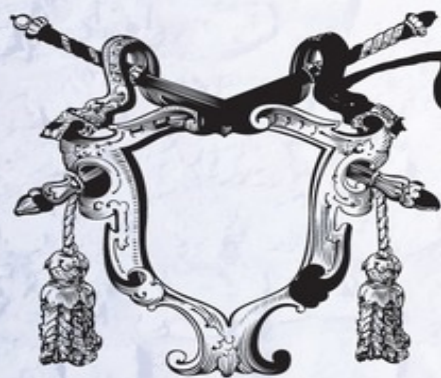


PRINCE'S

BOOK TWO *of the* CAPTIVE PRINCE TRILOGY

FAMBIT

C. S. PACAT



PRINCE'S GAMBIT

C.S.
PACAT



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Version_2

Prince's Gambit is dedicated to all the original readers and supporters of the story. It's you who made the continuation of this story possible.



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Acknowledgements

CHARACTERS

AKIELOS

KASTOR, King of Akielos

DAMIANOS (Damen), heir to the throne of Akielos

JOKASTE, a lady of the Akielon court

NIKANDROS, Kyros of Delpha

MAKEDON, a commander

NAOS, a soldier

VERE

The court

THE REGENT of Vere

LAURENT, the heir to the throne of Vere

NICAISE, the Regent's pet

GUION, Lord of Fortaine, member of the Veretian Council and the former Ambassador to Akielos

VANNIS, Ambassador to Vask

ANCEL, a pet

The Prince's men

GOVART, Captain of the Prince's Guard

JORD

ORLANT

ROCHERT

HUET

AIMERIC

LAZAR, one of the Regent's mercenaries, now fighting with the Prince's men

PASCHAL, a physician

At Nesson

CHARLS, a merchant

VOLO, a cardsharp

At Acquitart

ARNOUL, a retainer

At Ravenel

TOUARS, Lord of Ravenel

THEVENIN, his son
ENGUERRAN, Captain of Ravenel's troops
HESTAL, advisor to Lord Touars
GUYMAR, a soldier
GUERIN, a blacksmith

At Breteau

ADRIC, a member of the minor nobility
CHARRON, a member of the minor nobility

PATRAS

TORGEIR, King of Patras
TORVELD, younger brother of King Torgeir and Ambassador to Vere
ERASMUS, his slave

VASK
HALVIK, a clan leader
KASHEL, a clanswoman

From the past

THEOMEDES, former King of Akielos and Damen's father
EGERIA, former Queen of Akielos and Damen's mother
HYPERMENESTRA, former mistress of Theomedes and Kastor's mother
EUANDROS, former King of Akielos, founder of the house of Theomedes
ALERON, former King of Vere and Laurent's father
AUGUSTE, former heir to the throne of Vere and Laurent's older brother

CHAPTER 1

The shadows were long with sunset when they rode up, and the horizon was red. Chastillon was a single jutting tower, a dark round bulk against the sky. It was huge and old, like the castles far to the south, Ravenel and Fortaine, built to withstand battering siege. Damen gazed at the view, unsettled. He found it impossible to look at the approach without seeing the castle at Marlas, that distant tower flanked by long red fields.

‘It’s hunting country,’ said Orlant, mistaking the nature of his gaze. ‘Dare you to make a run for it.’

He said nothing. He was not here to run. It was a strange feeling to be unchained and riding with a group of Veretian soldiers of his own free will.

A day’s ride, even at the slow pace of wagons through pleasant countryside in late spring, was enough by which to judge the quality of a company. Govart did very little but sit, an impersonal shape above the swishing tail of his muscled horse, but whoever had captained these men previously had drilled them to maintain immaculate formation over the long course of a ride. The discipline was a little surprising. Damen wondered if they could hold their lines in a fight.

If they could, there was some cause for hope, though in truth, his wellspring of good mood had more to do with the outdoors, the sunshine and the illusion of freedom that came with being given a horse and a sword. Even the weight of the gold collar and cuffs on his throat and wrists could not diminish it.

The household servants had turned out to meet them, arraying themselves as they would for the arrival of any significant party. The Regent’s men, who were supposedly stationed at Chastillon awaiting the Prince’s arrival, were nowhere to be seen.

There were fifty horses to be stabled, fifty sets of armour and tack to be unstrapped, and fifty places to be readied in the barracks—and that was only the men at arms, not the servants and wagons. But in the enormous courtyard, the Prince's party looked small, insignificant. Chastillon was large enough to swallow fifty men as though the number was nothing.

No one was pitching tents: the men would sleep in the barracks; Laurent would sleep in the keep.

Laurent swung out of the saddle, peeled off his riding gloves, tucking them into his belt, and gave his attention to the castellan. Govart barked a few orders, and Damen found himself occupied with armour, detailing and care of his horse.

Across the courtyard, a couple of alaunt hounds came bounding down the stone stairs to throw themselves ecstatically at Laurent, who indulged one of them with a rub behind the ears, causing a spasm of jealousy in the other.

Orlant broke Damen's attention. 'Physician wants you,' he said, pointing with his chin to an awning at the far end of the courtyard, under which could be glimpsed a familiar grey head. Damen put down the breastplate he was holding, and went.

'Sit,' said the physician.

Damen did so, rather gingerly, on the only available seat, a small three-legged stool. The physician began to unbuckle a worked leather satchel.

'Show me your back.'

'It's fine.'

'After a day in the saddle? In armour?' said the physician.

'It's fine,' said Damen.

The physician said, 'Take off your shirt.'

The physician's gaze was implacable. After a long moment, Damen reached behind himself and drew his shirt off, exposing the breadth of his shoulders to the physician.

It was fine. His back had healed enough that new scars had replaced new wounds. Damen craned for a glimpse but, not being an owl, saw almost nothing. He stopped before he got a crick in his neck.

The physician rummaged in the satchel and produced one of his endless ointments.

'A massage?'

'These are healing salves. It should be done every night. It will help the

scarring to fade a little, in time.'

That was really too much. 'It's cosmetic?'

The physician said, 'I was told you would be difficult. Very well. The better it heals, the less your back will trouble you with stiffness, both now and later in life, so that you will be better able to swing a sword around, killing a great many people. I was told you would be responsive to that argument.'

'The Prince,' said Damen. But of course. All this tender care of his back, like soothing with a kiss the reddened cheek you have slapped.

But he was, infuriatingly, right. Damen needed to be able to fight.

The ointment was cool, and scented, and it worked on the effect of a long day's ride. One by one, Damen's muscles unlocked. His neck bent forward, his hair falling a little about his face. His breathing eased. The physician worked with impersonal hands.

'I don't know your name,' Damen admitted.

'You don't remember my name. You were in and out of consciousness, the night we met. A lash or two more, you might not have seen morning.'

Damen snorted. 'It wasn't that bad.'

The physician gave him an odd look. 'My name is Paschal,' was all he said.

'Paschal,' said Damen. 'It's your first time to ride with troops on campaign?'

'No. I was the King's physician. I tended the fallen at Marlas, and at Sanpelier.'

There was a silence. Damen had meant to ask Paschal what he knew of the Regent's men, but now he said nothing, just held his bunched shirt in his hands. The work on his back continued, slow and methodical.

'I fought at Marlas,' said Damen.

'I assumed you had.'

Another silence. Damen had a view of the ground under the awning, packed earth instead of stone. He looked down at a scuffmark, the torn edge of a dry leaf. The hands on his back eventually lifted and were done.

