small and thick-glassed to see anything more than a blurry view of the

courtyard. Behind him, the hall had cleared on his order. He tried to control his breathing. The shouts of the Akielons in the hall had been shouts of furious outrage. He told himself that. That no one could think for a moment that he would—

His head was pounding. He felt a furious powerlessness at it, that Kastor could kill their father, and then lie like this, poison the very truth, and get away with—

The injustice of it took him in the throat. He felt it like the final tearing of that relationship, as though somehow before this moment there had been some hope that he could reach Kastor, but that now what was between them was unsalvageable. Worse than making him a prisoner, worse than making him a slave. Kastor had made him into his father's killer. He felt the Regent's smiling influence, his mild, reasonable voice. He thought of the Regent's lies spreading, taking hold, the people of Ios believing him a murderer, his father's death dishonoured and used against him.

To have his people mistrust him, to have his friends turn from him, to have the thing that had been most dear and good in his life twisted into a weapon to hurt—

He turned. Laurent was standing alone, against the backdrop of the hall.

With sudden double vision, Damen saw Laurent as he was, his true isolation. The Regent had done this to Laurent, had whittled away his support, had turned his people against him. He remembered trying to convince Laurent of the Regent's benevolence in Arles, as naive as Estienne. Laurent had had a lifetime of this.

He said, in a steady, measured voice, 'He thinks he can provoke me. He can't. I am not going to act in anger or in haste. I am going to take back the provinces of Akielos one by one, and when I march into Ios, I will make him pay for what he has done.'

Laurent just kept watching him with that slightly assessing expression on his face.

'You can't be considering his offer,' said Damen.

Laurent didn't answer immediately. Damen said, 'You can't go to Ios. Laurent, you won't get a trial. He'll kill you.'

'I'd get a trial,' said Laurent. 'It's what he wants. He wants me proven unfit. He wants the Council to ratify him as King so that he can rule with his claim wholly legitimised.'

'But—'

‘I’d get a trial.’ Laurent’s voice was quite steady. ‘He’d have a parade of witnesses, and each one would swear me a traitor. Laurent, the debauched shirker who sold his country to Akielos and spread his legs for the Akielon prince-killer. And when I had no reputation left, I’d be taken to the public square and killed in front of a crowd. I’m not considering his offer.’

Looking at him across the gap that separated them, Damen realised for the first time that a trial might have some kind of seductive appeal to Laurent, who must wish, somewhere deep inside himself, to clear his name. But Laurent was right: any trial would be a death sentence, a performance designed to humiliate him, and then end him, overseen by the Regent’s terrifying command of public spectacle.

‘Then what?’

‘There’s something else,’ said Laurent.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that my uncle doesn’t hold out a hand for someone to knock it aside. He sent that herald to us for a reason. There’s something else.’

Laurent’s next words were almost unwilling. ‘There’s always something else.’

There was a sound from the doorway. Damen turned to see Pallas in full uniform.

‘It’s the Lady Jokaste,’ said Pallas. ‘She’s asking to see you.’

* * *

The whole time that his father was dying, she and Kastor had been pursuing their affair.

That was all he could think as he stared at Pallas, his pulse still beating hard from the accusation, from Kastor’s treachery. His father, growing weaker with every breath. He had never talked of it with her—he had never been able to bear talking of it with anyone—but sometimes he had come from his father’s sickbed to see her, to take solace, wordlessly, in her body.

He knew that he was not in control of himself. He wanted to go and rip the truth out of her with his bare hands. *What did you do? What did you and Kastor plan?* He knew that he was vulnerable to her in this state, that her expertise, like Laurent’s, was in finding weakness and pressing down. He looked over at Laurent and said, flatly, ‘Deal with it.’

Laurent gazed at him for a long moment, as if searching for something in his expression, then he nodded wordlessly, and made his way to the cells.

Five minutes passed. Ten. He swore and pushed away from the window, and did the one thing that he knew better than to do. He left the hall and descended the worn stone steps to the prison cells. At the grating on the final door, he heard a voice from the other side, and stopped.

The cells at Karthas were dank, cramped, and underground, as though Meniados of Sicyon had never anticipated having political prisoners, which was probably the case. Damen felt the temperature drop; it was cooler here, in the hewn stone under the fort. He passed through the first door, the guards coming to attention, and moved into a corridor with uneven stone flooring. The second door had a section of tight grating through which he could glimpse the interior of the cell.

He could see her, reclined on an exquisitely carved seat. Her cell was clean and well furnished, with tapestries and cushions that had been transferred from her solar on Damen's orders.

Laurent was standing in front of her.

Damen stopped, unseen in the shadowed space behind the door grating. Seeing the two of them together made something turn over in his stomach. He heard a cool familiar voice speak.

'He's not coming,' said Laurent.

She looked like a queen. Her hair was twisted up and held in place by a single pearl pin, a gold crown of polished curls atop her long, balanced neck. She sat on the low reclining seat, something in her posture reminiscent of his father, King Theomedes, on his throne. The simple white sheaf of her gown, gathered at each shoulder, was covered by an embroidered silk shawl of royal vermillion, which someone had allowed her to retain. Under her arched golden brows, her eyes were the colour of woad.

The extent to which she and Laurent resembled each other, in colouring, in their cool, intellectual lack of emotion, in the detachment with which they regarded one another, was both unnerving and extraordinary.

She spoke in pure, accentless Veretian. 'Damianos has sent me his bed boy. Blond, blue-eyed, and all laced up like a virgo intacta. You're just his type.'

Laurent said, 'You know who I am.'

'The prince du jour,' said Jokaste.

There was a pause.

Damen needed to step forward, announce his presence, and stop this. He watched Laurent arrange himself against the wall.

Laurent said, 'If you're asking, did I fuck him, the answer is, yes.'

'I think we both know you weren't the one fucking him. You were on your back with your legs in the air. He hasn't changed that much.'

Jokaste's voice was as refined as her poise, as if the practice of high manners was not disturbed by either Laurent's words or her own. Jokaste said, 'The question is how much you liked it.'

Damen found himself with his hand on the wood beside the grate, listening as intently as he could for Laurent's reply. He shifted position, trying to get a glimpse of Laurent's face,

'I see. We are going to trade stories? Shall I tell you my preferred position?'

'I imagine it's similar to mine.'

'Confined?' said Laurent.

It was her turn to pause. She used the time to peruse his features, as if sampling the quality of silk. Both she and Laurent looked utterly at ease. It was Damen whose heart was pounding.

She said, 'Are you asking what it was like?'

Damen didn't move, didn't breathe. He knew Jokaste, knew the danger. He felt fixed to the spot, as Jokaste continued her study of Laurent's face.

'Laurent of Vere. They say you're frigid. They say you rebuff all your suitors, that no man has been good enough to prise your legs apart. I believe you thought it would be brutish and physical, and maybe a part of you even wanted it that way. But you and I both know that Damen does not make love like that. He took you slowly. He kissed you until you started to want it.'

Laurent said, 'Don't stop on my account.'

'You let him undress you. You let him put his hands on you. They say you hate Akielons, but you let one into your bed. You weren't expecting what it felt like when he touched you. You weren't expecting the weight of his body, how it felt to have his attention, to have him want you.'

'You left out the part near the end, when it was so good I let myself forget what he'd done.'

'Oh dear,' said Jokaste. 'That was the truth.'

Another pause.

'It's heady, isn't it?' said Jokaste. 'He was born to be a king. He's not a stand-in, or a second choice, like you are. He rules men just by breathing.'

When he walks into a room, he commands it. People love him. Like they loved your brother.'

'My dead brother,' said Laurent helpfully. 'Shall we now do the part where I spread for my brother's killer? You can describe it again.'

He couldn't see Laurent's face as he said it, though Laurent's voice was easy, as was his elegant lean against the stone wall of the cell.

She said, 'Is it difficult to ride with a man who is more of a king than you are?'

'I wouldn't let Kastor hear you call him a king.'

'Or is that what you like about it? That Damen is what you'll never be. That he has surety, self-belief, strength of conviction. Those are things that you yearn for. When he focuses it all on you, it makes you feel like you can do anything.'

Laurent said, 'Now we are both telling the truth.'

The quality of this pause was different. Jokaste gazed back at Laurent.

'Meniados is not going to defect from Kastor to Damianos,' said Jokaste.

'Why not?' said Laurent.

'Because when Meniados fled Karthas, I encouraged him to head straight to Kastor, who will kill him for leaving me alone here.'

Damen felt himself turn cold.

Jokaste said, 'We now have dispensed with pleasantries. I am in possession of certain information. You will offer me clemency in exchange for what I know. There will be a series of negotiations, then, when we have decided on a mutually beneficial arrangement, I will return to Kastor in Ios. After all,' said Jokaste, 'that is why Damianos sent you here.'

Laurent seemed to study her in turn. When he spoke, it was without particular urgency.

'No. He sent me to tell you that you're not important. You'll be held here until he's crowned in Ios, then you will be executed for treason. He's never going to see you again.'

Laurent pushed himself off the wall.

'But thank you,' said Laurent, 'for the information about Meniados. That was helpful.'

He had almost reached the door before she spoke.

'You haven't asked me about my son.'

Laurent stopped. Then turned.

Enthroned on the reclining couch, she was regal, like a queen in a sculpted marble frieze commanding the length of a room.

‘He came early. It was a long birth, through the night into the morning. At the end of it all, a child. I was looking into his eyes when we got word of Damen’s soldiers marching on the fort. I had to send him away, for safety. It’s a terrible thing to separate a mother from her child.’

‘Really, is this all?’ said Laurent. ‘A few pinpricks, and the desperate appeal of motherhood? I thought you were an opponent. Did you really think a prince of Vere would be moved by the fate of a bastard’s child?’

‘You should be,’ said Jokaste. ‘He is the son of a king.’

The son of a king.

Damen felt dizzy, as if the floor was scrolling out from under his feet. She delivered the words calmly, as she had delivered every remark, except that these words changed everything. The idea that it might be—that it was—

His child.

Everything resolved into a pattern: that the child had come so early; that she had travelled so far into the north to deliver it, to a place where the date of the child’s birth could be obscured; that in Ios she had heavily disguised the first months of the pregnancy, both from himself and from Kastor.

All of Laurent’s features whitened in reeling shock, and he stared at Jokaste as though he had been struck.

Even through his own shock, Laurent’s sheer horror was excessive. Damen didn’t understand it, didn’t understand the look in Laurent’s eyes, or in Jokaste’s. Then Laurent spoke in an awful voice.

‘You have sent Damianos’s son to my uncle.’

She said, ‘You see? I am an opponent. I will not be left in a cell to rot. You will tell Damen that I will see him as I require, and I think you will find that he will not send in a bed boy this time.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT WAS STRANGE that all he could think about was his father.

He sat on the edge of the bed in his rooms, with his elbows on his knees and the heels of his palms digging hard into his eyes.

The last thing that he had been truly aware of was Laurent turning and seeing him through the grating. He had taken one step back from Laurent, then another, then he had turned, and pushed his way up the stairs to his quarters, a hazy journey. No one had bothered him since.

He needed the silence and the solitude, the time alone to think, but he couldn't reason; the pounding in his head was too strong, the emotions in his chest in a tangle.

He might have a son, and all he could think about was his father.

It was as if some protective membrane had been torn away and everything that he had not let himself feel was exposed behind the rupture. He had nothing left to hold it back, only this raw, terrible feeling, of being denied family.

On his last day in Ios, he had knelt, his father's hand heavy in his hair, too naive, too foolish to see that his father's sickness was a killing. The smell of tallow and incense had mingled thickly with the sound of his father's laboured breathing. His father's words had been made of breath, nothing left of his deep-timbered voice.

'Tell the physicians I will be well,' his father had said. 'I wish to see all my son will accomplish when he takes the throne.'

In his life, he had known only one parent. His father had been to him a set of ideals, a man he looked up to, and strove to please, a standard against whom he measured himself. Since his father's death, he had not allowed himself to think or feel anything but determination that he would return, that he would see his home again, and restore himself to the throne.

Now he felt as if he stood in front of his father, felt his father's hand in his hair, as he never would again. He had wanted his father to be proud of him; and had failed him, in the end.

A sound from the doorway. He looked up, and saw Laurent.

Damen drew in an unsteady breath. Laurent was closing the door behind him and entering. He must deal with this, too. He tried to gather himself.

Laurent said, 'No. I'm not here to—' He said, 'I'm just here.'

He was suddenly aware that the room had grown dark, that night had fallen, and no one had come to light candles. He must have been here for hours. Someone had kept the servants out. Someone had kept everyone out. His generals and his nobles and every person who had business with the King had been turned back. Laurent, he realised, had guarded his solitude for him. And his people, fearing the fierce, strange foreign prince, had done as Laurent ordered, and stayed out. He was stupidly, profoundly grateful for that.

He looked at Laurent, meaning to tell him how much it meant, though as he was, it would take a moment before he could muster himself to speak.

Before he could, he felt Laurent's fingers on the back of his neck, a shock of touch that caught him in a tumult of confusion as it drew him forward, simply. It was, from Laurent, slightly awkward; sweet; rare; stiff with obvious inexperience.

If he had been offered this as an adult, he couldn't remember it. He couldn't remember ever having needed it, except that maybe he had needed it since the bells had rung in Akielos, and never allowed himself to ask for it. Body leaned in to body and he closed his eyes.

Time passed. He became aware of the slow, strong pulse, the slender body, the warmth in his arms—and that was nice in a different way.

'Now you are taking advantage of my kind-hearted instincts,' Laurent said, a murmur into his ear.

He drew back, but didn't move away completely, nor did Laurent seem to expect it, the bedding shifting as Laurent sat beside him, as if it was natural for them to be sitting with their shoulders almost touching one another.

He let his lips form a half-smile. 'You aren't going to offer me one of your gaudy Veretian handkerchiefs?'

'You could use the clothing you're wearing. It's about the same size.'

'Your poor Veretian sensibilities. All those wrists and ankles.'

'And arms and thighs and every other part.'

'My father's dead.'

The words had a finality to them. His father was buried in Akielos beneath the columned halls of the silent, where the pain and confusion of his

last days would never trouble him again. He looked up at Laurent.

‘You thought he was a warmonger. An aggressive, war-hungry king, who invaded your country on the flimsiest of pretexts, hungry for land and the glory of Akielos.’

‘No,’ said Laurent. ‘We don’t have to do this now.’

‘A barbarian,’ said Damen, ‘with barbaric ambitions, fit only to rule by the sword. You hated him.’

‘I hated you,’ said Laurent. ‘I hated you so badly I thought I’d choke on it. If my uncle hadn’t stopped me, I would have killed you. And then you saved my life, and every time I needed you, you were there, and I hated you for that, too.’

‘I killed your brother.’

The silence seemed to tighten, painfully. He made himself look at Laurent, a bright, sharp presence beside him.

‘What are you doing here?’ Damen said.

He was pale in the moonlight, set against the dim shadows of the room that shrouded them both.

Laurent said, ‘I know what it’s like to lose family.’

The room was very quiet, with no hint of the activity that must be taking place beyond its walls, even this late. A fort was never silent, there were always soldiers, attendants, slaves. Outside, the guards were making their evening rounds. The sentries on the walls were patrolling, looking out into the night.

‘Is there no way forward for us?’ said Damen. It just came out. Beside him, he could feel Laurent holding himself very still.

‘You mean, will I come back to your bed for the little time we have left?’

‘I mean that we hold the centre. We hold everything from Acquitart to Sicyon. Can we not call it a kingdom and rule it together? Am I such a poorer prospect than a Patran princess, or a daughter of the Empire?’

He made himself say no more than that, though the words crowded in his chest. He waited. It surprised him that it hurt to wait, and that the longer he waited, the more he felt he couldn’t bear to hear the answer, brought to him on a knife point.

When he made himself look at Laurent, Laurent’s eyes on him were very dark, his voice quiet.

‘How can you trust me, after what your own brother did to you?’

‘Because he was false,’ said Damen, ‘and you are true. I have never known a truer man.’ He said, into the stillness, ‘I think if I gave you my heart, you would treat it tenderly.’

Laurent turned his head, denying Damen his face. Damen could see his breathing. After a moment he said in a low voice, ‘When you make love to me like that, I can’t think.’

‘Don’t think,’ said Damen.

Damen saw the flickering change, the tension, as the words provoked an internal battle.

Damen said, ‘Don’t think.’

‘Don’t,’ said Laurent, ‘toy with me. I—have not the means to—defend against this.’

‘I don’t toy with you.’

‘I—’

‘Don’t think,’ said Damen.

‘Kiss me,’ said Laurent. And then flushed, a rich colour. *Don’t think*, Damen had said, but Laurent couldn’t do that. Even to sit there after what he had said, he was fighting a battle in his head.

The words hung awkwardly, a blurt, but Laurent didn’t take them back, he just waited, his body singing with tension.

Instead of leaning in, Damen took Laurent’s hand, brought it towards himself, and kissed his palm, once.

He had learned in the course of their one night together to tell when Laurent was taken unawares—taken aback. It wasn’t easy to anticipate, the gaps in Laurent’s experience not mapping to anything that he understood. He felt it now, Laurent’s eyes very dark, uncertain of what he should do. ‘I meant —,’

‘Don’t let you think?’

Laurent didn’t answer. Damen waited, in the quiet.

‘I’m not—’ said Laurent. And then, as the moment stretched out between them, ‘I’m not an innocent who needs his hand held through every step.’

‘Aren’t you?’

Realisation came to Damen. Laurent’s wariness was not, at this moment, the high walls of the defended citadel. It was that of a man with a portion of his guard down, who was desperately unused to it.

After a moment: ‘At Ravenel, I—it had been a long time since I had—with anyone. I was nervous.’

‘I know,’ said Damen.

‘There has,’ said Laurent. He stopped. ‘There has only been one other person.’

Softly, ‘I’m a little more experienced than that.’

‘Yes, that is immediately apparent.’

‘Is it?’ A little pleased.

‘Yes.’

He looked at Laurent, who was sitting right on the edge of the bed, his face still turned away slightly. Here there were only the dimly lit shapes of the room’s arches, its furnishings, the unyielding marble base of the bed where they sat, mattressed and cushioned from its foot to the curve of its headrest. He spoke softly.

‘Laurent, I’d never hurt you.’

He heard Laurent’s strange, disbelieving breath, and he realised what he had said.

‘I know,’ said Damen, ‘that I did hurt you.’

Laurent’s motionlessness was careful, even his breathing was careful. He didn’t turn back to look at Damen.

‘I hurt you, Laurent.’

‘That’s enough, stop,’ said Laurent.

‘It wasn’t right. You were just a boy. You didn’t deserve what happened to you.’

‘I said that’s *enough*.’

‘Is it so hard to hear?’

He thought of Auguste, thought how no boy deserved to lose his brother. The room was very quiet. Laurent didn’t look back at him. Deliberately Damen leaned back, his body intentionally relaxed, his weight on his hands on the bed. He didn’t understand the forces that moved in Laurent, but some instinct pushed him to say it.

‘My first time, there was a lot of rolling around. I was eager and had no idea what to do. It’s not like Vere, we don’t watch people doing it in public.’ He said, ‘I still get too caught up near the end. I know I forget myself.’

A silence. It went on too long. He didn’t disturb it, watching the tense line of Laurent’s body.

‘When you kissed me,’ said Laurent, pushing the words out, ‘I liked it. When you took me in your mouth, it was the first time that I had . . . done that.’ He said, ‘I liked it when you—’

Laurent's breathing shallowed as Damen pushed himself up.

He had kissed Laurent as a slave, but never as himself. They both felt the difference of it, the anticipated kiss so real between them it was as if it was already happening.

The inches of air between them were nothing, and everything. Laurent's reaction to kissing had always been complex: tense; vulnerable; hot. The tension was the greatest part of it, as though this single act was too much for him, too extreme. And yet, he had asked for it. *Kiss me.*

Damen lifted his hand, slid his fingers into the short, soft hair at the back of Laurent's neck, cupping his head. They had never been this close, not with the fact of who he was open between them.

He felt the tension in Laurent rise, the crisis peaking with proximity.

'I'm not your slave,' said Damen. 'I'm a man.'

Don't think, he'd said, because it was easier than saying, *Take me for who I am.*

He couldn't bear that suddenly. He wanted it without pretences, without excuses, his fingers curling hard into Laurent's hair.

'It's me,' said Damen. 'It's me, here with you. Say my name.'

'Damianos.'

He felt the sundering in Laurent at that, the name an admission, a statement of truth that came out of him, Laurent open to him with nothing to hide behind. He could hear it in Laurent's voice. *Prince-killer.*

Laurent shuddered against him as they kissed, as if, having surrendered to it, the painful exchange of brother for lover, he was in some private reality where myth and man met. Even if it was some self-destructive impulse in Laurent, Damen was not noble enough to give it up. He wanted it, felt a surge of purely selfish desire as he thought of it, that Laurent knew it was him. That Laurent wanted this with *him*.

He pushed Laurent down onto the bed, pushed himself on top, Laurent's fingers tight in his hair, though fully clothed they could do no more than kiss. It was a closeness that wasn't enough, limbs tangling. His hands slid impotently down Laurent's tight-laced clothing. Beneath him, Laurent's kisses were all open-mouthed. Desire flamed, painful and bright.

It was subsumed, as it had to be, into the act of kissing. His body felt heavy, one form of penetration substituted for another, the tremors in Laurent not that of a single barrier crumbling, but shudders as though one after

another were being brought down, each place unexplored, each place deeper than the last.

Prince-killer.