Outside, the courtyard was clearing; Laurent's men were efficient. Damen stood, shook out his shirt.

'If you served the King,' said Damen, 'how is it you now find yourself in the Prince's household, and not his uncle's?'

‘Men find themselves in the places they put themselves,’ Paschal said, closing his satchel with a snap.

* * *

Returning to the courtyard, he couldn’t report to Govart, who had vanished, but he did find Jord, directing traffic.

‘Can you read and write?’ Jord asked him.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Damen. Then stopped.

Jord didn’t notice. ‘Almost nothing’s been done to prepare for tomorrow. The Prince says, we’re not leaving without a full arsenal. He also says, we’re not delaying departure. Go to the western armoury, take an inventory, and give it to that man.’ Pointing. ‘Rochert.’

Since taking a full inventory was a task that would take all night, Damen assumed what he was to do was check the existing inventory, which he found in a series of leather-bound books. He opened the first of them searching for the correct pages, and felt a strange sensation pass over him when he realised that he was looking at a seven-year-old list of hunting weaponry made for the Crown Prince Auguste.

Prepared for His Highness the Crown Prince Auguste, garniture of hunter’s cutlery, one staff, eight tipped spear-heads, bow and strings.

He was not alone in the armoury. From somewhere behind shelves, he heard the cultured voice of a young male courtier saying, ‘You’ve heard your orders. They come from the Prince.’

‘Why should I believe that? You his pet?’ said a coarser voice.

And another: ‘I’d pay to watch that.’

And another: ‘The Prince has got ice in his veins. He doesn’t fuck. We’ll take orders when the Captain comes and tells us them himself.’

‘How dare you speak about your Prince like that. Choose your weapon. I said choose your weapon. Now.’

‘You’re going to get hurt, pup.’

‘If you’re too much of a coward to—’ said the courtier, and before he was even halfway through that sentence, Damen was folding his grip around one of the swords and walking out.

He rounded the corner just in time to see one of three men in the Regent’s

livery draw back, swing, and punch the courtier hard in the face.

The courtier wasn't a courtier. It was the young soldier whose name Laurent had dryly mentioned to Jord. *Tell the servants to sleep with their legs closed. And Aimeric.*

Aimeric staggered backwards and hit the wall, sliding halfway down its length as he opened and closed his eyes with stupefied blinks. Blood poured from his nose.

The three men had seen Damen.

'That's shut him up,' said Damen, equitably. 'Why don't you leave it at that, and I'll take him back to the barracks.'

It wasn't Damen's size that stopped them. It wasn't the sword he held casually in his hand. If these men really wanted to make a fight out of it, there were enough swords, flingable armour pieces, and teetering shelves to turn this into something long and ludicrous. It was only when the leader of the men saw Damen's gold collar that he shoved out an arm, holding the others back.

And Damen understood, in that moment, exactly how things were going to be on this campaign: the Regent's men in ascendancy. Aimeric and the Prince's men were targets because they had no one to complain to except Govart, who would slap them back down. Govart, the Regent's favourite thug, brought here to keep the Prince's men in check. But Damen was different. Damen was untouchable, because Damen had a direct line of reportage to the Prince.

He waited. The men, unwilling to openly defy the Prince, decided on discretion; the man who had laid out Aimeric nodded slowly, and the three moved off and out, Damen watching them go.

He turned to Aimeric, noting his fine skin and elegant wrists. It wasn't unheard of for younger sons of the highborn to seek out a position in the royal guard, making what name for themselves they could. But as far as Damen had seen, Laurent's men were of a rougher sort. Aimeric was probably exactly as out of place among them as he looked.

Damen held out his hand, which Aimeric ignored, pushing himself up.

'How old are you? Eighteen?'

'Nineteen,' said Aimeric.

Around the smashed nose, he had a fine-boned aristocratic face, beautifully shaped dark brows, long dark lashes. He was more attractive up

close. You noticed things like his pretty mouth, even dripping with nosebleed.

Damen said, 'It's never a good idea to start a fight. Particularly against three men when you're the type who goes down with one punch.'

'If I go down, I stand back up. I'm not afraid to be hit,' said Aimeric.

'Well, good, because if you insist on provoking the Regent's men, it's going to happen a lot. Tip your head back.'

Aimeric stared at him, hand clasped to his nose, holding a fistful of blood. 'You're the Prince's pet. I've heard all about you.'

Damen said, 'If you're not going to tip your head back, why don't we go find Paschal? He can give you a scented ointment.'

Aimeric didn't budge. 'You couldn't take a flogging like a man. You opened your mouth and squealed to the Regent. You laid hands on him. You spat on his reputation. Then you tried to escape, and he still intervened for you, because he'd never abandon a member of his household to the Regency. Not even someone like you.'

Damen had gone very still. He looked at the boy's young, bloody face, and reminded himself that Aimeric had been willing to take a beating from three men in defence of his Prince's honour. He'd call it misguided puppy love, except that he'd seen the glint of something similar in Jord, in Orlant, and even, in his own quiet way, in Paschal.

Damen thought of the ivory and gold casing that held a creature duplicitous, self-serving and untrustworthy.

'You're so loyal to him. Why is that?'

'I'm not a turncoat Akielon dog,' said Aimeric.

* * *

Damen delivered the inventory to Rochert, and the Prince's Guard began the task of preparing arms, armour and wagons for their departure the following morning. It was work that should have been done before their arrival, by the Regent's men. But of the hundred and fifty Regent's men set to ride out with the Prince, fewer than two dozen had turned out to help them.

Damen joined the work, where he was the only man to smell, expensively, of ointments and cinnamon. The sole knot remaining in

Damen's back concerned the fact that the castellan had ordered him to report to the keep when he was done.

After an hour or so, Jord approached him.

'Aimeric's young. He says it won't happen again,' said Jord.

It will happen again, and once the two factions in this camp start retaliating against one another your campaign is over, he didn't say. He said, 'Where's the Captain?'

'The Captain is in one of the horse stalls, up to his waist in the stableboy,' said Jord. 'The Prince has been waiting for him at the barracks. Actually . . . I was told to have you fetch him.'

'From the stables,' said Damen. He stared at Jord in disbelief.

'Better you than me,' said Jord. 'Look for him down the back. Oh, and when you're done, report to the keep.'

It was a long walk across two courtyards from the barracks to the stables. Damen hoped that Govart would be finished by the time he arrived, but of course he wasn't. The stables contained all the quiet sounds of horses at night, but even so Damen heard it before he saw it: the soft rhythmic sounds coming, as Jord had accurately predicted, from the back.

Damen weighed Govart's reaction to an interruption against Laurent's to being kept waiting. He pushed open the stall door.

Inside, Govart was unambiguously fucking the stableboy against the far wall. The boy's pants were in a crumpled heap on the straw not far from Damen's feet. His bare legs were splayed wide and his shirt was open and pushed up onto his back. His face was pressed to the rough wooden panelling and held in place by Govart's fist in his hair. Govart was dressed. He had unlaced his own pants only enough to take out his cock.

Govart stopped long enough to glance sideways and say, 'What?' before, deliberately, continuing. The stableboy, seeing Damen, reacted differently, squirming.

'Stop,' said the stableboy. 'Stop. Not with someone watching—'

'Calm down. It's just the Prince's pet.'

Govart jerked the stableboy's head back for emphasis.

Damen said, 'The Prince wants you.'

'He can wait,' said Govart.

'No. He can't.'

'He wants me to pull out on his order? Go visit him with a hard prick?'

Govart bared his teeth in a grin. 'You think that too-stuck-up-to-fuck stuff is just an act, and he's really just a tease who wants cock?'

Damen felt anger settle inside him, a tangible weight. He recognised an echo of the impotence Aimeric must have experienced in the armoury, except that he was not a green nineteen year old who had never seen a fight. His eyes passed impassively over the half-unclothed body of the stableboy. He realised that in a moment he was going to return to Govart in this small, dusty stall all that was owed for the rape of Erasmus.

He said, 'Your Prince gave you an order.'

Govart forestalled him, pushing the stableboy away in annoyance. 'Fuck, I can't get off with all this—' Tucking himself back in. The stableboy stumbled a few steps, sucking in air.

'The barracks,' said Damen, and weathered the impact of Govart's shoulder against his own as Govart strode out.

The stableboy stared at Damen, breathing hard. He was braced against the wall with one hand; the other was between his legs in furious modesty. Wordlessly, Damen picked up the boy's pants and tossed them at him.

'He was supposed to pay me a copper sol,' said the stableboy, sullenly.

Damen said, 'I'll take it up with the Prince.'

* * *

And then it was time to report to the castellan, who led him up steps and all the way into the bedchamber.

It was not as ornate as the palace chambers in Arles. The walls were thick hewn stone. The windows were frosted glass, criss-crossed with lattice. With the darkness outside, they did not offer a view, but instead reflected the shadows of the room. A frieze of twining vine leaves ran around the room. There was a carved mantle and a banked fire; and lamps, and wall hangings, and the cushions and silks of a separate slave pallet, he noticed, with a feeling of relief. Dominating the room was the heavy opulence of the bed.

The walls around the bed were panelled in dark, carved wood, depicting a hunting scene in which a boar was held at the end of a spear, pierced through the neck. There was no sign of the blue and gold starburst. The draperies were blood red.

Damen said, 'These are the Regent's chambers.' There was something uneasily transgressive about the idea of sleeping in the place meant for Laurent's uncle. 'The Prince stays here often?'

The castellan mistook him to mean the keep, not the rooms. 'Not often. He and his uncle came here a great deal together, in the year or two after Marlas. As he grew older, the Prince lost his taste for the runs here. He now comes only rarely to Chastillon.'

At the order of the castellan, servants brought him bread and meat and he ate. They cleared away the plates, and brought in a beautifully shaped pitcher and goblets, and left, perhaps by accident, the knife. Damen looked at the knife and thought about how much he would have given for an oversight like that when he was trussed up in Arles: a knife that he might take and use to prise his way out of the palace.

He sat himself down to wait.

On the table before him was a detailed map of Vere and Akielos, each hill and crest, each town and keep meticulously recorded. The river Seraine snaked its way south, but he already knew they were not following the river. He put his fingertip on Chastillon and traced one possible path to Delpha, south through Vere until he reached the line that marked the edge of his own country, all the place names written jarringly in Veretian: *Achelos, Delfeur*.

In Arles, the Regent had sent assassins to kill his nephew. It had been death at the bottom of a poisoned cup, at the end of a drawn sword. That was not what was happening here. Throw together two feuding companies, put them under a partisan, intolerant captain, and hand the result to a green commander-prince. This group was going to tear itself apart.

And likely there was nothing Damen could do to stop it happening. This was going to be a ride of disintegrating morale; the ambush that surely awaited them at the border would devastate a company already in disarray, ruined by in-fighting and negligent leadership. Laurent was the only counterweight against the Regent, and Damen would do all he had promised to keep him alive, but the stark truth of this ride to the border was that it felt like the last play in a game that was already over.

Whatever business Laurent had with Govart kept him deep into the night. The sounds from the keep grew quiet; the fluttering of the flames grew audible in the hearth.

Damen sat and waited, his hands loosely clasped. The feelings that

freedom—the illusion of freedom—stirred in him were strange. He thought of Jord and Aimeric and all Laurent's men working through the night to prepare for an early departure. There were house servants in the keep, and he was not eager for Laurent's return. But as he waited in the empty rooms, the fire flickering in the hearth, his eyes passing over the careful lines of the map, he was conscious, as he had seldom been during his captivity, of being alone.

Laurent entered, and Damen rose from his seat. Orlant could be glimpsed in the doorway behind him.

'You can go. I don't need a guard on the door,' said Laurent.

Orlant nodded. The door closed.

Laurent said, 'I have saved you till last.'

Damen said, 'You owe the stableboy a copper sol.'

'The stableboy should learn to demand payment before he bends over.'

Laurent calmly helped himself to goblet and pitcher, pouring himself a drink. Damen couldn't help glancing at the goblet, remembering the last time they had been alone together in Laurent's rooms.

Pale brows arched a fraction. 'Your virtue's safe. It's just water. Probably.' Laurent took a sip, then lowered the goblet, holding it in refined fingers. He glanced at the chair, as a host might offering a seat, and said, as though the words amused him, 'Make yourself comfortable. You are going to stay the night.'

'No restraints?' said Damen. 'You don't think I'll try to leave, pausing only to kill you on the way out?'

'Not until we get closer to the border,' said Laurent.

He returned Damen's gaze evenly. There was no sound but the crack and pop of the banked fire.

'You really do have ice in your veins, don't you,' said Damen.

Laurent placed the goblet carefully back on the table, and picked up the knife.

It was a sharp knife, made for cutting meat. Damen felt his pulse quicken as Laurent came forward. Only a handful of nights ago, he had watched Laurent slit a man's throat, spilling blood as red as the silk that covered this room's bed. He felt shock as Laurent's fingers touched his, pressing the hilt of the knife into his hand. Laurent took hold of Damen's wrist below the gold cuff, firmed his grip, and drew the knife forward so that it was angled towards his own stomach. The tip of the blade pressed slightly into the dark

blue of his prince's garment.

'You heard me tell Orlant to leave,' said Laurent.

Damen felt Laurent's grip slide down his wrist to his fingers, and tighten.

Laurent said, 'I am not going to waste time on posturing and threats. Why don't we clear up any uncertainty about your intentions?'

It was well placed, just below the rib cage. All you would have to do was push in, then angle up.

He was so infuriatingly sure of himself, proving a point. Damen felt desire come hard upon him: not wholly a desire for violence, but a desire to drive the knife into Laurent's composure, to force him to show something other than cool indifference.

He said: 'I'm sure there are house servants still awake. How do I know you won't scream?'

'Do I seem like the type to scream?'

'I'm not going to use the knife,' said Damen, 'but if you're willing to put it in my hand, you underestimate how much I want to.'

'No,' said Laurent. 'I know exactly what it is to want to kill a man, and to wait.'

Damen stepped back and lowered the knife. His knuckles remained tight around it. They gazed at one another.

Laurent said, 'When this campaign is over, I think—if you are a man and not a worm—you will attempt to gain retribution for what has happened to you. I expect it. On that day, we roll the dice and see how they fall. Until then, you serve me. Let me therefore make one thing above all clear to you: I expect your obedience. You are under my command. If you object to what you are told to do I will hear reasoned arguments in private, but if you disobey an order once it is made, I will send you back to the flogging post.'

'Have I disobeyed an order?' said Damen.