A slide and a push and Laurent was on top of him, looking down. Laurent's breathing was quickened, his pupils enlarged in the dim light. For a moment they just gazed at each other. Laurent's gaze splayed out over him, a knee on either side of Damen's thighs. It was a single, dark-eyed moment of choice, the chance to leave, or stop.

Instead, Laurent took hold of the gold lion pin at Damen's shoulder, and with a sharp tug he cast it off. It skittered over the marble floor to the far right of the bed.

Cloth unwound itself, slipped from its moorings. Damen's clothing fell away from him, revealing his body to Laurent's gaze.

'I—' Damen pushed himself up instinctively onto one arm, and was stopped halfway by the look in Laurent's eyes.

He felt acutely aware that he was half on his back, naked, with Laurent fully clothed, astride, still wearing his polished boots and the high-necked, tightly laced collar of his jacket. It was a sudden, vulnerable fantasy that Laurent might simply get up and wander off, strolling the rooms, or sit in the chair opposite to sip wine with his legs crossed, while Damen was left exposed on the bed.

Laurent didn't do that. Laurent lifted his hands to his own neck. His eyes on Damen's, slowly, he took up one of the tight-laced ties at his throat, and drew on it.

The spill of heat that came from that was too much, the reality of who they both were stark between them. This was the man who had had him whipped, the Prince of Vere, his nation's enemy.

Damen could see Laurent's shallow breath. He could see his dark-eyed intention. Laurent was undressing for him, one lace after another, the jacket's fabric opening, revealing the fine white shirt beneath.

Heat flared over Damen's skin. Laurent's jacket came first, dropping from him like armour. He looked younger in only a shirt. Damen saw the hint of the scar at Laurent's shoulder, the knife wound, newly healed. Laurent's chest was rising and falling. A pulse was hammering in his throat. Laurent reached behind himself and drew the shirt off.

The sight of Laurent's skin sent its shock down into him. He wanted to touch it, to slide his hands over it, but he felt pinned, controlled by the

intensity of what was happening. Laurent's body was held in obvious tension, from his hard pinked nipples to the taut muscles of his stomach, and for a moment they just looked, caught in each other's eyes. More than skin was exposed.

Laurent said, 'I know who you are. I know who you are. Damianos.'

'Laurent,' said Damen, and sat up then, he couldn't help it, his hands riding up the fabric over Laurent's thighs to clasp his unclothed waist. Skin touched skin. His whole body felt like it was shaking.

Laurent slid a little, straddling Damen's lap, his thighs opening. He put his hand on the plane of Damen's chest, on the mark where Auguste had run him through, and the touch made Damen ache. In the dim light, Auguste was between them, sharp as a knife. The scar on his shoulder was the last thing Auguste had done before Damen had killed him.

The kiss was like a wound, as if to do it Laurent was impaling himself on that knife. There was an edge of desperation to it, Laurent kissing like he needed it, his fingers clutching, his body unsteady.

Damen groaned, wanting it selfishly, his thumbs pressing hard into Laurent's flesh. He kissed back knowing it hurt him, hurt them both. There was a desperation in both of them, an aching need that could not be filled, and he could feel it in Laurent, the same unconscious striving.

He had envisaged slow lovemaking, but it was as if, having reached the edge, they could only hurtle. The slight shudders of Laurent's breath, the urgent kisses that strove for closeness, Laurent's boots pulled off, the thin silk of his courtier's clothes peeled down.

'Do it.' Laurent was turning in his arms, presenting himself as he had on their first night together, offering his body from the curve in his back to the dip of his lowered head. 'Do it. I want it. I want—'

Damen was unable to stop himself pressing his own weight forward, running his hand up Laurent's back, and slowly rubbing himself, close to his object, in sweet, simulated fuck. Laurent arched his back, and Damen's body ran out of breath.

'We can't, we don't have—'

'I don't care,' Laurent said.

Laurent shuddered, and his body gave a jerk that was an unmistakable fuck backwards. For a moment both their bodies were operating somewhat on instinct, pushing together.

It wasn't going to work. Physicality was an obstacle to desire, and he groaned into Laurent's neck, slid his hands down over Laurent's body. In a burst of explicit fantasy, he wished Laurent were a pet, or a slave, wished him a body that was not going to require extensive, coaxing preparation before it could be penetrated. He felt like he was right on the edge of control, felt like he had been that way for days, months.

He wanted to be inside. He wanted to feel Laurent's surrender shudder and give way, become total. He wanted no denying that Laurent had let him in, who he had let in. *It's me*. His body primed, as though only in one act could this be driven home.

He slid his hands up Laurent's thighs, pushing them apart a little. The view was pinked, small, and tight, the curl of a calyx, impenetrable.

'Do it, I told you, I don't care—'

A smash, the unlit oil burner hitting the marble and shattering in the dim room, his fingers clumsy. He pressed with his oiled fingers first. It was inelegant, braced over Laurent's back, guiding himself in with one hand. It wouldn't, quite.

'Let me in,' he said, and Laurent made a new sound, his head dropped between his shoulder blades, his breath ribboning out of him. 'Let me inside you.'

There was some give, and he pushed, slowly. He felt every inch, as the room faded into sensation. There was only the feel of it, the slide of his chest against Laurent's back, the dip of Laurent's head, and the sweat-damp hair at the nape of Laurent's neck.

Damen was panting. He was aware of his own insistent weight, and Laurent beneath him, pushed forward onto his elbows. Damen dropped his forehead to Laurent's neck and just felt it.

He was inside Laurent. It felt raw and unprotected. He had never felt more like himself: Laurent had let him inside, knowing who he was. His body was already moving. Laurent made a helpless sound into the bedding that was the Veretian word, 'Yes.'

Damen's grip tightened in helpless reflex, his forehead bent to Laurent's neck as the heat of that admission pulsed through him. He wanted Laurent fully against him. He wanted to feel every cooperative muscle, every encouraging movement, so that every time he looked at Laurent he would remember that he had been like this.

His arm slid around Laurent's chest, thigh fit against thigh. Damen's grip, still oiled, was wrapped around the hottest, most honest part of Laurent. Laurent's body responded, moving, finding its own pleasure. They were moving together.

It was good. It was so good, and he wanted more of it, wanted to drive it towards its conclusion, wanted it never to end. He was only half aware that he was speaking words unchecked and in his own language.

'I want you,' said Damen, 'I've wanted you for so long, I've never felt like this with anyone—'

'Damen,' said Laurent, helplessly, 'Damen.'

His body pulsed, almost climaxing. He barely knew the moment when he pressed Laurent onto his back, the brief sundering, the need to be back inside him, Laurent's mouth opening under his, the tug on his neck as Laurent took hold of it and pulled him in. His weight bore down on Laurent, shuddering heat as he entered him again with a strong, slow push.

And Laurent opened for it, a single, perfect slide. Damen took up the rhythm that he needed, their bodies tangled and a harder, continuous fucking. They were caught in each other, and when their eyes met Laurent said, '*Damen*,' again, like it meant everything, and as if Damen's identity was enough, he was shuddering, pulsing against the air.

Strident as proof, Laurent came with Damen inside him, Damen's name on his lips, and Damen was lost to it, his whole body given over, the first deep pulse of his own climax just one part of a choking pleasure that took him, overwhelming and bright, into oblivion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DAMEN WOKE TO the impression of Laurent beside him, a warm, wonderful presence in his bed.

Gladness welled, and he let himself look, a sleepy indulgence. Laurent lay with the sheet tangled around his waist, the morning sun dusting him with gold. Damen had half thought to find him gone, as he had once before, vanished like the tendrils of a dream. The intimacy of last night might have been too much for either or both of them.

He lifted his hand to brush Laurent's cheek, smiling. He was opening his eyes.

'Damen,' said Laurent.

Damen's heart moved in his chest, because the way Laurent said his name was quiet, happy, a little shy. Laurent had only ever said it once before, last night.

'Laurent,' said Damen.

They were gazing at each other. To Damen's delight, Laurent reached out to trace a touch down over his body. Laurent was looking at him as if he couldn't quite believe the fact of him, as if even touch could not quite confirm it.

'What?' Damen was smiling.

'You're very,' said Laurent, and then, flushing, 'attractive.'

'Really,' said Damen, in a rich, warm voice.

'Yes,' said Laurent.

Damen's smile widened, and he lay back in the sheets and just luxuriated in the idea, feeling ridiculously pleased.

'Well,' Damen owned, turning his head back to Laurent eventually, 'You are too.'

Laurent dropped his head slightly, on the edge of laughter. He said, with absurd fondness, 'Most people tell me that right away.'

Was it the first time that he had said it? Damen looked at Laurent, who was now lying half on his side, his blond hair a little mussed, eyes full of

teasing light. Sweet and simple in the morning, Laurent's beauty was heart-stopping.

'I would have,' said Damen, 'if I'd had the chance to court you properly. If I'd come in state to your father. If there had been a chance for our countries to be—' Friends. He felt the mood shift, thinking of the past. Laurent didn't seem to notice it.

'Thank you, 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, trying to get a look in edgewise.'

Damen held himself very still. This easy way of speaking of Auguste was new, and he didn't want to disturb it.

After a moment, Laurent said, 'He would have liked you.'

'Even after I started courting his little brother?' said Damen carefully.

He watched Laurent stop, the way that he did when he was taken by surprise, and then lift his eyes to meet Damen's.

'Yes,' said Laurent softly, his cheeks reddened slightly.

The kiss happened because they couldn't help it, and it was so sweet and so right that Damen felt a kind of ache. He pulled back. The realities of the outside world seemed to press at him. 'I—' He couldn't say it.

'No. Listen to me.' He felt Laurent's hand firm on the back of his neck. 'I'm not going to let my uncle hurt you.' Laurent's blue gaze was calm and steady, as if he had made a decision and wanted Damen to know it. 'It's what I came here last night to say. I'm going to take care of it.'

'Promise me,' Damen heard himself say. 'Promise me we won't let him —'

'I promise.'

Laurent said it seriously, his voice honest; no game playing, just the truth. Damen nodded, his grip on Laurent tightening. The kissing this time had an echo of last night's desperation, a need to block out the outside world and stay for a moment longer in this cocoon, Laurent's arms winding around his neck. Damen rolled over him, body fitting against body. The sheet slipped away from them. Slow rocking began to turn kissing into something else.

There was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' said Laurent, turning his head towards the sound.

Damen said, '*Laurent*,' shocked and on full display as the door swung open. Pallas entered. Laurent greeted him with no self-consciousness at all.

‘Yes?’ Laurent’s voice was matter-of-fact.

Pallas’s mouth opened. Damen saw what Pallas saw: Laurent like some dream of a newly fucked virgin, himself unmistakably above him, fully roused. He flushed all over. In Ios, he might have dallied with a lover while a household slave attended to some task in the room, but only because a slave was so far beneath him in status as not to signify. The idea of a soldier watching him make love to Laurent was breaking open his mind. Laurent had never even taken an acknowledged lover before, let alone—

Pallas forced his eyes to the floor.

‘My apologies, Exalted. I came to seek your orders for the morning.’

‘We’re busy currently. Have a servant prepare the baths and bring us food at mid-morning.’ Laurent spoke like an administrator glancing up from his desk.

‘Yes, Exalted.’

Pallas turned blindly, and made for the door.

‘What is it?’ Laurent looked at Damen, who had detached himself and was sitting with the sheet pulled up to where he had clutched it to cover himself. And then, with the burgeoning delight of discovery, ‘Are you *shy*?’

‘In Akielos we don’t,’ said Damen, ‘in front of other people.’

‘Not even the King?’

‘Especially not the King,’ said Damen, for whom *the King* still partly meant his father.

‘But how does the court know if the royal marriage has been consummated?’

‘The King knows whether or not it has been consummated!’ Horrified.

Laurent stared at him. Damen was surprised when Laurent dropped his head, and even more surprised when Laurent’s shoulders started shaking. Around the laughter emerged, ‘*You wrestled him without any clothes on.*’

‘That is *sports*,’ said Damen. He folded his arms, thinking that Veretians lacked any sense of dignity, even as Laurent sitting up and pressing a delighted kiss to his lips had him slightly mollified.

Later, ‘The King of Vere really consummates his marriage in front of the court?’

‘Not in front of the court,’ said Laurent, as if this were unspeakably foolish, ‘in front of the Council.’

‘Guion is on the Council!’ said Damen.

Later, they lay alongside one another, and Damen found himself tracing the scar on Laurent's shoulder, the only place his skin was marred, as Damen now knew intimately. 'I'm sorry Govart is dead. I know you were trying to keep him alive.'

'I thought he knew something that I could use against my uncle. It doesn't matter. We'll stop him another way.'

'You never told me what happened.'

'It was nothing. There was a knife fight. I got free, and Guion and I came to an arrangement.'

Damen gazed at him.

'What?'

'Nikandros is never going to believe it,' said Damen.

'I don't see why not.'

'You were taken prisoner, you single-handedly escaped from the cells at Fortaine, and somehow managed to get Guion to switch sides on the way out?'

'Well,' said Laurent, 'not everyone is as bad at escaping as you are.'

Damen let out a breath, and found himself laughing, as he might never have thought possible, considering what awaited him outside. He remembered Laurent in the mountains fighting alongside him, shoring up his injured side.

'When you lost your brother, was there someone to comfort you?'

'Yes,' said Laurent. 'In a way.'

'Then I'm glad,' said Damen. 'I'm glad you weren't alone.'

Laurent pushed himself away, up into a sitting position, and for a moment he sat, without speaking. He pushed his palms into his eye sockets.

'What is it?'

'It's nothing,' said Laurent.

Damen, sitting up alongside him, felt the outside world intrude its presence again. 'We should—'

'And we will.' Laurent turned to him, sliding fingers into his hair. 'But first, we have the morning.'

* * *

After, they talked.

Servants brought a breakfast of fruits, soft cheese, honey and breads on round platters, and they sat at the table in one of the rooms that opened onto the bedchamber. Damen took the seat closest to the wall, affixing the gold pin he had recovered to the cotton at his shoulder. Laurent sat in a relaxed pose, in only pants and a loose shirt, its collar and sleeves still open. Laurent was talking.

Quietly, seriously, Laurent outlined the state of play as he saw it, describing his plans and his contingencies. Damen realised that Laurent was letting him in to a part of himself he had never shared before, and he found himself drawn in to the political complexities, even as the experience felt new, and a little revelatory. Laurent never opened his thoughts like this, but always kept his planning intensely private, making his decisions alone.

When servants entered to clear the plates from the table, Laurent watched them come and go and then looked at Damen. There was an unspoken question in his words.

‘You are not keeping slaves in your household.’

‘I can’t imagine why,’ said Damen.

‘If you’ve forgotten what to do with a slave, I can tell you,’ said Laurent.

‘You hate the idea of slavery. It turns your stomach.’ Damen said it, a flat statement of truth. ‘If I’d been anyone else, you would have freed me on the first night.’ He searched Laurent’s face. ‘When I argued the case for slavery in Arles you didn’t try to change my mind.’

‘It is not a subject for an *exchange of ideas*. There is nothing to say.’

‘There will be slaves in Akielos. We are a slave culture.’

‘I know that.’

Damen said, ‘Are pets and their contracts so different? Did Nicaise have a choice?’

‘He had the choice of the poor with no other way to survive, the choice of a child powerless to his elders, the choice of a man when his King gives him an order, which is no choice at all, and yet still more than is afforded to a slave.’

Damen felt again the shock of hearing Laurent voice his private beliefs. He thought of him, helping Erasmus. He thought of him visiting the girl from the village, teaching her a sleight-of-hand trick. For the first time, he caught a glimmer of what Laurent would be like as a king. He saw him, not as the Regent’s unready nephew, not as Auguste’s younger brother, but as himself, a young man with a collection of talents thrown into leadership too early, and

taking it on, because he was given no other choice. *I would serve him*, he thought, and that itself was like a little revelation.

‘I know what you think of my uncle, but he is not—’ Laurent spoke after a pause.

‘Not?’

‘He won’t hurt the child,’ said Laurent. ‘Whether it is your son or Kastor’s, it is leverage. It is leverage against you, against your armies, and against your men.’

‘You mean that it hurts me more that my son is alive and whole than it would if he were maimed or dead.’

‘Yes,’ said Laurent.

He said it seriously, looking into Damen’s eyes. Damen felt every muscle in his body ache with the effort of not thinking of it. Of not thinking the other, darker thought, the one that at all costs must be avoided. He tried to think instead of a way forward, though it was impossible.

He had an entire army gathered, Veretians and Akielons alike, ready to march south. He had spent months with Laurent assembling their forces, establishing a base of power, setting up supply lines, winning soldiers to their cause.

In one stroke, the Regent had rendered his army useless, unable to move, unable to fight, because if they did—

‘My uncle knows you won’t move against him while he holds the child,’ said Laurent. And then, calmly, steadily, ‘So we get him back.’

* * *

He looked for changes in her, but the cool, untouchable air was the same, as was the particular way that her eyes regarded him. She had the same colouring as Laurent. She had the same mathematical mind. They were like a matched pair, except that her presence was different. There was a part of Laurent that was always in tension, even when he affected calm. Jokaste’s unassailable composure seemed like serenity, until you knew she was dangerous. A similar core of steel, perhaps, existed in both.

She was waiting for him in her solar, where he’d allowed her to be reinstated, under heavy guard. She sat elegantly, with her ladies arranged around her, like flowers in a garden. She didn’t seem perturbed by her incarceration, or even really to notice it.

After his long, scrolling look around the room, he sat himself in the chair opposite her, and as if the soldiers who had entered behind him didn't exist.

He said, 'Is there a child?'

'I have told you that there is,' said Jokaste.

'I wasn't talking to you,' said Damen.

The attending women seated around Jokaste were of varying ages, from the eldest of perhaps sixty to the youngest, Jokaste's age, around twenty-four. He guessed that all seven had been in her household a long time. The woman with the braided black hair was someone he vaguely recognised (Kyrina?). The two slaves were also faintly familiar. He didn't recognise the older maidservant, or the remaining ladies of good birth. He let his eyes pass over them slowly. All were silent. He returned his gaze to Jokaste.

'Let me tell you what is going to happen. You are going to be executed. You are going to be executed whatever you say or do. But I will spare your women, if they agree to answer my questions.'

Silence. Not one of the women spoke or came forward.

He said to the soldiers behind him, 'Take them.'

Jokaste said, 'This plan of action will mean the death of the child.'

He said, 'We haven't established that there is a child.'

She smiled, as if pleased to discover a pet capable of a trick. 'You've never been very good at games. I don't think you have what it takes to play against me.'

He said, 'I've changed.'

The soldiers had halted, but there was a ripple among the ladies now at their presence, as Damen sat back in his chair.

She said, 'Kastor will kill it. I will tell Kastor that the child is yours, and he'll kill it. Sophisticated thoughts about using it as leverage won't enter his mind.'

He said, 'I believe Kastor will kill any child he believes is mine. But you have no means of getting a message to Kastor.'

'The child's wet nurse,' said Jokaste, 'will tell Kastor the truth if I am killed.'

'If you are killed.'

'That's right.'

'You,' said Damen, 'but not your women.'

There was a pause.

‘You are the only one protected in your arrangement. These women are going to die. Unless they talk to me.’

She said, ‘You *have* changed. Or is this the new power behind the throne? Who am I really negotiating with here, I wonder?’

He was already nodding to the nearest soldier. ‘Start with her.’

It wasn’t pleasant. The women resisted, and there was screaming. He watched impassively as soldiers took hold of the women and began to drag them from the room. Kyrina wrenched herself bodily out of the grip of two soldiers and prostrated herself, forehead to the floor. ‘Exalted—’

‘No,’ said Jokaste.

‘—Exalted. You are merciful. I have a son of my own. Spare my life, Exalted—’

‘No,’ said Jokaste. ‘He will not kill a roomful of women for loyalty to their mistress, Kyrina.’

‘—spare my life, I swear, I will tell you all I know—’

‘No,’ said Jokaste.

‘Tell me,’ said Damen.

Kyrina spoke without lifting her head from her prostration. Her long hair, which had escaped from its bindings during the tussle, spread over the floor.

‘There is a child. He was taken to Ios.’

‘That’s enough,’ said Jokaste.

‘None of us know if the child is yours. She says it is.’

‘That’s enough, Kyrina,’ said Jokaste.

‘There’s more,’ said Damen.

‘Exalted—’ said Kyrina—

—as Jokaste said, ‘*No.*’ —

‘My lady did not trust the Regent of Vere to protect her interests. In the case that there was no other way to save her life, the wet nurse could be instructed to bring the child to you—in exchange for Jokaste’s freedom.’

Damen sat back in his chair, and lifted his brows slightly at Jokaste.

Jokaste’s hand was a fist in her skirts, but she spoke in a calm voice. ‘Do you think you have overturned my plans? There is no way to circumvent my conditions. The wet nurse will not leave Ios. If you are going to make the exchange, you will need to take me there, and exchange me personally.’

Damen looked at Kyrina, who lifted her head and nodded.

Jokaste, he thought, believed that it was impossible for him to travel into Ios, and that there was no place where it was safe for him to attempt an

exchange.

But there was a place where two enemies could meet without fear of ambush. An ancient, ceremonial place, which held to strict laws, where, since days of old, the kyroi could gather in safety, protected by the standing rule of peace, and the order of soldiers who enforced it. Kings travelled there to be crowned, nobles to settle disputes. Its strictures were sacred, and allowed parley without the prickling spears and spilt blood of the earliest, warlike days of Akielos.

It had a fated quality that appealed to him. 'We make the exchange in a place where no man can bring an army, or draw a sword, on pain of death.' Damen said, 'We make the exchange in the Kingsmeet.'

There was not much to do after that. Kyrina was taken to an antechamber to arrange communication with the wet nurse. The women were escorted out. And then he and Jokaste were alone.

'Give my congratulations to the Prince of Vere,' she said. 'But you're a fool to trust him. He has his own plans.'

'He has never pretended otherwise,' said Damen.

He looked at her, alone on the low couch. He couldn't help but remember the day they met. She had been presented to his father, daughter of a minor noble from Aegina, and he had been able to look nowhere else. It was three months of courtship before she was in his arms.

He said, 'You chose a man who was bent on destroying his own country. You chose my brother, and look where it's left you. You have no position, no friends. Even your own women have turned on you. Don't you think it's a shame things had to end this way between us?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Kastor should have killed you.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BECAUSE HE COULDN'T put Jokaste in a sack and carry her bodily across the border into Kastor's territory, the journey presented certain logistical challenges.

In order to justify two wagons and an entourage, they would be pretending to be cloth merchants. This disguise was not going to stand up to any serious scrutiny. There would be bolts of cloth in the wagons. There would also be Jokaste. Stepping out into the courtyard, she looked at the preparations with the sort of calm that said she would cooperate wholly with Damen's plans, and then, given the first opportunity, smile and wreck them.

The real problem was not even the disguise. It was getting past the border patrols. 'Cloth merchants' might help them travel unimpeded inside Akielos, but it would not get them past border sentries. It would certainly not get them past border sentries who—Damen was quite sure—had already been alerted to the possibility of their coming by Jokaste. Damen spent two fruitless hours with Nikandros trying to plot a course that could sneak two wagons across the border without alerting patrols, and another fruitless hour alone staring at the map, until Laurent wandered in and outlined a plan so outrageous that Damen had said yes with the feeling that his mind was splitting apart.

They were taking the best of their soldiers, those elite few who had excelled in the games: Jord who had won short sword, Lydos of the trident, Aktis the spear thrower, the young, triple-crowned Pallas, Lazar, who had whistled at him, and a handful of their best spear throwers and swordsmen. Laurent's addition to the expedition was Paschal, and Damen tried not to think too deeply about the reasons why Laurent thought it necessary to bring a physician.

And then, ludicrously, Guion. Guion could use a sword. Guion's guilt made him more likely to fight for Damen than anyone else. And if the worst happened, Guion's testimony had the potential to bring down the Regency. Laurent had said all of this succinctly, and told Guion, in a pleasant voice, 'Your wife can chaperone Jokaste on the journey.'

Guion had understood more quickly than Damen. ‘I see. My wife is the leverage for my good behaviour?’

‘That’s right,’ said Laurent.

Damen watched from a second-storey window as they gathered in the courtyard: two wagons, two noblewomen, and twelve soldiers of whom ten were soldiers and two were Guion and Paschal in metal hats.

He himself was dressed in the humble white cloth of a traveller, with a wrist-gauntlet of leather strapped over the gold cuff. He was waiting for Laurent to arrive in order to discuss the finer points of his ridiculous plan. Damen picked up a glazed pitcher of wine in order to pour it into one of the waiting shallow cups.

‘Did you learn the rotation of the border patrols?’ said Laurent.

‘Yes, our scouts found—’

Laurent was standing in the doorway wearing a chiton of unadorned white cotton.

Damen dropped the pitcher.

It shattered, shards flying outward as it slipped from his fingers and hit the stone floor.

Laurent’s arms were bare. His throat was bare. His collarbone was bare, and most of his thighs, his long legs, and all of his left shoulder. Damen stared at him.

‘You’re wearing Akielon clothing,’ said Damen.

‘Everyone’s wearing Akielon clothing,’ said Laurent.

Damen thought that the pitcher had shattered and he could not now take a deep draught of the wine. Laurent came forward, navigating the broken ceramic in his short cotton and sandalled feet, until he reached the seat beside Damen, where the map was laid out on the wooden table.

‘Once we know the rotation of the patrols, we’ll know when to approach,’ said Laurent.

Laurent sat down.

‘We need to approach at the beginning of their rotation in order to give us the most time before they report back to the fort.’

It was even shorter sitting down.

‘Damen.’

‘Yes. Sorry,’ said Damen. And then: ‘What were you saying?’

‘The patrols,’ said Laurent.

The plan was no less outrageous when laid out in meticulous detail, with estimates of travel times and distances. The risk if it failed was enormous. They were taking as many soldiers as they could justify, but if they were discovered, if it came to a fight, they would lose. They had only twelve soldiers. Twelve-ish, amended Damen, thinking of Paschal and Guion.

In the courtyard, he looked at the small assembled party. The armies they had spent so long building would be left behind. Vannes and Makedon would stay to jointly defend the network they had established, from Ravenel, through Fortaine, Marlas, and Sicyon. Vannes could handle Makedon, Laurent said.

He ought to have known that an army was never going to have been the way to fight the Regent. It was always going to be like this, a small group, alone and vulnerable, making their way across the countryside.

Nikandros greeted him in the courtyard, the wagons prepared, their small band ready to ride out. The soldiers only needed to know their own roles in the enterprise, and Damen's briefing to them was short. But Nikandros was his friend, and he deserved to know how they would get across the border.

So he told him Laurent's plan.

* * *

'It's dishonourable,' said Nikandros.

They were approaching the border sentry on the southern road that crossed from Sicyon into the province of Mellos. Damen scanned the blockade, and the patrol, which was forty men. Beyond the blockade was the sentry tower, which would also be manned, and which would relay any message across the network of towers to the main fort. He could see the armed readiness of the men. The approach of their wagons, trundling slowly across the countryside, had long since been observed from the tower.

'I wish to restate my strong objection,' said Nikandros.

'It's noted,' said Damen.

Damen was suddenly aware of the flimsiness of his disguise, the incongruity of the wagon, the awkward mien of his own soldiers, who had had to be schooled multiple times not to call him 'Exalted', and the threat of Jokaste herself, waiting cool-eyed inside the wagon.

The danger was real. If Jokaste found her way out of her bindings and gag to make a sound, or was discovered inside the wagons, they faced capture

and death. The sentry tower held at least fifty men, in addition to the forty here in the patrol guarding the road. There was no way to fight past them.

Damen made himself sit at the reins of the wagon and continue to drive it slowly, not giving in to the temptation to speed up, but approaching the blockade at a sedate walk.

‘Halt,’ said the guard.

Damen reined in. Nikandros reined in. The twelve soldiers reined in. The wagons stopped, with a creak and a long drawn-out, ‘Whoa,’ to the horses from Damen.

The Captain came forward, a helmeted man on a bay horse, a short red cape flowing over his right shoulder. ‘Declare yourself.’

‘We are the escort to the Lady Jokaste, returning to Ios after her labour,’ said Damen. There was nothing to confirm or deny this statement other than a blank, covered wagon that seemed to wink in the sun.

He could feel Nikandros’s disapproval behind him. The Captain said, ‘Our reports said that the Lady Jokaste was taken prisoner at Karthas.’

‘Your reports are wrong. The Lady Jokaste is in that wagon.’

There was a pause.

‘In that wagon.’

‘That’s right.’

Another pause.

Damen, who was telling the truth, looked back at the Captain with the steady gaze he had learned from Laurent. It didn’t work.

‘I’m sure the Lady Jokaste won’t mind answering a few questions.’

‘I’m sure she will mind,’ said Damen. ‘She requested—quite clearly—not to be disturbed.’

‘We have orders to search every wagon that comes through. The lady will have to make allowances.’ There was a new tone in the Captain’s voice. There had been too many objections. To stall again wasn’t safe.

Even so, Damen heard himself saying. ‘You can’t just barge in on—’

‘Open the wagon,’ said the Captain, ignoring him.

The first attempt was less like the throwing open of illicit cargo and more like the awkward knocking on my lady’s door. There was no answer. A second knock. No answer. A third.

‘You see? She’s sleeping. Are you really going to—’

The Captain called, ‘Open it up!’

There was a splintering sound of impact, as of a wooden bolt struck by a mallet. Damen forced himself to do nothing. Nikandros's hand went to the hilt of his sword, his expression tense, ready. The wagon door swung open.

There was an interval of silence, broken by the occasional muffled sounds of an exchange. It went on for some time.

'My apologies, sir.' The Captain returned, bowing deeply. 'The Lady Jokaste is of course welcome wherever she chooses to go.' He was red-faced and sweating slightly. 'At the Lady's request, I will ride with you personally through the last of the checkpoints, to ensure that you are not stopped again.'

'Thank you, Captain,' said Damen, with great dignity.

'Let them through!' came the call.

'The stories of Lady Jokaste's beauty are not exaggerated,' said the Captain, man-to-man, as they wound their way across the countryside.

'I expect you to speak of the Lady Jokaste with the greatest respect, Captain,' said Damen.

'Yes, of course, my apologies,' said the Captain.

The Captain ordered a full salute for them when they parted ways at the final checkpoint. They trundled on for two miles, until the checkpoint was safely out of sight behind a hill, when the wagon stopped and the door swung open. Laurent stepped out of the wagon, wearing only a loose Veretian shirt, slightly dishevelled over his pants. Nikandros looked from him to the wagon and back again.

He said, 'How did you convince Jokaste to play along with the guards?'

'I didn't,' said Laurent.

He tossed the wad of blue silk in his hands to one of the soldiers to dispose of, then shrugged into his jacket in a rather mannish gesture.

Nikandros was staring at him.

'Don't think about it too much,' said Damen.

* * *

They had two hours before the sentries returned to the main fort and saw that Lady Jokaste had not arrived, at which point the Captain would have a slow-dawning realisation. Not long after that, Kastor's men would appear, pounding down the road after them.

Jokaste gave him a cool look when they took out the cloth from her mouth and undid her bindings. Her skin reacted like Laurent's to confinement: red weals where they had tied her wrists with silk rope. Laurent held out his hand to escort her back from the supply wagon into the main wagon, a bored Veretian gesture. Her eyes had the same bored look as she took his hand. 'You're lucky we're alike,' she said, stepping down. They looked at one another like two reptiles.

In order to avoid Kastor's patrols, they were riding for a childhood sanctuary of sorts, the estate of Heston of Thoas. Heston's estate was thickly wooded and contained ample places to hide and wait for patrols to pass, until interest in them slackened. But more than that, Damen had spent hours of his boyhood in the orchards and the vineyards, as his father took repast with Heston on his tours of the northern provinces. Heston was fiercely loyal, and would shelter Damen from an invading army.

It was familiar countryside. Akielos in summer: part rocky hillside covered with brush and scrub, and stretches of cultivatable land, scented with orange blossom. Wooded patches of concealing trees were rare, and none of them filled Damen with confidence that they could hide a wagon. With the danger of patrols growing, Damen liked less and less the plan they had for him to leave the wagons unprotected and ride ahead, to scout the territory and make his presence known to Heston. But they had no choice.

'Keep the wagons on course,' Damen said to Nikandros. 'I'll be swift, and I'll take our best rider with me.'

'That's me,' said Laurent, wheeling his horse.

They made fast time, Laurent light and sure in the saddle. About half a mile out from the estate, they dismounted, and tethered their horses out of sight off the road. They proceeded the rest of the way on foot, pushing scrub out of their path, sometimes bodily.

Sweeping a branch out of his face, Damen said, 'I thought when I was King I wouldn't be doing this kind of thing again.'

'You underestimated the demands of Akielon kingship,' said Laurent.

Damen stepped on a rotten log. He unpicked the bottom of his garment from a thorn bush. He sidestepped a jut of razor-sharp granite.

'The undergrowth was thinner when I was a boy.'

'Or you were.'

Laurent said it holding back a low tree branch for Damen, who stepped past with a rustle. Cresting the final rise together, they saw their destination

spread out before them.

The estate of Heston of Thoas was a long, low series of cool, marble-fluted buildings that opened onto private gardens, and from there to picturesque orchards of nectarine and apricot.

Seeing it, Damen could only think how good it would be to arrive there, to share the beauty of its architecture with Laurent, to take their rest—watching the sun set from the open balcony, Heston offering his warm-hearted hospitality, ordering him simple delicacies and arguing with him on some obscure point of philosophy.

The whole estate was dotted with convenient rocks that protruded through the thin covering of soil. Damen tracked them: they provided a covered route from the scraggle of trees where he stood with Laurent all the way down to the house gate—and from there he knew the way into Heston's study, with its doors out onto the gardens, a place where he could enter, and find Heston alone.

'Stop,' said Laurent.

Damen stopped. Following Laurent's gaze, he saw a dog lounging on its chain near a small penned field full of horses on the west side of the estate. They were downwind; it had not yet begun to bark.

'There are too many horses,' said Laurent.

Damen looked again at the pen, and his stomach sank. It held at least fifty horses, in a small overstuffed patch of field that was never meant to contain them; it would be grazed out too quickly.

And they were not the lighter steeds bred for an aristocrat to ride. They were soldiers' mounts, all of them, big-chested and heavy with muscle to carry the weight of a rider in armour, transported from Kesus and Thrace to service the northern garrisons.

'Jokaste,' he said.

His hands clenched into fists. Kastor might have remembered that they had hunted here as boys, but only Jokaste would have guessed that Damen would stop here if he travelled south—and sent men in advance, denying him a safe harbour.

'I can't leave Heston to Kastor's men,' said Damen. 'I owe him.'

'He's only in danger if you're found here. Then he's a traitor,' Laurent said.

Their eyes met, and the understanding passed between them, quickly and wordlessly: they needed another way to get the wagons off the road—and

they needed to do it avoiding the sentries posted at Heston's estate.

'There's a stream a few miles to the north that runs through woodland,' Damen said. 'It will cover our tracks, and keep us off the road.'

'I'll take care of the sentries,' said Laurent.

'You left the dress in the wagon,' said Damen.

'Thank you, I do have other ways of getting past a sentry.'

They understood each other. The light through the trees dappled Laurent's hair, which was longer now than it had been in the palace, and showing signs of minor disarray. It had a twig in it. Damen said, 'The stream is north of that second rise. We'll wait for you downstream of its second meander.'

Laurent nodded and slipped away, wordlessly.

There was no sign of a blond head, but somehow the dog got loose and went streaking through the yard to where the unfamiliar horses were penned. A yappy dog in an overstuffed pen had a predictable effect on the horses; they bucked, bolted and burst from the enclosure. The grazing in Heston's private garden being excellent, when the rails came down, the horses streamed out to partake of it, and to partake of the grazing in the adjacent crop fields, and of the grazing quite far away, over the eastern hill. The spasming excitement of the dog egged them on. As did the sylph-like actions of a ghost, untying ropes, slipping open rails.

Returning to his own mount, Damen smiled grimly as he heard the distant Akielon shouts: *The horses! Round up the horses!* They had no horses with which to round up the horses. There was going to be a lot of stomping around on foot, trying to catch mounts and cursing small dogs.

Now it was time for his part. The wagons, when he galloped back to them, were even slower than he remembered. Pushed to the fastest gait they could sustain, they seemed to crawl across the countryside. Damen willed them to go faster, which was a sensation like shouting at a snail to run. He felt the hot oppression of the flat fields that seemed to stretch for miles with their weirdly shaped scrubs scattered over the landscape.

Nikandros was harsh-faced. Guion and his wife were nervous. They probably felt they had the most to lose, but in fact everyone would lose the same thing: their lives. Everyone but Jokaste. She only said, mildly, 'Trouble at Heston's?'

The stream was a glimmer through the trees when they saw it in the distance. One of the wagons almost jackknifed when they finally drove off the road and down, precariously, to the stream. The other wagon creaked and

lurched ominously as it hit the stream bed. There was an awful moment when it seemed the wagons wouldn't travel in the shallow water, that they were trapped here, exposed and visible from the road. Twelve soldiers splashed down off their horses, into water that came halfway up their sandalled shins, and put their back into it. Damen came to stand behind the largest wagon and heaved, his every muscle straining. Slowly, the wagon shifted into the minor swirls of current, the pebbles and stones, along the stream towards the trees.

The sound of hooves caused Damen's head to jerk up. 'Get to cover. Now.'

They scrambled for the concealing copse ahead, reaching it only a moment before the patrol burst from behind the rise, Kastor's men riding flat out. Damen stopped, frozen. Jord and the Veretians stood in one tight bunch, the Akielons in another. Damen had the ridiculous urge to put his hand over his horse's nose and stifle any chance of a whicker. He looked up and saw that Nikandros, grimly, had his hand over Jokaste's mouth, and was holding her inside the wagon in a firm grip from behind.

Kastor's men pounded closer, and Damen tried not to think about their poorly concealed wagon tracks, the bent tree branches, the leaves torn from shrubs, and all the signs that they had dragged two wagons off the road. Red capes streaming, the patrol galloped right for them—

—and past them, continuing along the road in the direction of Heston's estate.

Eventually the hoof beats receded. Silence settled and everyone breathed. Damen let long minutes go by before he gave the nod, and the wagons began to move, the horses' hooves splashing through the water, downstream, deeper into the woodland away from the road.

It got cooler the deeper they went into the trees, the air over the stream cool, and the leaves providing cover from the hot sun. There were no sounds here other than that of the water and their own movement through it, absorbed by the trees.

Damen called for a halt at the second meander, and they waited, Damen trying not to think about how likely it was that Kastor had remembered the day they had found this stream hunting as boys, and whether he had spoken of it fondly with Jokaste. If he had, Jokaste's meticulous planning would have soldiers here already, or coming right for them.

The sound of a twig breaking set everyone's hands to their swords, Akielon and Veretian blades drawn soundlessly. Damen waited in the tense

silence. Another snapped twig.

And then he saw the pale head, and the paler white shirt, a lithe figure palming his way from tree trunk to tree trunk.

‘You’re late,’ said Damen.

‘I brought you a souvenir.’

Laurent tossed Damen an apricot. Damen could feel the quiet exultation of Laurent’s men, while the Akielons looked a little dazed. Nikandros passed Laurent his reins.

‘Is this how you do things in Vere?’

‘You mean effectively?’ said Laurent.

And swung up onto his horse.

* * *

Risk of laming was high, and they made slow progress along the stream bed because they had to protect the wagons. Riders went ahead to ensure the stream didn’t deepen or quicken in current, and that the stream bed remained a gentle shale with enough purchase for the wheels.

Damen called the halt. They pulled up onto a bank, where an outcrop of rock could disguise a small fire. There were granite ruins here too, which would also provide cover. Damen recognised the shapes, having seen them in Acquitart and more recently at Marlas, though here the ruins were only the remains of a wall, the stones worn and covered in undergrowth.

Pallas and Aktis put their skills to work and speared fish, which they ate baked and flaky wrapped in leaves, drinking fortified wine. It was a sweet-tasting supplement to their usual road fare of bread and hard cheese. The horses, tied for the night, grazed a little, whuffling the ground gently. Jord and Lydos took first watch, while the others came to sit in a semicircle around their small fire.

When Damen came to sit too, everyone suddenly scrambled up and stood, awkwardly. Earlier, Laurent had tossed Damen his bedroll and said, ‘Unpack this,’ and Pallas had almost challenged him to a duel for the insult. Sitting down and eating cheese casually with their King was not something that they knew how to do. Damen poured a shallow cup of wine and passed it to the soldier beside him (Pallas), and there was a long silence in which Pallas stood obviously garnering every piece of courage that he had to reach out and take it.

Laurent strolled up to the impasse, threw himself down on the log next to Damen, and in an expressionless voice launched into the story of the brothel adventure that had earned him the blue dress, which was so unabashedly filthy it made Lazar blush, and so funny it had Pallas wiping his eyes. The Veretians asked frank questions about Laurent's escape from the brothel. This led to frank answers and more eye wiping, as everyone had opinions about brothels that were translated and mistranslated hilariously. The wine was passed around.

Not to be outdone, the Akielons told Laurent about their escape from Kastor's soldiers, the crouching in the stream bed, the race in slow wagons, the hiding behind tree fronds. Pallas did a decent impression of Paschal's riding. Lazar watched Pallas with lazy admiration. It wasn't the impression he was admiring. Damen bit into the apricot.

When Damen rose a while later, everyone remembered again that he was the King, but the stiff formality was banished, and he went rather pleased to the bedroll that he had dutifully unpacked, and lay down on it, listening to the sounds of the camp preparing itself to sleep.

It was with a little shock that he heard footsteps, and the faint sound of a bedroll hitting the earth beside him. Laurent stretched out, and they lay alongside one another under the stars.

'You smell of horse,' said Damen.

'It's how I got past the dog.'

He felt a throb of happiness, and said nothing, just lay on his back and looked up at the stars.

'It's like old times,' said Damen, though the truth was, he had never really had times like this.

'My first trip to Akielos,' said Laurent.

'Do you like it?'

'It's like Vere, with fewer places to have a bath,' said Laurent.

When he looked sideways, Laurent was lying on his side looking back at him; their postures echoed each other.

'The stream is right there.'

'You want me wandering around the Akielon countryside naked at night?' And then, 'You smell just as much of horse as I do.'

'More,' said Damen. He was smiling.

Laurent was a pale shape in the moonlight. Beyond him was the sleeping camp, and the ruins in granite that would crumble over time and fall away

forever into the water.

‘They’re Artesian. Aren’t they? From the old empire, Artes. They say it used to span both our countries.’

‘Like the ruins at Acquitart,’ said Laurent. He didn’t say, *And at Marlas*. ‘My brother and I used to play there as boys. Kill all the Akielons and restore the old empire.’

‘My father had the same idea.’

And look what happened to him. Laurent didn’t say that either. Laurent’s breathing was easy, as though he was relaxed and sleepy, lying beside Damen. Damen heard himself say it.