Laurent gave him another of those long, oddly searching looks. 'No,' said Laurent. 'You have dragged Govart out of the stables to do his duty, and rescued Aimeric from a fight.'

Damen said, 'You have every other man working until dawn to prepare for tomorrow's departure. What am I doing here?'

Another pause, and then Laurent indicated once again to the chair. This time Damen followed his prompt and sat. Laurent took the chair opposite. Between them, unfurled on the table, was all the intricate detail of the map.

‘You said you knew the territory,’ Laurent said.

CHAPTER 2

Long before they rode out the next morning, it was obvious that the Regent had chosen the worst standard of men he could find to send out with his nephew. Also obvious was the fact that they had been stationed at Chastillon to conceal their poor quality from the court. They were not even trained soldiers, they were mercenaries, second- and third-rate fighters, most of them.

With a rabble like this, Laurent's pretty face wasn't doing him any favours. Damen must have heard a dozen slurs and sly insinuations before he'd even saddled his horse. No wonder Aimeric had been furious: even Damen, who had frankly no objection to men slandering Laurent, was finding himself annoyed. It was disrespectful to speak that way of any commander. *He'd loosen up for the right cock*, he heard. He pulled too sharply on the girth strap of his horse.

He was out of sorts, perhaps. Last night had been strange, sitting across a map from Laurent, answering questions.

The fire had burned low in the hearth, warm-embered. *You said you knew the territory*, Laurent had said, and Damen had found himself confronted with an evening spent dispensing tactical information to an enemy he might expect to face one day, country against country, King against King.

And that was the best possible outcome: it assumed that Laurent would beat his uncle, and that Damen would return to Akielos, claiming his throne.

'You have some objection?' Laurent had said.

Damen had drawn in a deep breath. A strong Laurent meant a weakened Regent, and if Vere was distracted by a familial squabble over the succession, that only benefitted Akielos. Let Laurent and his uncle duke it out.

Slowly, carefully, he had started talking.

They had talked about the terrain on the border and about the route they would travel to get there. They would not be riding in a straight line south. Instead, it was to be a two-week journey southwest through the Veretian provinces of Varenne and Alier, their route hugging the Vaskian mountain border. It was a change from the direct route that had been planned by the Regent, and Laurent had already sent out riders to inform the keeps. Laurent, Damen thought, was buying himself time, extending the journey as much as was plausibly possible.

They had talked about the merits of Ravenel's defences when compared to Fortaine. Laurent hadn't seemed to show any inclination to sleep. He had never once glanced at the bed.

As the night wore on, Laurent had abandoned his deliberate comportment for a relaxed, youthful pose, drawing one knee up to his chest and slinging an arm around it. Damen had found his gaze drawn to the easy arrangement of Laurent's limbs, the balance of wrist on knee, the long, finely articulated bones. He had been aware of a diffuse but growing tension, a sensation almost like he was waiting . . . waiting for something, unsure what it was. It was like being alone in a pit with a snake: the snake could relax, you could not.

About an hour before dawn, Laurent had risen. 'We're done for tonight,' he had said briefly. And then, to Damen's surprise, he had left to begin preparations for the morning. Damen had been brusquely informed that he would be summoned when he was needed.

The castellan had called for him some hours later. Damen had taken the chance to snatch some sleep, determinedly retiring to his pallet and closing his eyes. The next time he had seen Laurent had been in the courtyard, changed and armoured and coolly ready to ride. If Laurent had slept at all, he hadn't done so in the Regent's bed.

There were fewer delays than Damen expected. Laurent's pre-dawn arrival and whatever cold bitchy remarks he had made—sharpened by a night without sleep—had been enough to eject the Regent's men out of their beds and into a semblance of lines.

They rode out.

* * *

There was no immediate disaster.

They rode through long green meadows scented with white and yellow flowers, Govart crude and commanding on a warhorse at their head, and beside him—young, elegant and golden—the Prince. Laurent looked like a figurehead, eye-catching and useless. Govart had not been disciplined at all for his stableboy-induced tardiness, nor had anything happened to the Regent's men for shirking their duty last night.

There were in total two hundred men, followed by servants and wagons and supplies and additional horses. There was no livestock, as there would be following a larger army on campaign. This was a small troop with the luxury of several supply stops on the way to their destination. There were no camp followers.

But they stretched out for almost a quarter mile, because of stragglers. Govart sent riders from the front streaming down to the end of the column to shout them into action, which caused a minor ruckus among the horses, but no noticeable improvement in forward motion. Laurent watched all of this, but did nothing about it.

Setting up camp took several hours, which was too long. Time wasted was time robbed from rest when the Prince's men had already been up half the preceding night. Govart gave basic commands but did not care much for fine work or detail. Among the Prince's men, Jord shouldered most of the responsibilities of Captain, as he had done last night, and Damen took his orders from him.

There were those among the Regent's men who simply worked hard because work needed to be done, but it was an impulse that came out of their own natures rather than through any external discipline or commands. There was little order among them, and no hierarchy, so that one man might shirk as he pleased with no repercussions except the growing resentment of the others around him.

There was going to be a fortnight of this, with a fight at the end of it. Damen set his jaw, kept his head down and got on with the work he had been assigned. He saw to his horse and his armour. He pitched the Prince's tent. He moved supplies and hauled water and wood. He washed with the men. Ate. The food was good. Some things were done well. The sentries were posted promptly, and so were the outriders, taking up position with the same professionalism as the guards who had watched him in the palace. The site of

the camp was well chosen.

He was making his way through the camp to Paschal when he heard from the other side of a canvas:

‘You should tell me who did it, so we can take care of it,’ said Orlant.

‘It doesn’t matter who did it. It was my fault. I told you.’ Aimeric’s stubborn voice was unmistakable.

‘Rochert saw three of the Regent’s men coming out of the armoury. He said one of them was Lazar.’

‘It was my fault. I provoked the attack. Lazar was insulting the Prince—’

Damen sighed, turned and went to find Jord.

‘You might want to go see Orlant.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because I’ve seen you talk him down from a fight before.’

The man Jord had been speaking to gave Damen an unpleasant look after Jord left. ‘I heard you were good at carrying tales. And what will you be doing while Jord stops that fight?’

‘Getting massaged,’ said Damen, succinctly.

He reported, ludicrously, to Paschal. And from thence to Laurent.

The tent was very large. It was large enough for Damen, who was tall, to walk freely inside without having to glance nervously upwards to avoid obstructions. The canvas walls were covered in draperies of rich blue and cream, shot through with gold thread, and high above his head the ceiling hung suspended in scalloped folds of twilled silk.

Laurent was seated in the entrance area, which was arranged for visitors with chairs and a receiving table, much like a warfield tent. He was talking to one of the scruffier-looking servants about armaments. Except that he wasn’t talking, he was mostly listening. He waved Damen inside to wait.

The tent was warmed with braziers, and further lit by candles. In the foreground, Laurent continued speaking to the servant. Screened away at the back of the tent was the sleeping area, a tumble of cushions, silks and swathed bedding. And, emphatically separate, his own slave pallet.

The servant was dismissed, and Laurent rose. Damen turned his eyes from the bedding to the Prince, and found a silence stretching out in which Laurent’s cool blue gaze was on him.

‘Well? Attend me,’ said Laurent.

‘Attend,’ said Damen.

The word sank into him. He felt as he had in the training arena when he had been unwilling to go near the cross.

‘Have you forgotten how?’ Laurent said.