‘There’s a summer palace in Ios outside the capital. My mother designed the gardens there. They say it’s built on Artesian foundations.’ He thought of the meandering walks, the delicate, flowering southern orchids, the sprays of orange blossom. ‘It’s cool in summer, and there are fountains, and tracks for riding.’ His pulse beat with uncharacteristic nerves, so that he felt almost shy. ‘When all this is over . . . we could take horses and stay a week in the palace.’ Since their night together in Karthas, he hadn’t dared to speak about the future.

He felt Laurent holding himself carefully, and there was a strange pause. After a moment, Laurent said, softly, ‘I’d like that.’

Damen rolled onto his back again, and felt the words like happiness as he let himself look up again at the wide sweep of stars.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS TYPICAL of their luck that the wagon, which had held together for five days in a stream bed, broke down as soon as they rejoined the road.

It sat like a truculent child in the middle of the dirt, the second wagon crowded uncomfortably behind it. Lazar, emerging from under the wagon with a smudge on his cheek, pronounced it a broken axel. Damen, who as a prince of the blood did not excel at wagon repairs, nodded knowledgeably, and ordered his men to fix it. Everyone dismounted and got to work propping up the wagon, cutting down a young tree for wood.

That was when a squadron of Akielon soldiers appeared on the horizon.

Damen held out his hand for silence—total silence. The hammering stopped. Everything stopped. There was a clear view across the plain all the way to the trotting squadron in tight formation: fifty soldiers, travelling northwest.

‘If they come this way—’ said Nikandros in a low voice.

‘Hey!’ Laurent called out. He was pulling himself up from the front wheel onto the wagon top. He had a swathe of yellow silk in his hand, and he stood on the wagon waving it colourfully at the squadron. ‘Hey you! Akielons!’

Damen’s stomach clenched, and he took an impotent step forward.

‘Stop him!’ said Nikandros, making a similar movement forward—too late. On the horizon, the squadron was wheeling like a flock of starlings.

It was too late to stop it. Too late to grab at Laurent’s ankle. The squadron had seen them. Brief visions of strangling Laurent weren’t helpful. Damen looked at Nikandros. They were outnumbered, and there was nowhere to hide on this wide, flat plain. The two of them subtly squared off towards the approaching squadron. Damen judged the distance between himself and the nearest of the approaching soldiers, his chances of killing them, of killing enough of them to even the odds for the others.

Laurent was clambering down from the wagon top, still clutching the silk. He greeted the squadron with a relieved voice and an exaggerated version of his Veretian accent.

‘But thank you, officer. What could we have done if you hadn’t stopped? We have eighteen bolts of cloth to deliver to Milo of Argos, and as you can see Christofle has sold us a defective wagon.’

The officer in question was identifiable by his superior horse. He had short dark hair under his helmet, and the kind of unyielding expression that only came with extensive training. He looked around for an Akielon, and found Damen.

Damen tried to keep his own expression bland and not look at the wagons. The first was full of cloth, but the second was full of Jokaste, with Guion and his wife also crammed in there. The moment the doors were flung open, they would be revealed. There was no blue dress to save them.

‘You are merchants?’

‘We are.’

‘What name?’ said the officer.

‘Charls,’ said Damen, who was the only merchant he knew.

‘You are Charls the renowned Veretian cloth merchant?’ said the officer sceptically, as if this was a name well known to him.

‘No,’ said Laurent, as if this was the most foolish thing in the world. ‘I am Charls the renowned Veretian cloth merchant. This is my assistant. Lamen.’

In the silence, the officer tracked his gaze over Laurent, then over Damen. Then he looked at the wagon, taking in every dent, every fleck of dust, every sign of long-distance travel, in minute detail.

‘Well, Charls,’ he said, eventually. ‘It looks like you’ve got a broken axel.’

‘I don’t suppose your men could aid us in our repairs?’ said Laurent.

Damen stared at him. They were encircled by fifty mounted Akielon soldiers. Jokaste was inside that wagon.

The officer said, ‘We’re patrolling for Damianos of Akielos.’

‘Who’s Damianos of Akielos?’ said Laurent.

His face was utterly open, his blue eyes unblinking, upturned to the officer on his horse.

‘He’s the King’s son,’ Damen heard himself saying, ‘Kastor’s brother.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Lamen. Prince Damianos is dead,’ said Laurent.

‘He is hardly the man to whom this officer is referring.’ Then, to the officer: ‘I apologise for my assistant. He doesn’t keep up with Akielon affairs.’

‘On the contrary, it’s believed Damianos of Akielos is alive, and that he crossed into this province with his men six days ago.’ The officer gestured to his squadron, waving them forward. ‘Damianos is in Akielos.’

To Damen’s disbelief, he was waving them forward to mend the wagon. One of the soldiers asked Nikandros for a wooden block to brace the wheel. Nikandros passed it to him wordlessly. Nikandros had the slightly stupefied look that Damen remembered from several of his own adventures with Laurent.

‘When your wagon is repaired, we can ride with you to the inn,’ said the officer. ‘You’ll be quite safe. The rest of the garrison is stationed there.’

He used the same tone that Laurent had used when he had said, ‘Who’s Damianos?’

It was suddenly obvious that they were not free from suspicion. A provincial officer might not feel comfortable confronting a well-known merchant on the road and searching his wagons. But at an inn, he could set his men to investigate the wagons at his leisure. And why risk a fight with a dozen guards on the road, when you could simply escort them back to the waiting arms of your garrison?

‘Thank you, officer,’ said Laurent without hesitating. ‘Lead on.’

The officer’s name was Stavos, and when the wagon was fixed, he rode alongside Laurent, everyone trotting upright in their saddles towards the inn. Stavos’s air of confidence got stronger as they rode, which brought every sense Damen had of danger to life. Yet any reluctance was a sure mark of guilt. He could only ride onwards.

The inn was one the larger hostelries in Mellos, equipped for powerful guests, and its entrance was a set of great gates through which wagons and carriages could pass into a central courtyard that contained ample yards for plodding beasts of burden, and stalls for good horses.

Damen’s sense of danger grew as they passed through the gates and into the bumpy courtyard. There was a sizeable barracks, the inn obviously used as a waypoint for military in the region. It was a common enough arrangement in the provinces: merchants and travellers of good birth appreciated and even subsidised a military presence, which elevated an establishment over the usual public houses where not even a slave, if they possessed a shred of respectability, would risk eating. He counted a hundred soldiers.

‘Thank you, Stavos. We can take it from here.’

‘Not at all. Let me escort you inside.’

‘Very well.’ Laurent showed no sign of hesitation whatsoever. ‘Come, Lamen.’

Damen followed him in, acutely aware that he was being separated from his men. Laurent simply walked into the inn.

The inn had a high ceiling in the Akielon style, and a gigantic spitfire in the hearth, the spit briefly overwhelming the room with the scent of its roasting beef. There was only one other group of guests, half visible through an open walk-through, sitting around a table, in animated discussion. To the left, there was a stone staircase leading up to the second-floor sleeping rooms. Two Akielon soldiers had taken up position at the entry, another two were posted at the far door, and Stavos himself had brought a small escort of four soldiers in with him.

Damen thought, absurdly, that the unrailed stairs could be high ground in a fight—as if they could take on an entire garrison, just the two of them. Perhaps he could overwhelm Stavos. He could negotiate some kind of exchange, Stavos’s life for their freedom.

Stavos was introducing Laurent to the innkeeper.

‘This is Charls the renowned Veretian cloth merchant.’

‘That isn’t Charls the renowned Veretian cloth merchant.’ The innkeeper looked at Laurent.

‘I can assure you that I am.’

‘I can assure you. Charls the renowned merchant is already here.’

There was a pause.

Damen found himself looking at Laurent as at the man stepping to the mark in a spear-throwing competition after the last competitor has thrown a perfect bullseye.

‘That is impossible. Call him out here.’

‘Yes, call him out here,’ said Stavos, and everyone waited while a serving boy retreated to the party of guests in the next room. A moment later, Damen heard a familiar voice.

‘Who is this impostor claiming to be m—’

They came face to face with Charls the Veretian cloth merchant.

Charls had changed very little in the months since they had seen one another, his expression merchant-serious, like his clothing, a heavy, expensive-looking brocade. He was a man in his late thirties, with an eager nature tempered by the kind of presence that developed over years of trading.

Charls took one look at the unmistakable blue eyes and blond hair of his Prince, who he had last seen in Damen's lap dressed as a pet in a tavern at Nesson. His eyes widened. Then, with a truly heroic effort:

'Charls!' said Charls.

'If he is Charls, then who are you?' said the officer to Charls.

'I,' said Charls, 'am—'

'He is Charls, I have known him these eight years,' said the innkeeper.

'That's right. He is Charls. I am Charls. We are cousins,' said Charls, gamely, 'named after our grandfather. Charls.'

'Thank you, Charls, this man believes I am the King of Akielos,' said Laurent.

'I simply meant that you might be an agent of the King,' said Stavos irritably.

'An agent of the King when he has raised taxes and threatens to bankrupt the entire cloth industry?' said Laurent.

Damen put his eyes somewhere where they wouldn't meet Laurent's, while everyone else stared at him—at his blond face, with its pale, arched brows, spreading his hands, a Veretian gesture to go with his Veretian accent.

'I think we can all agree he isn't the King of Akielos,' said the innkeeper. 'If Charls vouches for his cousin, that must satisfy the garrison.'

'I certainly do vouch for him,' said Charls.

After a moment, Stavos made a stiff bow. 'My apologies, Charls. We are taking every precaution on the roads.'

'There is no need to apologise, Stavos. Your vigilance does you credit.' Laurent gave a stiff little bow of his own.

Then he drew off his riding cloak and passed it to Damen to carry.

'In disguise again!' Charls said sotto voce as he drew Laurent over to his table by the fire. 'What is it this time? A mission for the Crown? A secret rendezvous? No fear, Your Highness—it's my honour to keep your secret.'

Charls introduced Laurent to the six men at the table and they each expressed their surprise and delight at meeting Charls's young cousin in Akielos.

'This is my assistant Guilliame.'

'This is my assistant Lamen,' said Laurent.

That was how Damen found himself at a table full of Veretian merchants in an inn in Akielos, discussing cloth. There were six men in Charls's party in total, all merchants. Laurent found a seat close to Charls and the silk

merchant Mathelin. Lamén was relegated to a small three-legged stool at the table end.

Servants brought out flatbreads dipped in oil, olives, and meats shaved from the spit. Red wine was decanted into mixing bowls and drunk with shallow cups. It was decent wine and there were no flutists or dancing boys, which was the best one could hope for at a public inn, Lamén thought.

Guillaume came to talk to him, since they were the same rank.

‘Lamén. That’s an unusual name.’

‘It’s Patran,’ said Lamén.

‘You speak very good Akielon,’ he said, loudly and slowly.

‘Thank you,’ said Lamén.

Nikandros had to stand awkwardly by the end of the table when he arrived. He frowned when he realised he had to give his report to Laurent. ‘The wagons are unpacked. Charls.’

‘Thank you, soldier,’ said Laurent, adding expansively to the group, ‘We usually operate in Delfeur, but I’ve been forced to come south. Nikandros is completely useless as the Kyros,’ Laurent said, loudly enough for Nikandros to hear him. ‘He doesn’t know the first thing about cloth.’

‘That is so true,’ agreed Mathelin.

Charls said, ‘He disallowed trading in Kemptian silk, and when I tried to sell silk from Varenne he taxed it at five sols a bolt!’

This was greeted with the exclamations of disapproval that it deserved, and the conversation moved on to the hardships of border trading and the unrest plaguing supply trains. If it was true that Damianos had returned in the north, Charls expected this to be his last consignment before the roads closed. War was coming, and they could expect lean times.

The speculation was on the price of grain in wartime, and of the impact on producers and growers. No one knew much about Damianos, or why their own Prince had allied with him.

‘Charls met the Prince of Vere once,’ Guillaume said to Lamén, lowering his voice to the conspiratorial, ‘in a tavern in Nesson, disguised as a,’ lowering it further, ‘*prostitute*.’

Lamén looked over at Laurent, who was deep in conversation, letting his eyes pass slowly over every familiar feature, the cool expression tipped with gold in the firelight. He said, ‘Did he?’

‘Charls said, think of the most expensive pet you’ve ever seen, then double it.’

‘Really?’ said Damen.

‘Of course, Charls knew who he was right away, because he couldn’t hide his princely style, and nobility of spirit.’

‘Of course,’ said Damen.

Across the table, Laurent was asking questions about cultural differences in trade. Veretians liked ornate fabrics and dyes, weavings and ornamentations, Charls said, but Akielons had a sharper focus on quality, and their textiles were in truth more sophisticated, every aspect of the weave revealed by their deceptively simple styles. In some ways, it was harder to trade here.

‘Maybe you could encourage Akielons to wear sleeves. You’d sell more cloth,’ said Laurent.

Everyone laughed politely at the joke, and then speculative looks crossed one or two faces, as if this young cousin of Charls’s might have stumbled by accident onto a good idea.

* * *

Their men were sleeping in the outbuildings. Damen the assistant checked in on both the soldiers and the wagons, and saw that Jord and most of the others had bedded down for the night. Guion was in the outbuilding too, uncomfortably. Paschal was snoring. Lazar and Pallas were sharing a blanket. Nikandros was awake, with the two soldiers who were guarding the wagons where Jokaste was spending the night, along with Guion’s wife, Loyse.

‘All’s quiet,’ reported Nikandros.

One of the inn men came out with a lantern in his hand traversing the courtyard to tell Damen that his room was prepared, second door to the right.

He followed the lantern. Inside, the inn was dark and quiet. Charls and his party had retired, and only the last of the embers were burning in the spit fire. The stone stairs nestled along the wall were unbannistered, which was typical of Akielon architecture, but trusted a great deal in the sobriety of the patrons.

He ascended the stairs. Without the lantern, there was quite a bit of unlit gloom, but he found the second door to the right and pushed it open.

The room was cosy, simple, its stone walls thickly plastered, its fireplace with a warming fire. It had a bed, a wooden table with a pitcher, two small

windows with deep sills, the glass panes black, the inside well-lit. Three candles burning: an extravagance, flaming low, giving the room a warm, welcoming glow.

Laurent was haloed in candlelight, all cream and gold. He was freshly bathed, his hair drying. He had exchanged his Akielon cotton for an oversized Veretian bed shirt, loose and trailing laces. And he had dragged all of the bedding from the small Akielon-style bed and heaped it in front of the fire, even dragging the clean mattress down to join the smaller pallet there.

Damen looked at the bedding, and said, carefully, 'The innsmen sent me here.'

'At my instruction,' said Laurent.

He was coming forward. Damen felt his heart begin to pound, even as he held himself still and tried not to make any dangerous assumptions.

Laurent said, 'It's our last chance for a real bed before the Kingsmeet.'

Damen didn't have time to answer that Laurent had dismantled the bed, because Laurent was pressing against him. His hands came up automatically, to grasp Laurent's sides over the thin fabric of the bed shirt. They were kissing, Laurent's fingers in his hair, pulling his head down. He could feel the sweat and the dirt of three days' ride on himself, against Laurent's clean, fresh skin.

Laurent didn't seem to care, even seemed to like it. Damen pressed him into the wall, and took his mouth. Laurent smelled of soap and fresh cotton. Damen's thumbs pushed into his waist.

'I need to bathe.' He said it into Laurent's ear, let his lips find the sensitive skin just behind it.

They were kissing again, deep, heated kisses. 'So go and bathe.'

He found himself pushed backwards, looking at Laurent across a stretch of space. Leaned against the wall, Laurent indicated to the small wooden door with his chin. His pale brows arched. 'Or do you expect me to attend you?'

In the adjoining room, he looked around at the soaps and fresh towels, the large wooden tub full of steaming water, and the smaller bucket alongside it. All of it had been arranged in advance, a servant bringing the towels and drawing the hot water. The evidence of planning was in fact very like Laurent, though Damen had never experienced it from him quite in this context before.

Laurent didn't follow him in, but left him to wash, a utilitarian task. It felt good to slough off the dust and dirt of the road. And there was something tantalising about breaking off to spend an interval washing. They had not before had the luxury of extended lovemaking, deliberate and unhurried as a First Night. His thoughts ribboned with all the things they had yet to do.

He soaped his body thoroughly. He dumped water over his hair, scrubbed it, dried himself all over with the towel, and stepped from the wooden tub.

When he returned to the bedchamber, his skin was flushed from the steam and water, the towel looped around his waist, his bare torso and shoulders damp with scattered droplets from the tips of his hair.

Here, too, was evidence of planning, and he could see it now for what it was: the lit candles, the joint bedding, and Laurent himself, clean and dressed in a bed shirt. He thought of Laurent, waiting for him expectantly. It was charming, because it was clear that Laurent was unsure exactly what to do, yet, typically, had acted to take control of everything.

'First time to entertain a lover?' Just saying the word made him flush, and he saw Laurent flush too.

Laurent said, 'Are you bathed?'

'Yes,' said Damen.

Laurent was standing on the other side of the room, near the stripped-down bed. He looked tense in the flame light, a nervy steeling of himself.

Laurent said, 'Take a step back.'

Damen had to look behind himself briefly, because stepping meant his back hit the wall. The pallet and bedding were on the floor to his left. The wall was a firm presence at his back.

'Put your hands on the plaster,' Laurent said.

The three flames on their candlewicks made the light move, heightening Damen's sense of the room. Laurent was coming forward, his blue eyes dark. As he did so, Damen placed his palms flat on the plaster behind him.

Laurent's eyes were on him. The room was quiet, the thick walls meaning that the only sound was from the fire, even the outside was no more than a reflection of candlelight in the black glass panes of the window.

'Take off the towel,' said Laurent.

Damen lifted one hand from the wall, tugging the towel loose. It unwound, and slid from his waist to the floor.

He watched Laurent react to his body. Virgins and the inexperienced tended to get nervous, which he enjoyed as a challenge to be overcome,

hesitancy turned into eagerness and pleasure. It pleased some deep part of him to see in Laurent the flickering of a similar reaction. Laurent eventually lifted his gaze from the place where it had, instinctively, dropped.

He let Laurent see him, see his nakedness was on display, the strident fact of his arousal. The flames in the stone hearth were too loud as they consumed the young cut wood.

‘Don’t touch me,’ said Laurent.

And dropped to his knees on the floor of the inn.

The simple sight of it outstripped words or thought. Damen’s pulse escalated wildly, even as he tried rather desperately not to presume that any other action would necessarily follow from this one.

Laurent wasn’t looking back up at him, he was looking at Damen’s nakedness. Laurent’s lips were parted, the strain in him greater now that he was closer to its source. Damen felt the first flutter of Laurent’s breath against him.

Laurent was going to do it. *When you see a panther opening its jaws you don’t get your dick out.* Damen didn’t move, didn’t breathe. Laurent had a hand on him, and all Damen could do was stand, palms and back flat against the wall behind him. The idea of the frigid Prince of Vere sucking his cock was impossible. Laurent put his own palm to the wall.

He could see the planes of Laurent’s face from this different angle. The pale sweep of his lashes hid the blue eyes beneath. The quiet room around them was a surreal backdrop of simple furniture and a stripped bed. Laurent put his mouth to the tip.

Damen’s head hit the plaster. His whole body fired, and he made a sound, rough and low with need, a moment of pure sensation, closing his eyes.

His eyes opened in time to see Laurent’s lowered head draw back, so that the whole thing might have been maginary, except that the tip was wet.

Confined against the wall, Damen felt the rough plaster under his palms. Laurent’s eyes were very dark, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths, clearly struggling with something, as he leant in again.

‘Laurent,’ he said, a groan. Laurent’s lips were on him again, parting. Damen was panting. He wanted to move, to thrust, and couldn’t. It was too much and not enough, trying to control his body, holding himself still against every instinct of his nature.

His fingers dug into the plaster. Whatever battle was taking place in Laurent’s head didn’t impede his slow skill, the sensual attention that ignored

any rhythm or desire for climax, but was unbearably exquisite. Laurent must be able to taste him, the salty beading of his desire, his need. That thought was almost too much, he was too close to the brink.

He hadn't imagined it like this. He knew Laurent's mouth, knew its vicious capability. He knew it as Laurent's primary weapon. In his daily life, Laurent held his lips taut, repressing their lush shape into a hard line, his mouth cruel curves. Damen had seen Laurent eviscerate people with that mouth.

Now Laurent's lips were given over to pleasure, his words traded for Damen's cock.

He was going to come in Laurent's mouth. That single, stunning realisation arrived a moment before Laurent went down in earnest, a long, practised slide. Heat hit, a burst of it, and Damen came in a rush before he could stop himself, too soon, overwhelmed, flooded. His body convulsed, even as he fought not to move, his stomach clenched, his fingers gripping the plaster.

Eventually, his eyes came open. His head was leaned back against the wall, and he watched as, dark-eyed, Laurent backed off. He half expected Laurent to go to the fire and, fastidiously, spit, but he didn't. He had swallowed. He was pressing the back of his hand to his mouth, and he stood all the way over by the window, watching Damen a little warily.

Damen pushed himself away from the wall.

When he reached Laurent, he put his palm on the plaster again, this time beside Laurent's head. He could see the rise and fall of Laurent's breath in the space between them, Laurent's body unmistakably aroused by what he had just done.

It was clear that Laurent didn't know how to process the fact that he was turned on, and that part of his wariness was that he was uncertain what was next, one of the strange gaps in his experience that Damen couldn't predict.

In the dim light, Laurent said, 'A fair exchange, is it?'

'I don't know. What do you want?'

Laurent's eyes were very dark. Damen could almost see the struggle, Laurent's tension rising visibly. For a moment Damen didn't think Laurent was going to answer, the truth of his desire too painfully vulnerable.

'Show me,' said Laurent, 'how it could be.'

He flushed after he said it, the words leaving him exposed, a young, inexperienced man against the plaster wall of the inn.

Outside was the hostile expanse of Akielos, full of enemies and people who wanted them dead, a dangerous landscape that must be traversed before either of them was safe.

In here, they were alone. The candlelight turned Laurent's hair to gold, flamed in the dip of his lashes, the line of his throat. Damen imagined that he was paying court to him in some foreign land, where all of this had never happened, making love to him in words on a balcony, perhaps, with perfumed flowers from some night garden drifting upwards, the glow of a party behind them. A suitor daring the limits of attention.

'I would court you,' said Damen, 'with all the grace and courtesy that you deserve.'

He undid the first lace on Laurent's shirt, and the fabric began to open, a glimpse of the hollow of his throat. Laurent's lips were parted, his breath hardly stirring.

Damen said, 'There'd be no lies between us.'

He opened the second lace, felt the low throb of his own pulse, the warmth of Laurent's skin as his fingers moved to the third.

'We'd have time,' Damen said, 'to be together.'

And in the warm flame light, he lifted his hand and cupped Laurent's cheek, and then leaned in, and kissed him on the lips, gently.

He felt Laurent's shock, as though he had not expected to be kissed after what he had just done. After a moment, Laurent kissed back. The way Laurent kissed was nothing like the way he did anything else. It was simple and without artifice, as if kissing were serious. And there was an expectant feel to it, as if he was waiting for Damen to take control of the kiss.

When he didn't, Laurent angled his head differently, and his fingers curled into Damen's hair, still damp from the baths. The kiss deepened at Laurent's bidding. Damen could feel Laurent's body against him, and he slid his hand inside Laurent's open shirt, liking how it felt to spread his palm there, the sort of proprietary touch he wouldn't have dreamed of before tonight, and still half expected Laurent to kill him for. Laurent made a small sound of encouragement, breaking off the kiss for a moment and closing his eyes, all his attention on Damen's touch.

'You like it slow.' He dipped his head near Laurent's ear.

'Yes.'

He kissed Laurent's neck very softly, even as his palm smoothed slowly over skin inside Laurent's shirt. Laurent's overfine skin was more sensitive

than his own, though during the day Laurent ruthlessly strapped himself into the most severe clothing possible. He wondered if Laurent repressed sensation for the same reason that he struggled to admit it now, his jaw taut.

His own body was rousing again, as he thought of sliding into Laurent slowly, taking him as slowly as he liked, for a long, drawn out interval of time, until they didn't know where one of them ended and the other began.

When Laurent lifted his shirt up and off, and stood naked before him as he had once, long ago, in the baths, Damen couldn't help stepping forward, brushing Laurent's skin with his fingertips, his eyes following his touch, from chest to hip. Laurent's body was golden cream in the flame light.

Laurent was looking at him in turn, as though Damen's physicality was more pronounced now that they were both naked. It was Laurent who pushed him down onto the bedding. Laurent's hands were on him. Laurent touched him as if to learn the shape and feel of his body, as if to catalogue every part of him and commit it to memory.

Damen felt the heat of the fire against his skin as they kissed. Laurent broke off, and appeared to have come to a decision, his breathing quickened but controlled.

'Make me come,' he said, and placed Damen's hand between his legs.

Damen closed his hand. The breathing perhaps got a little more difficult to control.

'Like that?'

No. Slower.

There was no noticeable change in Laurent, other than his lips parting, his lashes lowering a fraction. Laurent's reactions had always been subtle, his preferences never obvious. He hadn't been able to come in Ravenel with Damen's mouth on his cock. He didn't know whether he could come now, Damen realised.

He slowed right down so that for a moment there was nothing other than a tight grip and the slow movement of his thumb on the head. He felt Laurent's flushed, erect cock in his hand, liking the weight of it. It was beautifully shaped, and in pleasing proportion to its owner. His knuckles brushed the line of fine gold hair that trailed down from Laurent's navel.

His own body's renewed interest had grown from lazy arousal to primed, heavy; ready to mount, even as he put it aside to watch Laurent attempt to let his guard down.

He felt the repression when it came, the hard restraint that Laurent exerted over his body, his stomach clenching, a muscle moving in his jaw. He knew what it signalled. Damen didn't stop moving his hand.

'Don't like to come?'

'Is that a problem?' His breathing shallow, Laurent didn't quite manage the approximation of his usual tone.

'Not for me. I'll tell you how it was when I'm done.'

Laurent swore, once, succinctly, and the world flipped, Laurent suddenly on top of him, his body painfully aroused. On his back, Damen felt the straw mattress beneath him, and looked up at Laurent above him. His own desire flared at the reversal, even as he took Laurent in his hand and said, 'Come on, then.' It felt ridiculously daring to tell Laurent in any respect what to do.

The first thrust against him was deliberate, a push of heat into his hand. Laurent's eyes were on his. He could feel that it was new for Laurent to do this, just as it was new for him to feel like he was receiving it. He wondered if Laurent had ever fucked anyone in earnest, and he realised with a jolt of shock that Laurent hadn't. The flood of heat that came at that wasn't comfortable. And then like Laurent he was suddenly somewhere he had never been.

'I've,' said Damen, 'never—'

'Nor have I,' said Laurent. 'You'd be my first.'

Everything was magnified, the sensation of Laurent's cock sliding so near his own, the slow roll of hips, the flush of skin. The heat of the fire was too hot, his palm on Laurent's flank feeling the muscle's rhythmic flex there. Looking up at Laurent, Damen's own eyes were showing more than he knew, showing everything, and Laurent was responding, thrusting against him.

'As you'd be mine,' he heard himself say.

Laurent said, 'I thought that in Akielos, a First Night was special.'

'For a slave it is,' said Damen. 'For a slave it means everything.'

Laurent's first shudder came with his first sound, unconscious with exertion, his body driving him now. It was happening with their eyes wide on each other, Damen's arousal spiralling out of control. Climax hit even though they were not inside each other's bodies, but joined together, one.

Laurent was panting above him, his body still jerking with aftershocks, the intervals between them longer. His head was turned to the side, not looking at Damen, as if too much had been shared. Damen had his hand

against Laurent's flushed skin, could feel the beat of Laurent's heart against him. He felt Laurent shifting, too soon.

'I'll get—'

Laurent detached himself, while Damen sprawled on his back, one arm raised above his head, his own body taking longer to recover. With Laurent gone, he felt the warmth of the fire once again against his skin, and heard the crack and spark of its flame.

He watched Laurent cross the room to fetch towels and a pitcher of water before his breathing had even settled. He knew that Laurent was fastidious after lovemaking, and he liked that he knew it, liked that he was learning Laurent's idiosyncracies. Laurent paused, touching his fingers to the wooden edge of the table and just breathing in the dim light. Laurent's post-coital habits were also an excuse, covering a need to take a moment to himself, and Damen knew that, too.

When he returned, Damen let Laurent towel him down, with the sweet, unanticipated attentiveness that was also part of the way Laurent behaved in bed. He sipped from the shallow cup that Laurent provided, and poured water for Laurent in turn, which Laurent didn't seem to expect. Laurent sat awkwardly upright on the bedding.

Damen stretched out comfortably, and waited for Laurent to do the same. That took minutes longer than it would have with any other lover. Eventually, with that same stiff awkwardness, Laurent lay down next to him. Laurent was closer to the fire, the room's only remaining source of illumination, and it created wells of light and shadow across his body.

'You're still wearing it.'

He couldn't help but say it. Laurent's wrist was heavy with gold, like the colour of his hair in the firelight.

'So are you.'

'Tell me why.'

'You know why,' said Laurent.

They lay alongside one another, among the sheets and the mattress and the flat cushions. He rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. He could feel the beat of his own heart.

'I'll be jealous when you marry your Patran princess,' Damen heard himself say.

The room was quiet after he said it, he could hear the fire again, and was too aware of his own breathing. After a moment, Laurent spoke.

‘There will be no Patran princess, or daughter of the Empire.’

‘It’s your duty to continue your line.’

He didn’t know why he said it. There were marks on the ceiling, which was panelled and not plastered, and he could see the dark whorls and grain of the wood.

‘No. I’m the last. My line ends with me.’

Damen turned, to find Laurent was not looking back at him, but also had his eyes on some point in the dim light. Laurent’s voice was quiet. ‘I have never said that to anyone before.’

Damen didn’t want to disturb the silence that followed, the handspace that separated their bodies, the careful space between them.

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ said Laurent. ‘I always thought that I’d have to face my uncle alone.’

He turned to look at Damen, and their eyes met.

‘You’re not alone,’ said Damen.

Laurent didn’t answer, but he did give a smile, and reached out to touch Damen, wordlessly.

* * *

They parted ways with Charls six days later, after they crossed into the southernmost province of Akielos.

It had been a winding, relaxed journey, the days passing in a drone of summer insects and afternoon rest-stops to avoid the worst of the heat. Charls’s wagon train lent them respectability, and they passed Kastor’s patrols without difficulty. Jord taught dice to Aktis, who taught him some choice Akielon vocabulary. Lazar pursued Pallas with the kind of lazy confidence that would have Pallas lifting up his skirt as soon as they stopped somewhere with any semblance of privacy. Paschal gave free advice to Lydos, who went away relieved about the medical nature of his problems.

When the days got too hot, they retreated to inns and wayhouses, and once a large farmhouse where they ate bread, hard cheese and figs, and Akielon sweets of honey and nuts that attracted wasps in the sticky heat.

At the farmhouse, Damen found himself at an outside table, across from Paschal, who nodded his chin at Laurent, visible in the distance under the cooling branches of a tree. ‘He’s not used to the heat.’

That was true. Laurent was not made for the Akielon summer, and during the day decamped to the shade of the wagons, or, at rest-stops, stayed under awnings or the leafy shade of a tree. But he gave little other overt sign of it, neither complaining nor shirking when work needed to be done.

‘You never told me how you ended up in Laurent’s faction.’

‘I was the Regent’s physician.’

‘So you ministered to his household.’

‘And to his boys,’ said Paschal.

Damen said nothing.

After a moment, Paschal said, ‘Before he died, my brother served in the King’s Guard. I never swore my brother’s oath to the King. But I like to think that I’m carrying it out.’

Damen made his way down to the stream, where Laurent stood, his back leaned against the trunk of a young cypress. He was wearing sandals and the white cotton chiton, loose and wonderful, his eyes on the view: Akielos, beneath a wide blue sky.

The hills rolled down to a distant coast, where the ocean gleamed, and houses clustered, painted white as sails, with similar geometry. The architecture had the simple elegance that Akielons prized in their art, in their mathematics, and their philosophy, and which he had seen Laurent respond to silently on the journey.

Damen stopped for a moment, but it was Laurent who turned and said, ‘It’s beautiful.’

‘It’s hot,’ said Damen. Reaching the pebbled bank, Damen leaned down and scooped a cloth into the stream’s clear water. He came forward.

‘Here,’ said Damen, softly. After a slight hesitation, Laurent tipped his head forward and allowed Damen the delight of drizzling cool water over the back of his neck, while he closed his eyes and made a soft, sweet sound of relief. Only this close could you see the faint flush on his cheeks, and the slight sweat damp at the roots of his hair.

‘Your Highness. Charls and the merchants are preparing to depart.’ Pallas caught them with their heads close together, a trickle of water running down the back of Laurent’s neck. Damen looked up, his palm braced against the rough bark of the tree.

‘I see that you used to be a slave, and that Charls has freed you,’ Guillaume said to him, as they prepared to part ways. Guillaume spoke very earnestly. ‘I want you to know that Charls and I have never traded in slaves.’

Damen looked out at the weird beauty of the gnarled landscape. He heard himself say, 'Damianos will end slavery when he becomes King.'

'Thank you, Charls. We cannot endanger you any further.' Laurent was making his own farewells to the merchants.

'It was my honour to ride with you,' said Charls. Laurent clasped his hand.

'When Damianos of Akielos takes the throne, mention my name and tell him you helped me. He'll give you a good price on your cloth.'

Nikandros was looking at Laurent.

'He's very—'

'You get used to it,' said Damen, with a little wellspring of joy inside him, because that wasn't really true.

They made camp for the last time in a small copse that provided them cover, on the edge of the wide, flat plain where the Kingsmeet surmounted the only rise.

It was visible in the distance, high stone walls and marble columns, a place of kings. Tomorrow, he and Laurent would travel there, and rendezvous with the wet nurse, who would exchange herself and her small, precious consignment for Jokaste's freedom. He looked out at it and felt a belief in the future, and real hope.

His mind full of thoughts of the morning, he lay himself down on his bedroll next to Laurent, and slept.

* * *

Laurent lay beside Damen until all the sounds of the camp were quiet, and then, when Damen was sleeping and there was no one to stop him, Laurent rose, and made his way alone through the sleeping camp to the barred wagon that held Jokaste.

It was very late by then and all the stars were out in the Akielon sky. And that was strange. To be here, so close to the end of his own plans. So close to the end, really, of everything.

To be where he'd never dreamed he would be, and to know that by morning, this would be finished, or at least, his part in it. Laurent moved silently past the sleeping soldiers, to the place, a little distance away, where the wagons stood, still and quiet.

Then, because there should be no witnesses to this, he dismissed the guards. All bad things were done in the dark. The wagon was open to the night air, with the iron bars of its inner door keeping the prisoner inside. He came to stand in front of it. Jokaste watched all of this happen and didn't flinch from it, nor did she scream or plead for help, as he had thought she would not. She just met his gaze calmly through the bars.

'So you do have your own plans.'

'Yes,' said Laurent.

And he stepped forward, unlocking the barred door to the wagon, and let it swing open.

He stepped back. He had no weapon with him. It was simply a path to freedom. Not far off, there was a saddled horse. Ios was a half-day's ride.

She didn't walk through the open door, but just gazed at him, and in the cool, steady blue of her eyes were all the ways that leaving the wagon was a trap.

He said, 'I think it's Kastor's child.'

Jokaste didn't answer him, and there was a silence in which her gaze was on him. Laurent regarded her in turn. Around them, the camp stayed quiet, no sounds except for the breeze and the night.

'I think you saw it clearly, in those twilight days in Akielos. The end was coming, and Damianos wouldn't listen to anyone. The only way to save his life was to persuade Kastor to send him as a slave to Vere. To do that you had to be in Kastor's bed.'

Her expression didn't alter, but he felt the change in her, the new, careful way she was holding herself. In the cool night air, it transmitted something to him, against her will. It gave something away. And she was angry about it, and for the first time she was afraid.

He said, 'I think it's Kastor's child, because I don't think you would use Damen's child against him.'

'Then you underestimate me.'

'Do I?' He held her gaze. 'I suppose we'll find out.'

Laurent tossed the key into the wagon, in front of the place where she stood unmoving.

'We're alike. You said that. Would you have opened the door for me? I don't know. But you opened one for him.'

Her voice was wiped clean of inflection, ruthlessly, so that nothing showed but a mocking, mild bitterness. 'You mean, the only difference

between us is that I chose the wrong brother?’

As the stars began to drift across the sky, Laurent thought about Nicaise, standing in the courtyard with a handful of sapphires.

‘I don’t think you chose,’ said Laurent.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WAS BETTER not to drag Jokaste out of her wagon until the exchange was guaranteed, Laurent said, and so the two of them rode to the Kingsmeet alone.

That suited the Kingsmeet's own protocols. The Kingsmeet strictly enforced its laws of non-violence. It was a sanctum, a place for parley, with centuries-old rules of peace. Pilgrims could enter, but groups of soldiers were not permitted inside its walls.

There were three stages to their approach. First, across the long plains. Then, past the gates. Finally, they would enter the hall, and from there pass into the inner chamber that housed the Kingstone. The Kingsmeet on the horizon was a white marble crown, commanding its vantage from the only rise on the wide, dusty plain. Every white-cloaked soldier in the Kingsmeet would see Damen's approach with Laurent: two humble pilgrims here on horseback to make their tribute.

'You approach the Kingsmeet. Announce your purpose.'

The man's voice was very small, descending from an immense height of fifty feet. Damen shaded his eyes and called back. 'We are travellers, here to pay tribute to the Kingstone.'

'Take the pledge, traveller, and be welcome.'

With the sound of a chain screaming, the portcullis rose. They took their horses up the rise to the gates, past the huge, heavy iron portcullis enclosed by four immense stone towers, as at Karthas.

Inside, they dismounted to meet an older man, whose white cloak was fixed to his shoulder with a gold pin, and who, when they ceremonially gave over a great deal of gold in tribute, advanced to put a white sash around each of their necks. Damen had to bend slightly for it.

'This is a place of peace. No blow may be struck, no sword may be drawn. The man who breaks the peace of the Kingsmeet must face the King's justice. Do you accept the pledge?' said the older man.

‘I do,’ said Damen. The man turned to Laurent, who swore the same pledge. ‘I do.’ And they were inside.

He wasn’t expecting the summer tranquility of it, the tiny flowers growing on the grassy slopes that led up to the ancient hall, massive blocks of jutting stone remnants of its long-ago first structure. He had only ever been here during ceremonies, the kyroi and their men thronging the slopes and his father standing powerful in the hall.

He had been an infant the first time he had come here, presented to the kyroi held aloft by his father. Damen had heard the story many times, the King lifting him up, the nation’s joy at the arrival of an heir after years of miscarriages, the Queen seemingly unable to bring a child to term.

In the stories, no one spoke of nine-year-old Kastor, watching from the sidelines as a ceremony bestowed on an infant all that had been promised to him.

Kastor would have been crowned here. He would have called on the kyroi as Theomedes had called on them, and been crowned in the old way, with the kyroi in attendance, and the impassive faces of the Kingsmeet sentries looking on.

Now those sentries flanked them. They were a permanent independent military garrison, the finest chosen from each of the provinces with scrupulous neutrality to serve a two-year term. They lived in the complex of supporting outbuildings, filling the barracks and the gymnasiums, where they slept and woke and trained with immaculate discipline.

It was a soldier’s greatest honour to compete in the yearly games and be chosen from the best to serve here, to uphold the strict laws.

Damen said, ‘Nikandros served here, for two years.’

At fifteen, he had felt such pride at Nikandros’s accomplishment, even as he had embraced Nikandros and felt what it meant that his closest friend was leaving him to serve alongside the greatest fighters in Akielos. Perhaps, underneath that, something else, unacknowledged, was now in his voice.

‘You were jealous.’

‘My father said that I had to learn to lead, not to follow.’

‘He was right,’ said Laurent. ‘You’re a king in a place of kings.’

They had passed the gates. They started to climb the steps, up the grassy hillside towards the marble pillars that marked the entry to the hall. Each stage had sentries, white-cloaked and standing guard.

A hundred queens and kings of Akielos had been crowned here, the processionalists taking the same path that they took now: up the marble steps that led from the gates all the way to the entrance of the hall, the steps themselves eroded by decades of ascending feet.

He felt the solemnity of the place, and its quiet majesty. He heard himself say, 'The first King of Akielos was crowned here, and every queen and king since.'

They passed more sentries as they walked past the pillars and into the long, cavernous space of pale marble. The marble walk was carved with figures, and Laurent paused before one of them, a woman on horseback.

'That's Kydippe, she was Queen before Euandros. She took the throne from King Treus and averted civil war.'

'And that one?'

'That's Thestos. He built the palace at Ios.'

'He looks like you.' Thestos was carved in outline, holding a giant piece of masonry aloft. Laurent touched his bicep, then touched Damen's. Damen let out a breath.

There was a transgressive thrill to walking with Laurent here—he had brought a Veretian prince into the heart of Akielos. His father would have barred the way to Laurent, not let him rise, a slender figure, utterly dwarfed by the scale of the hall.

'That's Nekton, who broke the Kingsmeet's laws.'

Nekton had drawn a sword to protect his brother, King Timon. He was pictured on his knees, with an axe to his neck. King Timon had been forced to sentence his brother to death for what he had done, so strict were the ancient laws of the Kingsmeet. 'That's Timon, his brother.'

They passed them in succession: Eradne, Queen of the Six, the first since Agathon to rule six provinces and command six kyroi; Queen Agar, who had brought Isthima into the kingdom; King Euandros, who had lost Delpha. He felt the weight of those kings and queens as he had never felt it—here before them not as a king, but as a man.

He came to a halt in front of the oldest carving, a single name chiselled crudely into the stone.

'That is Agathon,' said Damen, 'the first King of Akielos. My father is descended from King Euandros, but my line runs back to Agathon through my mother.'

'His nose is chipped,' said Laurent.

‘He unified a kingdom.’ *My father had all the same dreams.* Damen said, ‘Everything I have has passed to me from him.’ They reached the end of the walk.

The sentries stood, guarding the inviolable space, the inner chamber of rougher stone, the only place in Akielos where a prince could kneel, to be crowned and rise a king.

‘As it will pass, I suppose, to my son,’ said Damen.

They entered, and saw a figure waiting for them, swathed in red, sitting comfortably on the heavy, carved wooden throne.

‘Not quite,’ said the Regent.

* * *

Every nerve came to alert. Damen’s mind flashed to—*ambush, double cross*—his eyes scanning the entrances for figures, for the swarm of men surrounding them. But the ring of metal, the clatter of feet never came. There was just his heart pounding in the silence, the impassive faces of the Kingsmeet soldiers, and the Regent rising and strolling forward, alone.