He said, ‘The last time, this did not end pleasantly.’

‘Then I suggest you behave better,’ said Laurent.

Laurent turned his back on Damen calmly and waited. The lacing of Laurent’s brocade outer garment began at his nape, and ran in a single line all the way down his back. It was ridiculous to . . . fear this. Damen stepped forward.

In order to begin unlacing the garment, he had to lift his fingers and brush to one side the ends of the gilt hair, soft as fox fur. When he did so, Laurent tipped his head very slightly, offering better access.

It was the normal duty of a body servant to dress and undress his master. Laurent accepted the service with the indifference of one long used to attendance. The opening in the brocade widened, revealing the white of an undershirt pressed warm against skin by the heavy outer fabric, and by armour atop that. Laurent’s skin and the shirt were the exact same delicate shade of white. Damen pushed the garment over Laurent’s shoulders and just for a moment felt, beneath his hands, the hard, corded tension of Laurent’s back.

‘That will do,’ said Laurent, stepping away and tossing the garment to one side himself. ‘Go and sit at the table.’

On the table was the familiar map, weighted by three oranges and a cup. Arranging himself in the chair opposite Damen, casual in pants and undershirt, Laurent picked up one of the oranges and started peeling it. One corner of the map rolled up.

‘When Vere fought Akielos at Sanpelier, there was a manoeuvre that broke through our eastern flank. Tell me how that worked,’ Laurent said.

* * *

In the morning, the camp woke early, and Jord asked Damen to the impromptu practice field by the armoury tent.

It was, in theory, a good idea. Damen and the Veretian soldiers were proponents of different styles, and there were many things that they could

learn from one another. Damen certainly liked the idea of returning to steady practice, and if Govart was not organising drills, an informal gathering would substitute.

When he arrived at the armoury tent, he took a moment to survey the field. The Prince's men were doing sword work, and his eye caught on Jord and Orlant, and then Aimeric. Not many of the Regent's men were there with them, but one or two were, including Lazar.

There had been no explosion last night, and Orlant and Lazar were within a hundred paces of each other without any sign of bodily harm, but that meant that Orlant had a grievance that had not yet been expressed to his satisfaction, and as Orlant stopped what he was doing and came forward, Damen found himself face to face with a challenge that he should have predicted.

He caught the wooden practice sword instinctively when Orlant tossed it to him.

'You any good?'

'Yes,' said Damen.

He could see from the look in Orlant's eyes what he intended. People were beginning to take notice, pause in their own practice.

'This isn't a good idea,' said Damen.

'That's right. You don't like fights,' said Orlant. 'You prefer going behind people's backs.'

The sword was a practice weapon, wood from pommel to blade-tip, with leather wound around the hilt to provide a grip. Damen felt the weight of it in his hand.

'Afraid to spar?' said Orlant.

'No,' said Damen.

'Then what? Can't fight?' said Orlant. 'You're only here to fuck the Prince?'

Damen swung. Orlant parried, and they were immediately caught up in the to-and-fro of a hard exchange. Wooden swords were unlikely to deal fatal blows but they could bruise and break bone. Orlant fought with that in mind: his attacks held nothing back. Damen, having launched the first assault, now gave a step of ground.

It was the kind of fighting that was done in battle, fast and hard, not in a duel, where the first few engagements were usually exploratory, cautious and

testing, especially when the opponent was unknown. Here sword clashed against sword, and the flurry of blows ceased only for a moment here and there, to be taken up, quickly, again.

Orlant was good. He was among the best of the men on the field, a distinction he shared with Lazar, Jord, and one or two of the other Prince's men, each of whom Damen recognised from his weeks of captivity. Damen supposed he should feel flattered that Laurent had set his best swordsmen to guard him in the palace.

It was over a month since Damen had last used a sword. It felt like longer since that day—that day in Akielos, when he had been naive enough to ask to see his brother. A month, but he was used to hours of hard daily training, a schedule begun in early childhood, into which a month's break meant nothing. It was not even long enough for sword calluses to soften.

He had missed fighting. It satisfied something deep within him to ground himself in physicality, to focus on one art, on one person, move and countermove at a speed at which thought became instinct. Yet the Veretian fighting style was different enough that responses could not be purely automatic, and Damen experienced a feeling that was partly release and partly simple enjoyment with a great deal held, carefully, in check.

A minute or two more and Orlant disengaged, and swore. 'Are you going to fight me or not?'

'You said we were sparring,' said Damen, neutrally.

Orlant flung down his sword, took two steps off to one of the watching men, and pulled from its sheath thirty inches of polished steel straightsword, which without preamble he returned to swing with killing speed at Damen's neck.

There was no time to think. There was no time to guess whether Orlant intended to pull the blow or whether he really meant to cleave Damen in half. The straightsword could not be parried. With Orlant's weight and momentum behind it, it would slice through a wooden practice sword as easily as it would through butter.

Faster than the sword strike, Damen moved—inside Orlant's range and still moving, and in the next second Orlant's back hit the dirt, the wind knocked hard out of his chest, the tip of Damen's sword at his throat.

Around them, the training area had gone quiet.

Damen stepped back. Orlant, slowly, got to his feet. His sword lay on the

ground.

No one spoke. Orlant looked from his discarded sword to Damen and back again, but otherwise didn't move. Damen felt Jord's hand clasping his shoulder, and he removed his eyes from Orlant and looked in the direction that Jord indicated briefly with his chin.

Laurent had come into the training area and was standing not far off, by the arms tent, watching them.

'He was looking for you,' said Jord.

Damen passed his own sword off and went to him.

He walked over the tufted grass. Laurent made no attempt to meet him halfway, but simply waited. A breeze had sprung up. The flagging on the tent was flapping violently.

'You were looking for me?'

Laurent didn't answer, and Damen couldn't interpret his expression.

'What is it?' said Damen.

'You're better than I am.'

Damen couldn't help his amused breath of reaction to that, or the long, scrolling look from Laurent's head to his toes and back again, which was probably a little insulting. But really.

Laurent flushed. The colour hit his cheeks hard, and a muscle tightened in his jaw as whatever he felt was forcibly repressed. It was not like any reaction that Damen had ever seen from him before, and he couldn't resist pushing it a little further.

'Why? Do you want to spar? We can keep it friendly,' Damen said.

'No,' said Laurent.

Whatever might have passed between them after that was forestalled by Jord, who was approaching from behind him with Aimeric.

'Your Highness. Apologies, if you need more time with—'

'No,' said Laurent. 'I'll speak with you instead. Follow me back to the main camp.'

The two walked off together, leaving Damen with Aimeric.

'He hates you,' said Aimeric, cheerfully.

At the end of the day's ride, Jord came to find him.

He liked Jord. He liked his pragmatism and the sense of responsibility he so clearly felt towards the men. Whatever background Jord had risen from, he had the makings of a fine leader. Even with all the additional duties Jord was

shouldering, he had still taken the time to do this.

‘I want you to know,’ said Jord, ‘when I asked you to join us this morning, it wasn’t to give Orlant the chance to—’

‘I know that,’ said Damen.

Jord nodded slowly. ‘Any time you want the practice, I’d be honoured to go a few rounds against you. I’m a lot better than Orlant.’

‘I know that too,’ said Damen.

He got the closest thing to a smile he’d received from Jord. ‘You weren’t that good when you fought Govart.’

‘When I fought Govart,’ said Damen, ‘I had my lungs full of *chalis*.’