Damen forced himself to release the hilt of his sword, which he’d gripped instinctively. The stymied desire to put his blade to the Regent’s throat beat in him, a thundering call to action that he must ignore. The rules of the Kingsmeet were sacrosanct. He could not draw a sword here and live.

The Regent stood waiting for them like a king before the Kingstone, his authority carried in his bones, dressed in dark red, a royal mantle on his shoulders. The scale of the hall suited him, the commanding power he possessed, as he met Laurent’s eyes.

‘Laurent,’ said the Regent, softly, ‘you have caused me a great deal of trouble.’

The slight flutter of the pulse in Laurent’s neck belied his steady exterior. Damen could feel the reverberation that he was covering, the control he exercised over his breathing.

‘Have I?’ said Laurent. ‘Oh, that’s right. You had to replace a bed boy. Don’t blame me too much. He would have been too old for you this year anyway.’

The Regent considered Laurent, a slow perusal that took several moments; as he considered, he spoke.

‘These petulant remarks have never suited you. The mannerisms of a boy sit so unattractively on a man.’ His voice was mild, speculative, perhaps faintly disappointed. ‘You know, Nicaise really thought you would help him. He didn’t know your nature, that you’d abandon a boy to treason and death out of petty spite. Or was there some other reason you killed him?’

‘Your bought whore? I didn’t think anyone would miss him.’

Damen had to force himself not to take a step back. He had forgotten the bloodless violence of these exchanges.

‘He’s been replaced,’ said the Regent.

‘I thought he would be. You cut his head off. It makes it a little difficult for him to suck your cock.’

After a moment, the Regent spoke musingly to Damen. ‘I assume whatever tawdry pleasure you get from him in bed leads you to overlook his nature. After all, you are an Akielon. There must be satisfaction to be had in getting the Prince of Vere under you. He is unpleasant, but that would barely register when you are rutting.’

Damen said, very steadily, ‘You’re alone. You can’t use weapons. You don’t have men. You may have taken us by surprise, but that will gain you nothing. Your words are meaningless.’

‘By surprise? You are refreshingly artless,’ said the Regent. ‘Laurent was expecting me. He is here to give himself up for the child.’

‘Laurent isn’t here to give himself up,’ said Damen, and in the second of silence that followed his words, he turned, and saw Laurent’s face.

Laurent was white, his shoulders straight, his silence a kind of acceptance of a deal that had long since been made between himself and his uncle. *Give yourself up, and all that is yours will be returned to you.*

There was something terrible, suddenly, about the Kingsmeet, the impassive, white-cloaked soldiers posted at intervals, the immense white stones. Damen said, ‘No.’

‘My nephew is predictable,’ the Regent said. ‘He has freed Jokaste, because he knows that I would never trade a tactical advantage for a whore. And he has come here to give himself up for the child. He doesn’t even care whose child it is. He just knows it’s in danger, and that you’ll never fight me while I have it. He’s found the way to ensure that in the end, you will win: give himself up, in exchange for your child’s life.’

Laurent’s silence was that of a man exposed. He didn’t look at Damen. He just stood, breathing shallowly, his body rigid, as though he was bracing

himself.

The Regent said, 'But that exchange doesn't interest me, nephew.'

In the pause that followed, Laurent's expression changed. Damen barely had time to register the volte-face before Laurent said, in a tight voice, 'It's a trap. You can't listen to him. We need to go.'

The Regent spread his hands. 'But I am here alone.'

'Damen, get out,' said Laurent.

'No,' said Damen. 'He's just one man.'

'Damen,' said Laurent.

'No.'

He made himself take in the Regent fully, his close-cropped beard, the dark hair, and the blue eyes that were his only point of physical commonality with Laurent.

'I'm the one he's come here to make a deal with,' said Damen.

The Kingsmeet, with its strict laws against violence, was the one place where two enemies could meet and strike a bargain. There was something fitting about facing the Regent here, in this ceremonial place made for adversaries.

He said, 'Tell me your terms for the child.'

'Oh,' said the Regent, 'No. The child is not on offer. I'm sorry, were you thinking of making a grand gesture? I prefer to keep him. No, I am here for my nephew. He is going to stand trial before the Council. Then he will die for his crimes. I don't need to negotiate, or give up the child. Laurent is going to get down on his knees and beg me to take him. Aren't you, Laurent?'

Laurent said, 'Damen, I told you to get out.'

'Laurent will *never* kneel to you,' said Damen. He pushed himself forward to stand between Laurent and the Regent.

'You don't think so?' said the Regent.

'Damen,' said Laurent.

'He wants you to leave,' said the Regent. 'Aren't you curious why?'

'*Damen*,' said Laurent.

'He has knelt for me.'

The Regent said it in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, so that it didn't penetrate at first. It was just a collection of words. Even when Damen turned, to see crimson on Laurent's cheeks like a stain. And then the meaning of those words began forcing out all other thought.

‘I probably should have turned him away, but who can resist when a boy with a face like that asks you to stay with him? He was so lonely after his brother died. “Uncle, don’t leave me alone—”’

Rage; it provided clarity and simplicity, burning away all thought. Laurent’s awful expression, the movement of the white-cloaked sentries at the first scrape of steel—all of that was unimportant, flashed impressions. Damen had drawn his sword and was going to drive it into the Regent’s unarmed body.

There was a sentry in his way. Another. The ringing sound of his sword had triggered a cascade of action. White-cloaked sentries of the Kingsmeet were flooding the hall, shouting orders. *Stop him!* They were in his way. He would remove them. The crunch of bone, a scream of pain—these were the best fighters in Akielos, hand-picked. They didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but killing the Regent.

A battering blow to his head momentarily blackened his vision. He staggered, then righted himself. Another. He was surrounded, held down by eight men struggling to contain him, others shouting for reinforcements. He half tore himself from their grip, and when he couldn’t free himself, he bodily dragged them forward, wielding sheer strength against them, like wading through quicksand, or through a full sea.

He made it four steps before another blow brought him down. His knees hit the marble. His arm was wrenched behind him, and he felt the cold, hard iron before he understood what was happening, the chains on his wrists and legs hobbling him. His movement was totally restrained.

Panting, on his knees, Damen began to come back to himself. His bloody, discarded sword lay on the stone five feet away, where it had been forced from his hand. The hall was full of white cloaks, not all of them standing. One of the soldiers had his hand clutched to his stomach, where blood blossomed red across the white livery. There were six others on the ground near him, three who weren’t getting up. The Regent was still standing, several feet away.

In the panting silence of the hall, one of the kneeling sentries rose and began to speak. *‘You have drawn your sword in the Kingsmeet.’*

Damen’s eyes locked on the Regent’s. Nothing mattered but a promise. ‘I’m going to kill you.’

‘You have broken the peace of the hall.’

Damen said, ‘The moment you laid your hands on him, you were dead.’

'The laws of the Kingsmeet are sacred.'

Damen said, 'I will be the last thing that you see. You will go to the ground with my blade in your flesh.'

'Your life is forfeit to the King,' said the sentry.

Damen heard the words. The laugh that came out of him was hollow and jagged. 'The King?' he said, with total scorn. 'Which King?'

Laurent was staring at him with huge eyes. Unlike Damen, it had only taken one of the Kingsmeet soldiers to restrain Laurent, his arms forced behind his back, his breathing shallow.

'In fact, there is only one King here,' said the Regent.

And slowly, the impact of what he had done began to make itself clear to Damen.

He looked at the devastation of the Kingsmeet, the blood-streaked marble, and the gathered sentries in disarray, the peace of its sanctum shattered.

'No,' said Damen. 'You heard what he did.' Roughened, it came out of him. 'You all *heard him*, are you going to let him do this?'

The sentry who had risen ignored him, and approached the Regent. Damen struggled again, and felt the strain on his arms brought almost to breaking point by the men holding him.

The sentry bowed his head to the Regent, said, 'You are the King of Vere and not of Akielos, but the attack was against you, and a king's judgement is sacred in the Kingsmeet. Pass your sentence.'

'Kill him,' said the Regent.

He spoke with indifferent authority. Damen's forehead was pushed down to the cold stone, and there was the scrape of metal as his sword was picked up from the marble. A white-cloaked soldier came forward holding it in the two-handed grip of the executioner.

'No,' said Laurent. He said it to his uncle, in a flat, emotionless voice Damen had never heard before, 'Stop. It's me you want.' And Damen said, '*Laurent*,' a final, terrible understanding resolving, as Laurent said, 'It's me you want, not him.'

The Regent's voice was mild. 'I don't want you, Laurent. You are a nuisance. A minor inconvenience that I will clear from my path without much thought.'

'Laurent,' said Damen, trying to stop what was happening from his restrained position on his knees.

‘I’ll come with you to Ios,’ said Laurent, in that same detached voice. ‘I’ll let you have your trial. Just let him—’ He didn’t look at Damen. ‘Let him live. Let him walk out of here whole and alive. Take me.’

The soldier holding the sword halted, looking to the Regent for an order. The Regent’s eyes were on Laurent, regarding him with considering attention.

‘Beg,’ said the Regent.

Laurent was held fast in the grip of a soldier, his arm twisted behind his back, the white cotton of his chiton in disarray. The soldier released him, pushing him forward into the silence. Laurent didn’t quite stumble, then began steadily to take one step, then another. *Laurent is going to get down on his knees and beg.* Like a man walking towards a cliff edge, Laurent came forward to stand before his uncle. Slowly, he went to his knees.

‘Please,’ said Laurent. ‘Please, uncle. I was wrong to defy you. I deserve punishment. Please.’

There was a surreal horror to what was happening. No one was stopping it, this travesty of justice. The Regent’s eyes passed over Laurent like those of a father receiving an act of long-overdue filial duty.

‘Is this exchange acceptable to you, Exalted?’ said the sentry.

‘I believe it is,’ said the Regent, after a moment. ‘You see, Laurent. I am a reasonable man. When you are properly penitent, I am merciful.’

‘Yes, uncle. Thank you, uncle.’

The sentry bowed. ‘The exchange of a life satisfies our laws. Your nephew will face trial in Ios. The other will be held until morning, then released. Let the will of the King be done.’

The other sentries echoed the words, ‘*Let the will of the King be done.*’

Damen said, ‘*No.*’ He was struggling again.

Laurent didn’t look at Damen. He kept his eyes fixed on a point in front of him, their blue slightly glazed. Under the thin cotton of his chiton, he was breathing shallowly, his body held taut, an attempt at control.

‘Come, nephew,’ said the Regent.

They went.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THEY KEPT DAMEN until dawn, and then brought him back to the camp, with his hands bound anew. He fought, intermittently, the whole way, through a kind of dark haze of exhaustion that wouldn't leave him.

When they reached the camp, they threw him down onto the ground so that he went to his knees with his hands bound behind him. Jord came forward with his sword drawn, but Nikandros held him back, eyes wide in fear and respect for the white cloaks of the Kingsmeet. Then Nikandros came forward. Damen was rising to his feet, and he felt Nikandros turning him and slicing the ropes from his arms with his knife.

'The Prince?'

'He's with the Regent.' He said it once, then for a moment could say nothing at all.

He was a soldier. He knew the brutality of the battlefield, had seen the things that men could do to those weaker than themselves, yet had never thought—

—Nicaise's head drawn from a blood-stained hessian bag, Aimeric's cold body sprawled out beside a letter, and—

It was very bright. He was aware of Nikandros speaking to him.

'I know you felt something for him. If you are going to be sick, do it quickly. We have to go. There will already be men coming to find us.'

Through the haze he heard Jord's voice. 'You left him? You saved your own life and left him with his uncle?'

Damen looked up, and saw that everyone had come out from the wagons to see. He was ringed by a small group of faces. Jord had come to stand in front of him. Nikandros stood behind him, and still had a hand on his shoulder, having steadied him to cut off the ropes. He saw Guion a few steps off, and Loyse. Paschal.

Jord said, 'You coward, you left him to—'

The words were abruptly cut off as Nikandros took hold of Jord and slammed him back against the wagon.

‘You will not speak that way to our King.’

‘Let him be.’ The words were thick in Damen’s throat. ‘Let him be. He is loyal. You would have reacted the same way if Laurent had come back alone.’ He found he was between them, that he had intervened bodily. Nikandros was two paces away—Damen had pulled him off.

Released, Jord was panting slightly. ‘He wouldn’t have come back alone. If you think that, you don’t know him.’

He felt Nikandros’s hand on his shoulder, steadying him, though Nikandros was speaking to Jord. ‘Stop it, can’t you see he’s—’

‘What’s going to happen to him?’ Jord’s voice, demanding.

‘He’ll be killed,’ said Damen. ‘There will be a trial. He’ll be branded a traitor. His name will be dragged through the mud. When it’s done, they’ll kill him.’

It was the unadorned truth. It would happen here, publicly. In Ios, they displayed severed heads on rough wooden spikes along the traitor’s walk. Nikandros was speaking.

‘We can’t stay here, Damianos. We have to—’

‘No,’ said Damen.

He had his hand to his forehead. His thoughts whirled, useless. He remembered Laurent saying, *I can’t think*.

What would Laurent do? He knew what Laurent would do. Stupid, mad Laurent had sacrificed himself. He had used the last piece of leverage he had: his own life. But Damen’s life was valueless to the Regent.

He felt the limits of his own nature, which too easily swung to anger, and the need—stymied by circumstance—to bring about the Regent’s death. All he wanted was to take up his sword and cut a path into Ios. His body felt thick and dull with a single thought that pushed at him, trying to get out. He pressed his eyes closed.

‘He thinks he’s alone,’ he said.

He told himself, sickeningly, that it wouldn’t be quick. The trial would take time. The Regent would draw it out. It was what he liked, public humiliation coupled with private chastisement, his reality validated by all those around him. Laurent’s death, sanctioned by the Council, would restore the Regent’s personal order, the world set to rights.

It wouldn’t be quick. There was time. There had to be time. If he could only think. He felt like a man standing outside the high gates of a city with no way to get inside.

‘Damianos. Listen to me. If he is taken to the palace, then he is gone. You can’t fight your way in single-handed. Even if you made it past the walls, you’d never make it out again. Every soldier in Ios is loyal to Kastor or to the Regent.’

Nikandros’s words penetrated, as hard and painful as only the truth could be.

‘You’re right, I can’t fight my way in.’

From the beginning he had been a tool, a weapon to be used against Laurent. The Regent had used him to hurt, to unsettle, to shake Laurent’s control; and finally, to destroy him.

‘I know what I have to do,’ he said.

* * *

He arrived in the cool of morning, alone. Leaving his horse, he went the last of the way on foot, choosing the goat tracks first, then passing through avenues of apricot and almond, and the dappled shade of olive trees. Shortly after, the tracks ascended, and he began to climb a low limestone hill, the first of the rises that led him up, and up further to the white cliffs, and the city.

Ios; the white city, built on high limestone cliffs that crumbled and broke off into the sea. The familiarity was so strong it was almost dizzying. On the horizon, the sea was a clear blue, only a few shades darker than the strident shade of the sky. He had missed the ocean. The foaming disorder of rocks, and the sudden sharp sense of how spray would feel against skin, more than anything, made him feel like home.

He expected to be challenged at the outer gates by soldiers warned and wary, on the lookout for him. But perhaps they were on the lookout for Damianos, the arrogant young King at the head of his army, not a single man in an old worn cloak, a hood that came down over his face, and sleeves to hide his arms. No one stopped him.

So he walked in, past the first threshold. He took the northern road, one man winding through the crowd. And when he turned the first corner, he saw the palace as everyone saw it: disorientingly, from the outside. There, small as specks, were the high open windows and long marble balconies that invited the sea air in during the evening to cool the baking stone. To the east was the long, columned hall and airy upper quarters. To the north, the King’s

quarters, and the high-walled gardens, with their shallow steps and winding paths and the myrtle trees planted for his mother.

Memory was sudden; long days training on the sawdust, evenings in the hall, his father presiding from the throne, himself walking those marble halls with surety and unconcern, an unreal former self, who spent evenings in the great hall laughing with friends, being served as he wished by slaves.

A yapping dog cut across his path. A woman with a parcel under her arm jostled him, then shouted at him in southern dialect to watch where he was going.

He kept walking. He passed the outer homes, with their small windows of differently sized rectangles and squares. He passed the outer storehouses, the granaries, a stone revolving on a millbase, pushed by oxen. He passed the shouts of a dozen market stalls that were all selling fish, pulled from the ocean in the pre-dawn.

He passed the traitor's walk, thick with flies. He scanned the tops of the spikes, but the dead were all dark-haired.

A burst of a cavalcade came trotting out on horses. He stepped to the side; they trotted past him, red-cloaked and regimented, without a second glance.

It was all uphill in the city, because the palace was built on the peak, with the sea at its back. He realised as he walked that he had never done this on foot before. When he reached the palace square, a feeling of disorientation came over him again, because he only knew the square from the opposite angle: as a view from the white balcony, where his father used to emerge sometimes to raise a hand and address the crowd.

Now he walked into the square as a visitor from one of the city entrances. From this angle, the palace loomed impressively, the guards like gleaming statues, the bases of their spears fixed to the ground.

He locked his eyes on the closest of the guards and began to walk forward.

At first no one paid any attention to him. He was just one man in the busy columned square. But by the time he reached the first of the guards he had garnered a few looks. It was rare to approach the steps to the high gate directly.

He could feel the growing attention, could feel eyes turning to look at him, could feel the guards' awareness of him, though they held their impassive positions. He put his sandalled foot on the first step.

Crossed spears blocked his way, and the men and women of the square began to turn, to create a semicircle of curiosity, nudging each other.

‘Halt,’ said the guard. ‘State your business, traveller.’

He waited, until he had the eyes of everyone near the gate on him, then he let the hood of his cloak fall back. He heard the shocked murmurs, the outbreak of sound as he spoke, his words, clear and unmistakable.

‘I am Damianos of Akielos, and I surrender to my brother.’

* * *

The soldiers were nervous.

Damianos. In the moments before they hurriedly ushered him in through the gate, the crowd grew. *Damianos.* The name spread from mouth to mouth, like a spark into a line of leaping fire, awed, fearful, shocked. *Damianos of Akielos.* The guard to the right just continued to look at him blankly, but there was growing recognition on the face of the guard to the left, who said, fatally, ‘*It’s him.*’

It’s him—and the spark ignited into a blaze, seizing the crowd. *It’s him. It’s him. Damianos.* Suddenly it was everywhere. The crowd was jostling, exclaiming. A woman fell down onto her knees. A man shoved forward. The guards were close to being overwhelmed.

They pushed him inside, roughly. His public surrender had accomplished that much: he had won himself the privilege of being manhandled into the palace.

If it worked, if he was in time—how long could a trial last? How long could Laurent stall for time? The trial would have commenced in the morning—how long until the Council returned their verdict, and Laurent was taken to the public square to be shoved to his knees, his head lowered, the sword brought down on his neck—?

He needed them to take him into the hall to face Kastor. He had given up his freedom for that single chance, gambling everything. *He’s alive. Damianos is alive.* The whole city knew, they couldn’t dispatch him in secret. They must take him to the hall.

In fact, they took him to an empty set of apartments on the eastern side of the palace, and discussed in hushed whispers what to do. He sat under guard on one of the low seats and didn’t scream in frustration, as time passed, and

then more time. This was already different to all his hopes; there were too many things that could go wrong.

The latch on the doors was thrown open, and a new set of soldiers entered, heavily armed. One was an officer. Another carried irons. He stopped dead when he saw Damen.

‘Cuff him,’ said the officer.

The soldier holding the irons didn’t move, his wide eyes staring at Damen.

‘Do it,’ came the order.

‘Do it, soldier,’ said Damen.

‘Yes, Exalted,’ said the soldier, and then flushed, as though he had done something wrong. He might have. It might have been treason to say that.

Or it might be treason to step forward and close the iron around Damen’s wrists. Damen held his arms ready behind his back and still the man hesitated. This was a complex political proposition for the soldiers. They were nervous.

The moment the iron closed around Damen’s wrists, the nerves showed themselves in a different way. The soldiers had done something irrevocable. They had to think of Damen as a prisoner now, and they grew rougher, shouting and shoving him in the back, out of the apartment, blustering and too loud.

Damen’s heartbeat sped up. Was it enough? Was he in time? The soldiers pushed him around a corner, and he saw the first stretch of corridor. It was happening, he was being taken to the great hall.

High, shocked faces lined the passages as they passed. The first person to recognise him was a household official carrying a vase which smashed, dropping from his hands. *Damianos*. A slave, caught in a crisis of etiquette, fell half to his knees and then stopped, agonisingly uncertain whether he should complete his prostration. A soldier froze in his tracks, eyes wide with horror. It was unthinkable that any man should lay hands on the King’s son. And yet *Damianos* was being escorted in shackles, pushed forward by a spear butt when he walked too slowly.

Thrust into the crush of the great hall, Damen saw several things at once.

There was a ceremony underway—the columned hall was full of soldiers. Half of the thick crowd were soldiers. Soldiers guarded the entrance. Soldiers lined the walls. But they were the Regent’s soldiers. Only

a small Akielon honour guard stood near the dais. Veretian and Akielon courtiers were packed into the hall with them, assembled for a spectacle.

And there wasn't one throne on the dais, there were two.

Kastor and the Regent sat side by side, presiding over the hall. Damen's whole body reacted against the wrongness of it—the Regent sitting on his father's throne. Sickeningly, there was a boy of about eleven on a stool beside the Regent. Damen's gaze fixed on the Regent's bearded face, the wide shoulders swathed in red velvet, the heavily ringed hands.

It was strange—he had waited for so long to face Kastor, and now he found him simply extraneous. The Regent was the sole intrusion, the sole threat.

Kastor looked satisfied. He didn't see the danger. He didn't understand what he had let into Akielos. The Regent's soldiers thronged the hall. The entire Veretian Council was here, gathered in assembly near the dais, as if Akielos was already their country. A part of Damen's mind registered all of that, as the rest of him kept looking, kept scanning the faces—

And then, as the crowd parted slightly, he saw what he was searching for: the first glimpse of a yellow head.

Alive, alive, Laurent was alive. Damen's heart leapt, and for a moment he just stood and drank the sight in, giddy with relief.

Laurent stood alone, in a cleared space to the left of the dais steps, flanked by his own set of guards. He was still wearing the short Akielon chiton that he had worn to the Kingsmeet, but it was dirty and ripped. Skimpy and showing the signs of rough wear, it was a humiliating garment for him to stand in before the Council. Like Damen, he had his hands chained behind his back.

It was suddenly obvious that this spectacle was Laurent's trial, and that it had been underway for hours, Laurent's straight-backed posture by now held in place by will alone. The physical act of standing for hours in irons must be taking its toll, the sheer ache of muscle exhaustion, the rough treatment, and the examination itself, the Regent's questions, and Laurent's steady, determined answers.

But he wore the clothes and the chains with disregard, his posture, as ever, coolly untouchable. His expression could not be read, except for, if you knew him, the courage that he sustained though he was alone, and tired, and without friends, and he must know that it was close to the end.

And then Damen was pricked into the hall at sword point, and Laurent turned and saw him.

It was clear from the open look of horrified recognition on Laurent's face that he had not expected Damen—that he had not expected anyone. On the dais, Kastor made a small gesture to the Regent, as if to say, *You see? I have had him brought for you.* The whole hall seemed to swing around at the disruption.

'No,' said Laurent, swinging his gaze back to his uncle. 'You *promised.*' Damen saw Laurent take physical control over himself, forcing back further reaction.

'I promised what, nephew?'

The Regent sat calmly on his throne. His next words addressed the Council.

'This is Damianos of Akielos. He was captured at the gates this morning. He's the man responsible for the death of King Theomedes, and for my nephew's treason. He is my nephew's lover.'

Close to, Damen saw the faces of the Council: the elderly, loyal Herode; the vacillating Audin, the reasonable Chelaut, and Jeurre, who was frowning. And then he saw other faces in the crowd. There was the soldier who had entered Laurent's rooms after the assassination attempt in Arles. There was an officer from the army of Lord Touars. There was a man in the clothing of the Vaskian clans. They were witnessess, all of them.

He had not been brought here to face Kastor or to answer for their father's death. He had been brought here as a final piece of evidence in Laurent's trial.

'We've all heard the evidence of the Prince's treason,' said the Regent's newest Councillor, Mathe. 'We've heard how he planted evidence in Arles to incite a war with Akielos, how he sent clan raiders to slaughter innocents on the border.'

Mathe gestured to Damen. 'Now we see the proof of all these claims. Damianos, the prince-killer, is here, giving the lie to all the Prince has been saying—proving once and for all that they are in league. Our Prince lies in the depraved embrace of his brother's killer.'

Damen was shoved to the front of the hall, with every pair of eyes fixed on him. He was suddenly an exhibit, a kind of proof none of them had imagined: Damianos of Akielos, captured and bound.

The Regent's voice searched for understanding. 'Even with all that we have heard today, I cannot bring myself to believe that Laurent allowed the hands that killed his brother to touch him. That he lay in the sweat of an Akielon bed, and let a killer have his body.'

The Regent stood, and as he spoke he began to descend the dais. A concerned uncle looking for answers, he stopped in front of Laurent. Damen saw one or two of the Councillors react to the proximity, fearing for the Regent's physical safety, though it was Laurent who was immobilised, held in the grip of a soldier, his wrists chained hard behind his back.

In a loving gesture, the Regent lifted his fingers and brushed a strand of yellow hair from Laurent's face, searching Laurent's eyes.

'Nephew, Damianos is restrained. You can speak honestly. You are safe from harm.' Laurent weathered the slow, caring touch, as the Regent said, gently, 'Is there some explanation? Perhaps you were not willing? Perhaps he forced you?'

Laurent's eyes met his uncle's. Laurent's chest rose and fell shallowly under the thin white fabric of the chiton.

'He didn't force me,' said Laurent. 'I lay with him because I wanted to.'

The hall erupted in comment. Damen could feel it: in a day's worth of questioning, this was the first admission.

'You don't have to lie for him, Laurent,' said the Regent. 'You can tell the truth.'

'I don't lie. We lay together,' said Laurent, 'at my behest. I ordered him to my bed. Damianos is innocent of all the charges brought against me. He suffered my company only under force. He is a good man, who has never acted against his own country.'

'I'm afraid the guilt or innocence of Damianos is for Akielos to decide, not Vere,' said the Regent.

Damen could feel what Laurent was trying to do, and his heart ached at it, that even now, Laurent was trying to protect him. Damen let his voice carry, cutting across the hall.

'And what am I accused of? That I have lain with Laurent of Vere?' Damen's eyes raked the Council. 'I have. I found him honest and true. He stands before you wrongly accused. And if this is a fair trial, you will hear me.'

'This is insupportable!' Mathe said. 'We won't hear testimony from the *prince-killer of Akielos*—'

‘You will hear me,’ said Damen. ‘You will hear me, and if when you have heard me you still find him guilty, then I will meet my fate alongside him. Or does the Council fear the truth?’

Damen found himself with his eyes on the Regent, who had re-ascended the dais of four shallow steps and now sat, enthroned beside Kastor, supremely comfortable. His gaze rested on Damen in turn.

The Regent said, ‘By all means, speak.’

It was a challenge. To have Laurent’s lover in his power pleased the Regent, as a demonstration of his larger power. Damen could feel that. The Regent wanted Damen to entangle himself, wanted a victory over Laurent that was total.

Damen drew in a breath. He knew the stakes. He knew that if he failed, he would die alongside Laurent, and the Regent would rule in Vere and in Akielos. He would have given over his life and his kingdom.

He looked around at the columned hall. It was his home, his birthright, and his legacy, more precious to him than anything. And Laurent had given him the means to secure it. At the Kingsmeet he could have left Laurent to his fate and ridden back to Karthas and his army. He was undefeated on the field, and not even the Regent would have been able to stand against him.

Even now, all he had to do was denounce Laurent and he could face Kastor with a real chance of taking back his throne.

But he had asked himself the question in Ravenel, and now he knew the answer.

A kingdom, or this.

‘I met the Prince in Vere. I thought as you did. I didn’t know his heart.’

It was Laurent who said, ‘No.’

‘I came to learn it slowly.’

‘Damen, don’t do this.’

‘I came to learn his honesty, his integrity, his strength of mind.’

‘Damen—’

Of course Laurent wanted everything done his own way. But today it was going to be different.

‘I was a fool, blinded by prejudice. I didn’t understand that he was fighting alone, that he had been fighting alone for a very long time.

‘And then I saw the men he commanded, disciplined and loyal. I saw the way his household loved him, because he knew their concerns, cared for their lives. I saw him protect slaves.

‘And when I left him, drugged and without friends after an attack on his life, I saw him stand up in front of his uncle and argue to save my life because he felt he owed me a debt.

‘He knew that it might cost him his life. He knew he’d be sent to the border, to ride into the very same plot to kill him. And he still argued for me. He did it because it was owed, because in the very private code with which he ran his life, it was right.’

He looked at Laurent, and he understood now what he had not understood then: that Laurent had known who he was that night. Laurent had known who he was and had still protected him, out of a sense of fairness that had somehow survived what had happened to him.

‘That is the man you face. He has more honour and integrity than any man I have ever met. He is dedicated to his people and his country. And I am proud to have been his lover.’

Damen said it with his eyes on Laurent, willing him to know how much he meant it, and for a moment Laurent just gazed back at him, his eyes blue and wide.

The Regent’s voice interrupted. ‘A heartfelt declaration is not evidence. I am afraid to say that there is nothing here to change the Council’s decision. You offered no proof, only accusations of an unlikely plot against Laurent, with no hint as to who the architect of it might be.’

‘You are the architect,’ said Damen, lifting his eyes to the Regent, ‘and I do have proof.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘I CALL GUION OF Fortaine to speak.’

That is outrageous! came the exclamation, and, *How dare you accuse our King!* Damen said it steadily into the furious shouts, his eyes locked with those of the Regent.

‘Very well,’ the Regent said, leaning back in his seat and gesturing to the Council.

Then they had to wait, while runners were sent to the place on the outskirts of the city where Damen had told his men to camp.

The Councillors got to sit down, and so did the Regent and Kastor. Lucky them. Next to the Regent, the brown-haired eleven-year-old was drumming his heels on the base of his stool, obviously bored. The Regent leaned in and murmured something into the boy’s ear, and then gestured for one of the slaves to bring a plate of sweetmeats. It kept the boy occupied.

It didn’t keep anyone else occupied. Around them, the hall was stifling, the thick press of soldiers and onlookers a packed, fidgeting mass. The strain of standing in heavy irons was beginning to make itself felt in Damen’s back and shoulders. For Laurent, who had been here for hours, it would be worse: the ache that began in the back travelling to the arms, the thighs, until every part of the body was made of fire.

Guion entered the hall.

Not only Guion, but all the members of Damen’s party: Guion’s wife, Loyse, looking white-faced, the physician Paschal, Nikandros and his men, even Jord and Lazar. It meant something to Damen that he had given each of them the option to leave, and they had chosen to stay with him. He knew what they risked. Their loyalty touched him.

He knew that Laurent didn’t like it. Laurent wanted to do everything alone. But it wasn’t going to be like that.

Guion was escorted forward to stand before the thrones.

‘Guion of Fortaine.’ Mathe resumed his role as questioner as the spectators craned their necks, disliking the columns because they obstructed

the view. ‘We are gathered to determine the guilt or innocence of Laurent of Vere. He is charged with treason. We have heard how he sold secrets to Akielos, how he supported coups, how he attacked and killed Veretians to further his cause. Do you have testimony that will bring clarity to these claims?’

‘I do.’

Guion turned to the Council. He had been a councillor himself, a respected colleague known to be privy to the Regent’s private dealings. Now he spoke clearly and unequivocally.

‘Laurent of Vere is guilty of every charge brought against him,’ said Guion.

It took a moment for those words to penetrate, and when they did, Damen felt the ground drop out from beneath him. ‘No,’ said Damen, as the hall erupted in comment for a second time.

Guion raised his voice. ‘I have been his prisoner for months. I have seen first-hand the depravity that he has fallen into, how he beds the Akielon every night, how he lies in the obscene embrace of his brother’s killer, sating his desires at the expense of our country.’

‘*You swore to tell the truth,*’ said Damen. No one was listening to him.

‘He tried to coerce me to lie for him. He threatened to kill me. He threatened to kill my wife. He threatened to kill my sons. He slaughtered his own people at Ravenel. I would vote him guilty myself, if I were still a member of the Council.’

‘I think we are satisfied,’ said Mathe.

‘No,’ said Damen, his involuntary struggle aborted by his handlers as shouts of agreement and of vindication came from the Regent’s supporters in the hall. ‘Tell them what you know about the Regent’s coup in Akielos.’

Guion spread his hands. ‘The Regent is an innocent man whose only crime is that he trusted a wayward nephew.’

That was enough for the Council. They had, after all, been deliberating all day. Damen swung his gaze to the Regent, who was watching proceedings with calm confidence. He had known. He had known what Guion would say.

‘He planned this,’ said Damen, desperately. ‘They are colluding.’ A blow from behind sent him to his knees, where he was held down. Guion calmly stepped across the chamber to take his place by the Council. The Regent rose and descended the dais, to put his hand on Guion’s shoulder and speak a few words to him, not loud enough for Damen to hear.

‘The Council will now pass their sentence.’

A slave approached bearing a golden sceptre. Herode took it up, holding it like a staff, end to the ground. And then a second slave came forward bearing a black square of cloth, symbol of the oncoming sentence of death.

The bottom fell out of Damen’s stomach. Laurent had also seen the cloth. He was facing it without flinching, though his face was very pale. On his knees, Damen could do nothing to stop it. He struggled hard, and was held down, panting. There was an awful moment in which all he could do was look up at Laurent, helplessly.

Laurent was pushed forward to stand across the width of the hall from the Council, chained and alone but for the two soldiers who held him by each arm in a hard grip. No one knows, thought Damen. No one knows what his uncle has done to him. His eyes swung to the Regent, who was gazing at Laurent with sad disappointment. The Council stood alongside him.

It had a symbolic power, the six of them standing on one side of the hall, and Laurent—in his thin, tattered Akielon clothing held in the grip of his uncle’s soldiers—on the other. Laurent spoke.

‘No final advice? No uncle’s kiss of affection?’

‘You had so much promise, Laurent,’ said the Regent. ‘I regret what you became more than you do.’

‘You mean that I’m on your conscience?’ said Laurent.

‘It hurts me,’ said the Regent, ‘that you feel such animosity towards me, even now. That you tried to undermine me with accusations, when I have only ever wanted the best for you.’ He spoke in a saddened voice. ‘You should have known better than to bring Guion to testify against me.’

Laurent met the Regent’s eyes, standing alone before the Council.

‘But uncle,’ said Laurent, ‘Guion isn’t who I brought.’

‘He brought me,’ said Guion’s wife Loyse, stepping forward.

Damen turned—everyone turned. Loyse was a woman of middle years and greying hair that was lank after a day and a night on the road with little rest. He hadn’t spoken to her during the ride. But he heard her now, as she came to stand before the Council.

‘I have something to say. It’s about my husband, and this man, the Regent, who has brought my family into ruin, and who ended the life of my youngest son, Aimeric.’

‘Loyse, what are you doing?’ said Guion, as all of the hall’s attention riveted on Loyse.

She paid him no attention, but continued to walk forward until she stood alongside Damen, addressing her words to the Council.

‘In the year after Marlas, the Regent visited my family in Fortaine,’ said Loyse. ‘And my husband, who is ambitious, gave him leave to enter the bedroom of our youngest son.’

‘Loyse, stop this now.’ But her words continued.

‘It was a gentleman’s agreement. The Regent could indulge himself in relaxed privacy at our home, and my husband was rewarded with lands and a position of greater prominence at court. He was made Ambassador to Akielos, and he became the intermediary between the Regent and the Regent’s conspirator, Kastor.’

Guion was looking from Loyse to the Council, and he gave a laugh, braying and too loud. ‘You can’t be giving credence to any of this.’

No one answered, the silence uncomfortable. Councillor Chelaut’s gaze shifted for a moment to the young boy sitting beside the Regent, his fingers sticky with powdered sugar from the sweetmeats.

‘I know that no one here cares about Aimeric,’ said Loyse. ‘No one cares that he killed himself at Ravenel because he couldn’t live with what he had done.’

‘So let me tell you instead about what Aimeric died for—a plot between the Regent and Kastor to kill King Theomedes and then to take his country.’

‘These are lies,’ Kastor said in Akielon, and then he said it again in thickly accented Veretian. ‘Arrest her.’

In the uneasy moment that followed, the small Akielon honour guard put their hands on the hilts of their swords, and the Veretian soldiers moved in opposition, halting them. It was plain from Kastor’s face that he had realised for the first time that he was not in control of the hall.

‘Arrest me, but not before you’ve seen the proof.’ Loyse was pulling a ring on a chain from her gown; it was a signet ring, ruby or garnet, and on it was the royal crest of Vere. ‘My husband brokered the deal. Kastor assassinated his own father in exchange for the Veretian troops you see here today. The troops he needed to take Ios.’

Guion swung around to face the Regent, urgently. ‘She’s not a traitor. She’s just confused. She’s been deceived, and coached, she’s been upset since Aimeric died. She doesn’t know what she’s saying. She’s being manipulated by these people.’

Damen looked at the Council. Herode and Chelaut wore expressions of repressed distaste, even revulsion. Damen saw suddenly that the obscene youth of the Regent's lovers had always been repellent to these men, and the idea that the son of a councillor had been used in this way was disturbing to them beyond measure.

But they were political men, and the Regent was their master. Chelaut said, almost reluctantly, 'Even if what you say is true, it does not clear Laurent of his crimes. The death of Theomedes is a matter for Akielos.'

He was right, Damen realised. Laurent hadn't brought Loyse to clear his own name, but to clear Damen's. There was no proof that would clear Laurent's name. The Regent had been too thorough. The palace assassins were dead. The assassins from the road were dead. Even Govart was dead, cursing boy pets and physicians.

Damen thought of that—of Govart holding something over the Regent. It had kept Govart alive, kept him in wine and women, until the day it hadn't. He thought of a trail of death that extended all the way to the palace. He remembered Nicaise, appearing in sleeping clothes the night of the assassination attempt. Nicaise had been executed only a few months later. His heart started pounding.

They were connected in some way. He was suddenly sure of it. Whatever Govart had known, Nicaise had known it too, and the Regent had killed him for it. And that meant—

Damen was pushing himself up abruptly.

'There's another man here who can testify,' Damen said. 'He hasn't come forward on his own. I don't know why. But I know he must have a reason. He's a good man. I know he'd speak if he were free to do so. Maybe he fears reprisal, against himself or against his family.'

He addressed his words to the hall. 'I ask him now. Whatever your reason, you have a duty to your country. You should know that better than anyone. Your brother died protecting the King.'

Silence. The spectators in the hall looked from one to another, and Damen's words seemed to hang awkwardly. The expectation of a reply came and went with a lack of all answer.

Paschal stepped forward, his face lined and rather pale.

'No,' said Paschal. 'He died because of this.'

He took from the folds of his clothes a bundle of papers, tied with string.

‘The last words of my brother, the archer Langren, carried by the soldier called Govart, and stolen by the Regent’s pet, Nicaise, who was killed for it. This is the testimony of the dead.’

He drew the string from the papers and unfolded them, standing before the Council in his robes and his lopsided hat.

‘I am Paschal, a palace physician. And I have a story to tell about Marlas.’

* * *

‘My brother and I came to the capital together,’ said Paschal. ‘He as an archer, and me as a physician—at first to the Queen’s retinue. My brother was ambitious, and rose quickly through the ranks, joining the King’s Guard. I suppose that I was ambitious also, and soon won a position as royal physician, serving both Queen and King.’

‘They were years of peace and good harvests. The kingdom was secure, and Queen Hennike had provided two heirs. Then, six years ago, when the Queen died, we lost our alliance with Kempt, and Akielos took it as an opportunity to invade.’

He had reached a part of the story that Damen knew, though it was different, hearing it told in Paschal’s voice.

‘Diplomacy failed. The talks fell through. Theomedes wanted land, not peace. He sent away the Veretian emissaries without hearing them.’

‘But we were confident in our forts. No army had taken a Veretian fort in over two hundred years. So the King brought his army south to Marlas, in full complement, to repel Theomedes from its walls.’

Damen remembered it—the gathering banners, the swell of numbers, two armies of immense power, and his father confident, even in the face of those impenetrable forts. *They are arrogant enough to come out.*

‘I remember my brother before the fight. He was nervous. Excited. Wild with a kind of confidence I had never seen in him before. He talked about a different future for our family. A better future. It wasn’t until many years later that I learned why.’

Paschal stopped, and looked across the hall right at the Regent, who stood beside the Council in his red velvet robes.

‘The Council will recall how the Regent advised the King to leave the safety of the fort, that our numbers were superior, that there was no danger in

riding out onto the flat, and that a surprise attack on the Akielons would end the war swiftly, saving many Veretian lives.'

Damen looked at the Council. They did remember it, he saw; as he did. How cowardly he had thought the attack. How craven. For the first time, he wondered what had happened behind Veretian lines to cause it. He thought of a King convinced it was the best way of protecting his people.

'Instead, Veretians fell. I was nearby when the word came that Auguste was dead. In grief, the King pulled off his helm. He was careless. I think in his mind, he had no reason left to be careful.'

'A stray arrow took him in the throat. And with the King dead and the heir dead, the Regent ascended to the throne of Vere.'

Paschal's eyes, like Damen's, were on the Council. They would all recall the days after the battle. As Council members, they had sanctioned the creation of the Regency.

'In the aftermath, I searched for my brother, but he was missing,' Paschal said. 'I learned later that he had fled the battlefield. He died several days later, in a village in Sanpelier, stabbed in an altercation. The villagers told me that there was someone with him when he died. It was a young soldier named Govart.'

At the mention of Govart's name, Guion jerked up his head. Alongside him, the Council stirred.

'Was Govart my brother's killer? I didn't know. I watched, not understanding, as Govart rose to power in the capital. Why was he suddenly the Regent's right-hand man? Why was he given money, power, slaves? Hadn't he been thrown out of the King's Guard? It occurred to me that Govart had received the bright future my brother had talked about, while my brother lay dead. But I didn't understand why.'

The papers Paschal had in his hand were old, yellowed, even the string that had held them together was old. He straightened them, unconsciously.

'Until I read this.'

He began to untie the string, drawing it away and opening the papers. They were covered in writing.

'Nicaise gave it to me for safekeeping. He had stolen it from Govart, and he was scared. I opened it, never expecting what I would find. In fact, the letter was to me, though Nicaise didn't know it. It was a confession, in my brother's handwriting.'

Paschal stood with the unfolded papers in his hands.

‘This is what Govart used to blackmail his way to power all these years. This is why my brother fled, and why he lost his life. My brother was the archer who killed the King, for which the Regent promised him gold and delivered him death.

‘This is the proof that King Aleron was killed by his own brother.’