Another slow nod.

‘I’m not sure how it is in Akielos,’ said Jord, ‘but . . . you shouldn’t take that stuff before a fight. Slows your reflexes. Saps your strength. Just some friendly advice.’

‘Thank you,’ said Damen, after a long, drawn out moment had passed.

* * *

When it happened, it was Lazar again, and Aimeric. It was the third night of the ride, and they were camped at Bailleux Keep, a brokendown structure with a fancy name. Lodgings inside were poor enough that the men eschewed the barracks and even Laurent remained in his confection of a tent rather than spend the night indoors, but there were a few household servants in attendance and the keep formed part of a supply line that allowed the men to restock.

However the fight started, by the time anyone else heard it, Aimeric was on the ground with Lazar standing over him. He was dusty but unblooded this time. It was bad luck that Govart was the one to intervene, which he did, dragging Aimeric up, and then backhanding him across the face for making trouble. Govart was one of the first to arrive, but by the time Aimeric was rising to his feet nursing his jaw, a respectable crowd was gathering, drawn by the noise.

It was bad luck that it was late evening, and that most of the work for the day was done, giving the men free time to gather.

Jord had to physically hold Orlant back, and Govart didn’t help by telling

Jord to keep his men in line. Aimeric wasn't here to get special treatment, Govart said, and if anyone retaliated against Lazar, they'd get the post. Violence slid across the men like oil waiting for a flame, and if Lazar had made a single move of aggression it would have ignited, but he took a step back, and had the good grace—or the smarts—to look troubled with Govart's pronouncement rather than pleased.

Jord somehow managed to keep the peace, but when the men dispersed, he broke the chain of command completely, and made straight for Laurent's tent.

Damen waited until he saw Jord exit. Then he took a deep breath, and sought entrance himself.

When he walked into Laurent's tent, Laurent said, 'You think I should have Lazar turned off. I've already heard it from Jord.'

Damen said, 'Lazar's a decent swordsman, and he's one of the few of your uncle's men who buckles down to work. I think you should have Aimeric turned off.'

'What?' said Laurent.

'He's too young. He's too attractive. He starts fights. He's not the reason I came to speak with you, but since you asked what I think: Aimeric causes problems, and one day soon he's going to stop making eyes at you and let one of the men fuck him, and the problems will get worse.'

Laurent absorbed that. But: 'I can't turn him off,' said Laurent. 'His father is Councillor Guion. The man you knew as the Ambassador to Akielos.'

Damen stared at him. He thought of Aimeric defending Laurent in the armoury, holding a bloody nose. He said, evenly, 'And which one of the border castles does his father hold?'

'Fortaine,' said Laurent, in the same voice.

'You're using a boy to gain influence with his father?'

'Aimeric's not a child lured in with a honeyed treat. He's Guion's fourth son. He knows that his being here splits his father's loyalty. It's half the reason he joined me. He wants his father's attention,' said Laurent. 'If you're not here to talk to me about Aimeric, why are you here?'

'You told me that if I had concerns or objections, you would hear arguments in private,' said Damen. 'I came here to speak with you about Govart.'

Laurent nodded slowly.

Damen cast his mind back over the days of shoddy discipline. Tonight's fight had been the perfect opportunity for a captain to step in and begin to take control of the problems in the camp, with scrupulously equal punishments and the message that violence from either faction would not be tolerated. Instead, the situation had worsened. He was forthright.

'I know that—for whatever reason—you are giving Govart free rein. Perhaps you hope he'll fall to his own mistakes, or that the more difficulties he causes the easier it will be to dismiss him. But it isn't working like that. Now the men resent him, but by morning they will resent you for not mastering him. He needs to be brought swiftly under your command, and disciplined for not following orders.'

'But he is following orders,' said Laurent. And then, at Damen's reaction: 'Not my orders.'

He had guessed that much at least, though he wondered what commands the Regent would have given to Govart. *Do as you please and don't listen to my nephew.* He thought, probably something exactly like that.

'I know you are capable of bringing Govart to heel without it being seen as an act of aggression against your uncle. I can't believe you fear Govart. If you did, you'd never have set me against him in the ring. If you're afraid of —'

'That's enough,' said Laurent.

Damen set his jaw. 'The longer this goes on, the harder it will be to regain face with your uncle's men. They already talk about you like—'

'I said that's enough,' said Laurent.

Damen was silent. It took a great deal of effort. Laurent was staring at him with a frown.

'Why do you give me good advice?' asked Laurent.

Isn't that why you brought me with you? Instead of speaking those words aloud, Damen said, 'Why don't you take any of it?'

'Govart is Captain and he has resolved matters to my satisfaction,' said Laurent. But the frown hadn't left his face, and his eyes were opaque, as though his thoughts had turned inward. 'I have business to attend to outside. I won't require your services this evening. You have my leave to retire.'

Damen watched Laurent go, and only with half his mind experienced the urge to throw things. He knew by now that Laurent never acted precipitously,

but always walked away and gave himself time and space alone to think. It was now time to step back and hope.

CHAPTER 3

Damen didn't fall asleep right away, though he had more luxurious sleeping arrangements than any of the soldiers in the camp. His slave pallet was soft with pillows, and he had silk against his skin.

He was awake when Laurent returned, and he pushed himself half up, unsure if he was needed. Laurent ignored him. Laurent, at night when their conversations were done, habitually paid him no more attention than a piece of furniture. Tonight Laurent sat at the table and wrote a dispatch by the light of the table candle. When he was finished, he folded and then sealed the dispatch with red wax and a signet that he did not wear on his finger but kept in a fold of his clothes.

He just sat for a while, after that. On his face was the same inward-turned expression that he had worn earlier that night. Eventually Laurent rose, snuffed the candle with his fingertips, and in the shadowed half-light from the braziers prepared himself for bed.

* * *

The morning began well enough.

Damen rose and attended to his duties. Fires were doused, tents were packed up and loaded onto wagons, and the men began readying themselves to ride. The dispatch that Laurent had written the night before galloped off to the east with a horse and a rider.

The insults that were bandied about were good-natured and no one was thrown into the dirt, which was about the best that could be hoped for from this group, Damen thought, as he prepared his saddlery.

He became aware of Laurent on the periphery of his vision, pale-haired

and wearing riding leathers. He was not the only one paying Laurent attention. More than one head was turned in Laurent's direction, and a few men had begun to gather. Laurent had Lazar and Aimeric before him. Feeling a flicker of unnamed anxiety, Damen put the saddlery he was working on down and made his way over.

Aimeric, who showed everything on his face, was giving Laurent an open look of hero worship and mortification. It was clearly an agony to him that he was being brought to his Prince's attention for an indiscretion. Lazar was harder to read.

'Your Highness—I apologise. It was my fault. It won't happen again,' was the first thing Damen heard when he came within earshot. Aimeric. Of course.

'What provoked you?' Laurent asked in a conversational tone of voice.

It was only now that Aimeric appeared to realise that he was swimming in deep waters. 'It isn't important. Only that I was in the wrong.'

'It isn't important?' said Laurent, who knew, who had to know, as his blue gaze came to rest mildly on Lazar.

Lazar was silent. Resentment and anger lay underneath. Then they folded in on themselves, wedded to sullen defeat as he dropped his gaze. Watching Laurent stare Lazar down, Damen was suddenly aware that Laurent was going to play this out, all of it, in public. Damen surreptitiously looked around himself. There were too many men watching already.