There was no outcry this time, no clash of sound, just a silence, in which the creased papers were delivered from Paschal to the Council. As Herode took them, Damen recalled that Herode had been a friend to King Aleron. Herode’s hand was shaking.

And then Damen looked at Laurent.

Laurent’s face was completely devoid of colour. It was not an idea that Laurent had entertained before, that much was clear. Laurent had his own blind spot when it came to his uncle. *I didn’t think he’d really try to kill me. After everything . . . even after everything.*

It had never really made sense that the Veretian army had attacked in the open when their strategic dominance had always been their forts. The day that Vere had fought Akielos at Marlas there had been three men between the Regent and the throne, but what might not be accomplished in the chaotic mess of battle?

Damen thought of Govart in the palace, doing what he pleased to one of the Regent’s Akielon slaves. Holding a threat over the Regent would be a dangerous cocktail, heady and terrifying. Six years of looking over your shoulder, of waiting for the sword to fall, not knowing when or how it would happen, but knowing that it would. He wondered if there had been a time in Govart’s life before the power and the fear had wrecked him.

Damen thought of his father struggling to breathe in his sickbed, of Orlant, of Aimeric.

He thought of Nicaise in oversized bedclothes in the hallway, caught up in something too big for him. And dead now, of course.

‘You can’t believe this? The lies of a physician and a boy whore?’

Guion’s voice was jarring in the silence. Damen looked to the Council, where the oldest of the Councillors, Herode, was looking up from the papers.

‘Nicaise had more nobility in him than you,’ said Herode. ‘He was more loyal to the Crown than the Council, in the end.’

Herode stepped forward. He used the gold sceptre like a staff as he walked. With the eyes of every person assembled on him, Herode crossed the

hall, stopping only when he stood in front of Laurent, who was still held in the tight grip of one of his uncle's soldiers.

'We were here to hold the throne in trust, and we failed you,' said Herode, 'my King.'

And he knelt, with the slow, painstaking care of an elderly man, on the marble stones of the Akielon hall.

Seeing Laurent's shocked face, Damen realised that something had happened that Laurent had not imagined. No one had ever told him before that he deserved to be King. Like a boy who has been given praise for the first time, Laurent didn't know what to do. He looked suddenly very young, his lips parted wordlessly, his cheeks flushed.

Jeurre rose. As the onlookers watched, Jeurre left his place with the Council and crossed the hall to drop to one knee alongside Herode. A moment later, Chelaut followed. Then Audin. And finally, like a rat deserting a ship, Mathe moved away from the Regent and hurriedly fell to one knee in front of Laurent.

'The Council has been deceived into treason,' said the Regent, calmly. 'Take them.'

There was a pause, in which his order ought to have been followed, but wasn't. The Regent turned. The hall was thick with his soldiers, the Regent's Guard, trained to his orders, and brought here to do his bidding. None of them moved.

In the strange silence, a soldier stepped forward. 'You're not my King,' he said. Pulling the Regent's insignia from his shoulder, he dropped it at the Regent's feet.

Then he crossed the hall as the Council had done, to stand beside Laurent.

His movement was the first drop that became a trickle, then a flow, as another soldier pulled his insignia from his shoulder and crossed, and another, and another, until the hall was loud with the sound of armoured feet, the hail of badges hitting the ground. Like the tide drawing away from a rock, the Veretians crossed the hall, until the Regent stood alone.

And Laurent stood facing him, with an army at his back.

'Herode,' said the Regent. 'This is the boy who has shirked his duties, who has never worked for anything in his life, who is in every way unfit to rule the country.'

Herode said, 'He is our King.'

'He's not a king. He's no more than a—'

‘You’ve lost.’ Laurent’s calm words cut across his uncle’s.

He stood free. His uncle’s soldiers had released him, striking the irons from his wrists. Across from him, the Regent stood exposed, a middle-aged man used to commanding public spectacle, now with it turned against him.

Herode lifted the sceptre. ‘The Council will now make its ruling.’

He took the black square of cloth from the slave who had carried it, and placed it over the head of the sceptre.

‘This is absurd,’ said the Regent.

‘You have committed the crime of treason. You will be put to the sword. You will not be interred with your father or brother. Your body will be displayed instead on the city gates as a warning against treachery.’

‘You can’t sentence me,’ the Regent said. ‘I am the King.’

He was taken in the firm grip of two soldiers. His arms were forced behind his back, and the chains that had bound Laurent closed over his wrists.

‘You were only ever his Regent,’ said Herode. ‘You were never the King.’

‘You think you can defy me?’ the Regent said to Laurent. ‘You think you can rule Vere? You?’

Laurent said, ‘I’m not a boy anymore.’

As the soldiers took him, the Regent laughed a little breathlessly. ‘You’ve forgotten,’ said the Regent, ‘that if you touch me, I’ll kill Damianos’s child.’

‘No,’ said Damen. ‘You won’t.’

And he saw that Laurent understood, that Laurent knew, somehow, about the scrap of paper that Damen had found that morning in the empty wagon in their camp, its door standing open. That he had carried it in careful fingers on the long walk to the city.

*The child was never yours, but he is safe. In another life, he
would have been a king.*

*I remember the way you looked at me, the day we met.
Perhaps that, too, in another life.*

Jokaste

‘Take him,’ said Laurent.

Metallic sounds as the whole hall burst into action, Veretian soldiers forming up to take the Regent, the Akielon honour guard moving to protect their hall and their King. The Regent was forced hard to his knees. His expression of disbelief was turning to fury, then to horror, and he was struggling. A soldier approached with a sword.

‘What’s happening?’ said a young voice.

Damen turned. The eleven-year-old boy who had been sitting beside the Regent’s throne had pushed up out of his chair and was staring, confusion in his wide brown eyes.

‘What’s happening? You said we’d go riding after. I don’t understand.’ He was trying now to go to the soldiers who were holding the Regent down. ‘Stop it, you’re hurting him. You’re hurting him. Let him go.’ A soldier was holding him back, and the boy was fighting him.

Laurent looked at the boy, and in his eyes was the knowledge that some things couldn’t be fixed. He said, ‘Get that boy out of here.’

It was a single clean stroke. Laurent’s face didn’t change. Laurent turned to the soldiers when it was done.

‘Put his body on the gates. Fly my flag on the walls. Let all my people know of my ascension.’ He lifted his eyes, and met Damen’s gaze across the length of the hall. ‘And unchain the King of Akielos.’

The Akielon soldiers holding Damen didn’t know what to do. One of them let go of Damen’s arm as the Veretians advanced, two of the others broke, shoving away in an attempt to escape.

There was no sign of Kastor. In the confusion, he had taken his chance and fled, his small honour guard with him. There would be bloodshed in the corridors as Laurent’s men moved out. All those who had supported Kastor would now be fighting for their lives.

Damen was suddenly surrounded by Veretian soldiers, and Laurent was with them. A Veretian soldier took hold of his chains. The iron cuffs fell from him, leaving only the gold.

‘You came,’ said Laurent.

‘You knew I would,’ said Damen.

‘If you need an army to take your capital,’ said Laurent, ‘I seem to have one.’

Damen let out a strange breath. They were gazing at each other. Laurent said, ‘After all, I owe you a fort.’

‘Find me, after,’ said Damen.

For there was one thing left to do.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE HALLS WERE chaos.

Damen took up a sword and made his way through it, running where he could. Clusters of men were fighting. Orders were shouted. Soldiers were battering down a thick wooden door. A man was taken roughly by the arms and forced to his knees, and with a small shock Damen recognised one of the men who had held him—treason to lay hands on the King.

He needed to find Kastor. Laurent's soldiers had their orders, to take the outer gates swiftly, but Kastor's men were defending his retreat, and if Kastor made it out of the palace and regrouped with his forces, it would mean all-out war.

Laurent's men weren't going to be able to stop him. They were Veretian soldiers in an Akielon palace. Kastor knew better than to try to leave by the main gates. Kastor would escape through the hidden tunnels. And Kastor had a head start.

So he ran. Even in the thick of the fighting, few tried to stop him. One of Kastor's soldiers recognised him and shouted that Damianos was here, but did not attack Damen himself. Another, finding himself in Damen's path, stepped back. A part of Damen's mind registered this as Laurent's effect on the field at Hellay. Even men fighting for their lives could not overcome a lifetime of observance and directly strike against their Prince. He had a clear path.

But even running, he wasn't going to make it in time. Kastor was going to escape, and in a few hours Damen's men would be scouring the city, searching houses with torches through the night, Kastor slipped away, hidden by sympathisers, rendezvousing with his army—civil war rolling like flame over his country.

He needed a shortcut, a way to cut Kastor off, and then he realised that he knew a way, a path that Kastor would never take—would never conceive of taking, because no prince used those passageways.

He turned left. Instead of heading towards the main doors, he made his way to the viewing hall, where slaves were displayed for their royal masters. He turned into the narrow corridors along which he'd been taken on that long ago night, the fighting becoming distant shouts and clangs behind him, the sounds growing muffled as he ran.

And from there, he descended down into the slave baths.

He entered a wide marble room with open baths, the collection of glass vials containing oils, the thin runnel on the far edge, the chains hanging from the ceiling all familiar. His body reacted, his chest constricting, his pulse kicking hard. For a moment, he was hanging suspended from those chains again, and Jokaste was coming towards him across the marble.

He blinked the vision back, but everything here was familiar: the wide archways, the lapping sounds of water that reflected light onto the marble, the wall chains that hung not only from the ceiling but decorated each chamber at intervals, the coiling, heavy steam.

He forced himself forward into the chamber. He passed through one archway, then another, and then he was in the place where he needed to be, marbled and white with a set of carved steps set against the far wall.

And then he had to stop, and there was an interval of silence. All he could do was wait for Kastor to appear at the top of the stairs.

Damen stood, his sword in his hands, and tried not to feel small, like a younger brother.

Kastor came in alone, without even an honour guard. When he saw Damen, he gave a low laugh, as though Damen's presence satisfied in him some sense of the inevitable.

Damen looked his brother's features; the straight nose, the high, proud cheekbones, the dark, flashing eyes, now turned on him. Kastor looked even more like their father than Damen did now that he had let his beard grow in.

He thought of everything that Kastor had done—the long, slow poisoning of their father, the massacre of his household, the brutality of his own enslavement—and he tried to understand that these things had not been done by another person, but by this one, his brother. But when he looked at Kastor all he could remember was that Kastor had taught him how to hold a spear, that he had sat with him when his first pony had broken its leg and had to be put down, that after his first okton Kastor had ruffled his hair and told him that he had done well.

'He loved you,' said Damen, 'and you killed him.'

‘You had everything,’ said Kastor. ‘Damianos. The trueborn, the favourite. All you had to do was be born and everyone doted on you. Why did you deserve it more than I did? Because you were better at fighting? What does wielding a sword have to do with kingship?’

‘I would have fought for you,’ said Damen. ‘I would have died for you. I would have been loyal—would have had you by my side.’ He said, ‘You were my brother.’

He made himself stop before he gave voice to the words that he had never let himself speak: I loved you, but you wanted a throne more than you wanted a brother.

‘Are you going to kill me?’ said Kastor. ‘You know I can’t beat you in a fair fight.’

Kastor hadn’t moved from the top of the stairs. He had his sword drawn too. The stairs followed the wall with no railing, carved marble with a drop to the left.

‘I know,’ said Damen.

‘Then let me go.’

‘I can’t do that.’

Damen took a step onto the first marble tread. It wasn’t tactically to his advantage to fight Kastor on the stairs, where height gave Kastor superior position. But Kastor wasn’t going to give up the only edge he had. Slowly, he began to ascend.

‘I didn’t want you made a slave. When the Regent asked for you, I refused. It was Jokaste. She convinced me to send you to Vere.’

‘Yes,’ said Damen. ‘I’m beginning to understand that she did.’

Another step.

‘I’m your brother.’ Kastor said it, as Damen took another step, and then another. ‘Damen, it’s a terrible thing to kill your own family.’

‘You’re troubled by what you’ve done? It gives you a moment’s pause?’

‘You think it doesn’t?’ said Kastor. ‘You think I don’t think every day about what I’ve done?’ Damen was close enough now. Kastor said, ‘He was my father, too. That’s what everyone forgot, the day you were born. Even him.’ Kastor said. ‘Do it.’ And Kastor closed his eyes, and dropped his sword.

Damen looked at Kastor, at his bowed neck and his closed eyes, his unarmed hands.

‘I can’t set you free,’ said Damen. ‘But I won’t end your life. Did you think I could? We can go together to the great hall. If you swear fealty to me there, I’ll let you live under house arrest here in Ios.’ Damen lowered his sword.

Kastor lifted his head and looked at him, and Damen saw a thousand unspoken words in his brother’s black eyes. ‘Thank you,’ said Kastor, ‘brother.’

And he drew a knife from his belt, and ran it straight through Damen’s unprotected body.

The shock of betrayal hit a moment before the physical pain that drove him a step back. The step wasn’t there. He was tumbling backwards into nothingness, a long drop until he hit marble, the air knocked out of his lungs.

Dazed, he tried to get his bearings, tried to breathe and couldn’t, as though he had taken a punch to the solar plexus, except that the pain was deeper and not lessening, and there was a lot of blood.

Kastor was at the top of the stairs, a blood-slicked knife in one hand, bending to pick up his sword with the other. Damen saw his own sword, which must have been knocked from his hand by the fall. It lay six paces away. Survival instinct told him he must get to it. He tried to move, to push himself closer. The heel of his sandal skidded on blood.

‘There can’t be two Kings of Akielos.’ Kastor was coming down the steps towards him. ‘You should have stayed a slave in Vere.’

‘Damen.’

A shocked, familiar voice to his left. He and Kastor both turned their heads.

Laurent was standing in the open archway, white-faced. Laurent must have followed him from the great hall. He was unarmed and still wearing that ridiculous chiton.

He needed to tell Laurent to get out, to run, but Laurent was already on his knees beside him. Laurent’s hand was passing over his body. Laurent said, in an oddly detached voice, ‘You have a knife wound. You have to staunch the blood until I can call for a physician. Press here. Like this.’ He lifted Damen’s left hand to press against his stomach.

Then he took Damen’s other hand in his own, clasping their fingers together and holding his hand like it was the most important thing in the world. Damen thought that if Laurent was holding his hand, he must be dying.

It was his right hand, his wrist ringed by the gold cuff. Laurent held it tighter, and drew it towards himself.

There was a *snick* as Laurent locked Damen's gold cuff to one of the slave chains scattered over the floor. Damen looked at his newly chained wrist, not comprehending.

Then Laurent rose, his hand closing around the hilt of Damen's sword.

'He won't kill you,' said Laurent. 'But I will.'

'No,' said Damen. He tried to move, and hit the limits of the chain. He said, 'Laurent, he's my brother.'

And he felt all the hairs on his body rise as the present fell away, and the marble floors became a distant field where brother faced brother across the years.

Kastor had reached the bottom of the stairs. 'I'm going to kill your lover,' he said to Damen, 'and then I'm going to kill you.'

Laurent stood in his way, a slender figure with a sword that was too big for him, and Damen thought of a thirteen-year-old boy with his life about to change, standing on the battlefield with determination in his eyes.

Damen had seen Laurent fight before. He had seen the spare, precise style that he used on the field. He had seen the different, highly intellectual way that he approached a duel. He knew Laurent as an accomplished swordsman, a master even, of his own style.

Kastor was better. Laurent was twenty, still a year or two outside of his physical prime as a swordsman. Kastor, at thirty-five, was at the tail end of his own. In physical fitness, there was little to choose between them, but the age difference gave Kastor fifteen years of experience that Laurent lacked, every one of which Kastor had spent fighting. Kastor had Damen's build—taller than Laurent, with a longer reach. And Kastor was fresh, where Laurent was tired, having stood, muscles trembling under the weight of irons, for hours.

They faced each other across limited space. There was no army to look on, just the marble cavern of the baths, with its smooth floor. But the past was here in eerie symmetry, a long ago moment when the fate of two countries had turned on a fight.

It had come. It was here, all that was between them. Auguste, his honour and determination. And young Damianos, riding arrogantly into the fight that would change everything. Chained, his hand clutched to his stomach, Damen

wondered if Laurent saw Kastor at all, or simply saw the past, two figures, one dark and one bright, one destined to live, the other to fall.

Kastor lifted his sword. Damen tugged uselessly on the chain as Kastor advanced. It was like watching a former self, unable to stop his own actions.

And then Kastor attacked, and Damen saw what a lifetime of single-minded dedication had forged in Laurent.

Years of training, of pushing a body never intended for martial pursuits to its limit in hours of ceaseless practice. Laurent knew how to fight a stronger opponent, how to counter a longer reach. He knew the Akielon style—more than that. He knew exact move sets, lines of attack taught to Kastor by the royal trainers that he could not have learned from his own sword masters, but only by watching Damen with meticulous attention as he trained, and cataloguing each movement, preparing for the day that they would fight.

In Delpha, Damen had duelled Laurent in the training arena. Then, Laurent had still been only half healed from a shoulder injury, and furious with emotion, both clouding the fight. Now he was clear-eyed, and Damen saw the childhood that had been taken from him, the years in which Laurent had re-formed himself for one purpose: to fight Damianos, and to kill him.

And because Laurent's life had been dragged from its course, because he was not the sweet, bookish youth he might have been, but instead was hard and dangerous as cut glass, Laurent was going to take on Kastor's best sword work, and force it back.

A flurry of strikes. Damen remembered that feint from Marlas, and that sidestep, that particular set of parries. Laurent's early training had mirrored Auguste's, and there was something heartbreaking about the way that he conjured him up now, half embodying his style, as Kastor embodied Damen's, a fight between ghosts.

They drew alongside the stairs.

It was a simple misjudgement on Laurent's part: a dip in the marble altered his footing and affected his line, his blade cutting too far to the left. He wouldn't have misjudged if he hadn't been tired. The same had been true for Auguste, fighting for hours on the front.

His eyes flying to Kastor, Laurent tried to correct the mistake, close the gap into which a man could drive his sword if he was ruthless, and willing to kill.

'No,' said Damen, who had lived this, too, jerking hard on his restraints, ignoring the pain in his side as Kastor took the opening, moving with

merciless speed to cut Laurent down.

Death and life; past and future; Akielos and Vere.

Kastor let out a choked sound, his eyes shocked and wide.

Because Laurent wasn't Auguste. And the stumble wasn't a mistake, it was a feint.

Laurent's sword met Kastor's, forcing it up, and then, with a neat, minimal motion of the wrist, driving forward into Kastor's chest.

Kastor's sword hit the marble. He dropped to his knees, staring up sightlessly at Laurent, who was staring down at him in turn. In the next moment, Laurent brought his sword once across Kastor's throat.

Kastor slumped and fell. His eyes were open and didn't close again. In the silence of the marble baths, Kastor lay motionless, and dead.

It was over; like a balance restored, the past put to rest.

Laurent was already turning, already at Damen's side, on his knees, his hands firm and strong on Damen's body as though he had never left. Damen's relief that Laurent was still alive for a moment obliterated all other thought, and he just felt it, felt Laurent's hands, Laurent's bright presence beside him.

Kastor's death he felt as the death of a man he had not known, or understood. Losing his brother—that had happened a long time ago, like the loss of another self who had not grasped the flawed nature of the world. Later, he would face that.

Later they would lay Kastor out, taking him on the long walk, inter him, where he should be, with their father. Later he would mourn, for the man Kastor was, for the man he might have been, for a hundred different pasts and might-have-beens.

Now, Laurent was beside him. Aloof, untouchable Laurent was beside him, kneeling on the wet marble hundreds of miles from home, with nothing in his eyes but Damen.

'There's a lot of blood,' said Laurent.

'Luckily,' said Damen, 'I brought a physician.'

It hurt to talk. Laurent let out a breath, a strange airless sound. He saw an expression in Laurent's eyes that he remembered from his own. Laurent didn't flinch from it.

'I killed your brother.'

'I know.'

Damen said it, and felt a strange empathy pass between them, as if they knew each other for the first time. He looked into Laurent's eyes and felt

himself understood, even as he understood Laurent. They were both orphans now, without family. The symmetry that ruled both their lives had brought them here, at the end of their journey.

Laurent said, 'Our men have the gates and the halls. Ios is yours.'

'And you,' said Damen. 'With your uncle gone, there won't be resistance. You have Vere.'

Laurent was very still, and the moment seemed to draw out, the space between them private in the hushed baths.

'And the centre. We both hold the centre,' said Laurent. And then: 'It was one kingdom, once.'

Laurent wasn't looking at him when he said it, and it was a long moment before he lifted his eyes to Damen's waiting ones, and Damen's breath caught at what he saw there, the odd shyness of it, as though Laurent was asking instead of answering.

'Yes,' said Damen, feeling light-headed at the question.

And then he really did feel light-headed, because Laurent's face was so transformed by the new light in his eyes that Damen almost didn't recognise him, the expression full of joy.

'No, don't move,' said Laurent, when Damen pushed up onto an elbow, and then, 'Idiot,' when Damen kissed him.

He pushed Damen firmly back. Damen let him. His stomach hurt. It was not a mortal wound, but it was nice to have Laurent fuss over him. The thought of days of bed rest and physicians was made sweeter by the thought of Laurent alongside him, making barbed remarks in public, and in private, newly tender. He thought, Laurent alongside him for all the span of his days. He lifted his fingers to touch Laurent's face. Iron links dragged over marble.

'You know, you're going to have to unchain me at some point,' said Damen. Laurent's hair was soft.

'I will. At some point. What's that sound?'

He could hear it even in the slave baths, muffled but audible, the sound ringing out from the highest peak, a peal of notes, proclaiming a new king.

'Bells,' said Damen.

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