He had to trust that Laurent knew what he was doing.

'Where is the Captain?' said Laurent.

The Captain could not immediately be found. Orlant was sent to search for him. Orlant was so long in searching for Govart that Damen, recalling the stables, silently gave Orlant his sympathy, despite their differences.

Laurent, calmly, waited.

And waited. Things began to go awry. A silent communal snigger sprang up among the onlooking men and began to spread across the camp. The Prince wished to have public words with the Captain. The Captain was forcing the Prince to wait on his pleasure. Whoever was about to be taken down a notch, it was going to be amusing. It was amusing already.

Damen felt the cold touch of awful premonition. This was not what he had meant for Laurent to do when he had given him advice last night. The longer Laurent was forced to wait, the more his authority was publicly

eroded.

When Govart finally arrived, he approached Laurent leisurely, still fixing his sword belt in place, as though he had no qualms whatsoever in letting people know the carnal nature of what he had been doing.

It was the moment for Laurent to assert his authority, and to discipline Govart, calmly and without prejudice. Instead:

‘Am I keeping you from fucking?’ said Laurent.

‘No. I finished. What do you want?’ Govart said, with an insulting lack of concern.

And it was suddenly clear that there was something more between Laurent and Govart than Damen knew, and that Govart was unfazed by the prospect of a public scene, secure in the Regent’s authority.

Before Laurent could reply, Orlant arrived. He had, by the arm, a woman with long brown curled hair and heavy skirts. This, then, was what Govart had been doing. There was a ripple of reaction from the watching men.

‘You made me wait,’ said Laurent, ‘while you bred your get on one of the keep women?’

‘Men fuck,’ said Govart.

It was wrong. It was all wrong. It was petty and personal, and a verbal dressing down wasn’t going to work on Govart. He simply didn’t care.

‘Men fuck,’ said Laurent.

‘I fucked her mouth, not her cunt. Your problem,’ said Govart, and it wasn’t until that moment that Damen saw how wrong it was going, how secure Govart was in his authority, and how deeply rooted was his antipathy for Laurent, ‘is that the only man you’ve ever been hot for was your broth—’

And any hope Damen had that Laurent could control this scene ended as Laurent’s face shuttered, as his eyes went cold, and with the sharp sound of steel, his sword came out of its sheath.

‘Draw,’ said Laurent.

No, no, no. Damen took an instinctive step forward, then brought up short. His fists clenched impotently.

He looked at Govart. He’d never seen Govart use a sword, but knew him from the ring as a veteran fighter. Laurent was a palace prince who had avoided border duty his whole life and who never faced an opponent honestly if he could attack sideways.

Worse. Govart had behind him the full backing of the Regent; and though

it was doubtful any of the men watching knew it, he had probably been given carte blanche to dispatch the nephew, if there arose any opportunity to do so.

Govart drew.

The unthinkable was going to happen: the Captain of the Guard, challenged to a duel of honour, was in front of the troop going to cut down the heir to the throne.

Laurent was apparently arrogant enough to do this without armour. He clearly didn't think he was going to lose, not if he was inviting the entire troop to watch it happen. He wasn't thinking clearly at all. Laurent, with his unmarked body and his pampered indoor skin, would be fresh from palace sports where his opponents would have always, politely, let him win.

He's going to be killed, thought Damen, seeing the future in that moment with perfect clarity.

Govart engaged with negligent ease. Steel grated along steel as the swords of the two men came together in a burst of violence, and Damen's heart jammed itself into his throat—he hadn't meant to set this in motion, for it to end this way, not like this—and then the two men came apart and Damen's heartbeat was loud with the shock of his surprise: at the end of the first exchange, Laurent was still alive.

At the end of the second also.

At the end of the third he was, persistently and remarkably, still alive, and watching his opponent calmly, measuringly.

This was intolerable for Govart: the longer Laurent went unscathed, the more the situation embarrassed him, for Govart was after all stronger and taller and older, and a soldier. This time Govart didn't allow Laurent any respite when he attacked, but pressed forward in a savage onslaught of cut thrust attacks.

Which Laurent turned back, the jar of impact on fine wrists minimised by exquisite technique that worked with the impetus of his opponent rather than against it. Damen stopped wincing, and started watching.

Laurent fought like he talked. The danger lay in the way he used his mind: there was not one thing he did that was not planned in advance. Yet he was not predictable, because in this, as with everything he did, there were layers of intent, moments when expected patterns would suddenly dissolve into something else. Damen recognised the signs of Laurent's inventive deceptions. Govart didn't. Govart, finding himself unable to close as easily as

he had expected, did the one thing that Damen could have warned him not to do. He got angry. That was a mistake. If there was one thing that Laurent knew, it was how to prick someone into fury and then set about exploiting the emotion.

Laurent turned back Govart's second surge with an easy grace and a particularly Veretian series of parries that made Damen itch to pick up a sword.

By now, anger and disbelief were really affecting Govart's swordsmanship. He was making elementary mistakes, wasting strength and attacking in the wrong lines. Laurent was physically not strong enough to weather one of Govart's full-strength blows straight on his sword; he had to avoid them or counter them in sophisticated ways, with those angled parries and shifting momentum. They would have been lethal, if Govart had landed any of them.

He couldn't manage it. As Damen watched, Govart swung, furiously, wide. He was not going to win this fight with anger driving him to foolish mistakes. That was becoming obvious to every man watching.

Something else was becoming painfully clear.

Laurent, possessing the sort of proportions that handed him balance and coordination as gifts, had not, as his uncle claimed, wasted them. Of course, he would have had the finest masters and the best tutelage. But to have attained this level of skill he would also have had to have trained long and hard, and from a very young age.

It was not an even match at all. It was a lesson in abject public humiliation. But the one teaching the lesson, the one effortlessly outclassing his opponent, was not Govart.

'Pick it up,' said Laurent, the first time Govart lost his weapon.

A long line of red was visible along Govart's sword arm. He'd given up six steps of ground, and his chest was rising and falling. He picked up his sword slowly, keeping his eyes on Laurent.

There were no more anger-driven blunders, no more wrong-footed attacks or wild swings. Necessity made Govart take stock of Laurent, and face him with his best swordwork. This time when they came together, Govart fought seriously. It made no difference. Laurent fought with cool, relentless purpose, and there was an inevitability to what was happening, to the line of blood blossoming this time down Govart's leg, to Govart's sword lying once more

in the grass.

‘Pick it up,’ said Laurent again.

Damen remembered Auguste, the strength that had held the front for hour after hour, and against which wave after wave had broken. And here fought the younger brother.

‘Thought he was a milksop,’ said one of the Regent’s men.

‘Think he’ll kill him?’ another speculated.

Damen knew the answer to that question. Laurent was not going to kill him. He was going to break him. Here, in front of everyone.

Perhaps Govart sensed Laurent’s intention, because the third time he lost his sword, his mind snapped. Throwing aside the conventions of a duel was preferable to the humiliation of a drawn-out defeat; he abandoned his sword and simply charged. This way, it was simple: if he carried the fight to the ground, he’d win. There was no time for anyone to intervene. But for someone of Laurent’s reflexes, it was enough time to make a choice.

Laurent lifted his blade and drove it through Govart’s body; not through his stomach, or chest, but through his shoulder. A slice or a shallow cut was not going to be enough to stop Govart, and so Laurent braced the hilt of his sword against his own shoulder and used the whole weight of his body to drive it in harder and stop Govart’s motion. It was a trick used in boar hunting when the spear wounded but did not kill: brace the blunt end of the spear against the shoulder, and keep the impaled boar at bay.

Sometimes a boar broke free, or snapped the wood of the spear, but Govart was a man run through with a sword and he went to his knees. It took a visible effort of muscle and sinew for Laurent to pull the sword out.

‘Strip him,’ said Laurent. ‘Confiscate his horse and his belongings. Turn him out of the keep. There is a village two miles to the west. If he wants to badly enough, he’ll survive the journey.’

He said it calmly into the silence, addressing two of the Regent’s men, both of whom moved without hesitation to obey his orders. No one else moved.

No one else. Feeling as though he was coming out of a kind of daze, Damen looked around himself at the gathered men. He looked first to the Prince’s men, instinctively expecting to see his own reaction to the fight mirrored on their faces, but instead they showed gratification coupled with a total lack of surprise. None of them had been concerned that Laurent might

lose, he realised.

The response among the Regent's men was more varied. There were signs of both satisfaction and amusement: they had perhaps enjoyed the spectacle, admired the show of skill. There was a hint of something else too, and Damen knew they were men who associated authority with strength. Perhaps they were thinking differently about their Prince and his pretty face now that he had displayed some of it.

It was Lazar who broke the stillness, tossing Laurent a cloth. Laurent caught it and wiped off his sword as a kitchenhand would wipe a carving knife. Then he sheathed it, abandoning the cloth, now bright red.

Addressing the men in a voice that carried, Laurent said: 'Three days of poor leadership have culminated in an insult to my family's honour. My uncle can't have known what lay in the heart of the Captain he appointed. If he had, he would have put him in the stocks, not given him leadership over men. Tomorrow morning, there will be change. Today, we ride hard to make up wasted time.'

Noise broke out into the silence as the milling men began to speak. Laurent turned away to attend to other business, pausing by Jord and transferring to him the captaincy. He placed a hand on Jord's arm and murmured something too quiet to hear, after which Jord nodded and began giving orders.

And it was done. Blood pumped from Govart's shoulder, reddening his shirt, which was stripped from him. Laurent's unsparing commands were carried out.

Lazar, who had thrown Laurent the cloth, didn't look as though he was going to be mouthing off about Laurent again. In fact, the new way he was looking at Laurent reminded Damen unmistakably of Torveld. Damen frowned.

His own reaction had him feeling oddly off balance. It was just that it was—unexpected. He had not known this about Laurent, that he was trained like this, capable like this. He wasn't sure why he felt as though something, fundamentally, had changed.

The brown-haired woman picked up her heavy skirts, walked over to Govart, and spat on the ground beside him. Damen's frown deepened.

The advice of his father came back to him: never to take your eyes off a wounded boar; that once you engaged an animal in the hunt, you must fight it

to the finish, and that when a boar was wounded, that was when it was the most dangerous animal of all.

That thought nagged at him.

* * *

Laurent sent four riders galloping to Arles with the news. Two of the riders were members of his own guard, one was of the Regent's men, and the last was an attendant from Baillieux Keep. All four had witnessed with their own eyes the events of the morning: that Govart had insulted the royal family, that the Prince, in his infinite goodness and fairness, had offered Govart the honour of a duel, and that Govart, having been fairly disarmed, had broken the rules of engagement and attacked the Prince intending to do him harm, a vile act thick with treason. Govart had been justly punished.

In other words, the Regent was to be informed that his Captain had been well and truly turned off, in a manner that could not be painted as a revolt against the Regency, or as princely disobedience, or as lazy incompetence. Round one: Laurent.

They rode in the direction of Vere's eastern border with Vask, which was bounded by mountains. They would make camp in the foothills at a keep called Nesson, and after that they would turn and make their wiggly way south. The combined effects of the cathartic violence of the morning and Jord's pragmatic orders were already reverberating through the troop. There were no stragglers.

They had to push hard to reach Nesson after the delays of the morning, but the men did so willingly, and when they reached the keep the sunset was only just beginning to drain from the sky.

Reporting to Jord, Damen found himself caught in a conversation that he wasn't ready for. 'I could tell from your face. You didn't know he could fight.'

'No,' said Damen. 'I didn't.'

'It's in his blood.'

'The Regent's men seemed just as surprised as I was.'

'He's private about it. You saw his personal training ring, inside the palace. He'll go a few rounds with some of the Prince's Guard occasionally,

with Orlant, with me—laid me out a few times. He's not as good as his brother was, but you only have to be half as good as Auguste to be ten times better than everyone else.'

In his blood: that wasn't quite it. There were as many differences as similarities between the two brothers: Laurent's build less powerful, his style built around grace and intelligence, quicksilver where Auguste had been gold.

Nesson turned out to be different to Baillieux in two ways. First, it was attached to a respectably sized township, which lay near one of the few traversable passes through the mountains and received trade in the summer from the Vaskian province of Ver-Vassel. Second, it was well kept enough—just—for the men to spend the night in the barracks, and Laurent to lodge in the keep.

Damen was sent through the low door into the bedchamber. Laurent was outside, still mounted, attending to some matter involving outriders. Damen was given the servant's task of lighting the candles and the fire, which he did with his mind elsewhere. On the long ride from Baillieux, there had been a lot of time for thought. At first he had simply turned the duel he had witnessed over in his mind.

Now he thought about the first time he had seen the Regent discipline Laurent, stripping him of his lands. It was a punishment that might have been meted out privately, but the Regent had turned it into a public display. *Embrace the slave*, the Regent had ordered at the end of it: a gratuity, a garnish, an act of superfluous humiliation.

He thought about the ring, the place where the court gathered to watch private acts played out in public, humiliations and simulated rapes turned into spectacle while the court looked on.

And then he thought about Laurent. The night of the banquet when Laurent had orchestrated the exchange of slaves had been a long, public battle with his uncle, planned out meticulously beforehand, and executed with precision. Damen thought about Nicaise, seated beside him at the high table, and Erasmus, warned in advance.

He has a mind for details, Radel had said.

Damen was finishing with the fire when Laurent came into the room, still in riding clothes. He looked relaxed and fair, as though weathering a duel, cutting down his Captain, and following that up with a day-long ride had had

no effect on him at all.

By now Damen knew him too well to be taken in by it. By any of it.

He said, 'Did you pay that woman to fuck Govart?'

Laurent paused in the act of stripping off his riding gloves and then, deliberately, he continued. He worked the leather from each finger individually. His voice was steady.

'I paid her to approach him. I didn't force his cock into her mouth,' Laurent said.

Damen thought about being asked to interrupt Govart in the stables, and the fact that there were no camp followers at all riding with this troop.

Laurent said, 'He had a choice.'

'No,' said Damen. 'You only made him think he did.'

Laurent turned the same cool look on him that he had turned on Govart. 'Expostulation? You were right. It needed to happen now. I was waiting for a confrontation to arise naturally, but that was taking too long.'

Damen stared at him. Guessing at it was one thing, but hearing the words spoken aloud was something else. "'Right"? I didn't mean—' He cut himself off.

'Say it,' said Laurent.

'You broke a man today. Doesn't that affect you at all? These are lives, not pieces in a chess game with your uncle.'

'You're wrong. We are on my uncle's board and these men are all his pieces.'

'Then each time you move one of them, you can congratulate yourself on how much like him you are.'

It just came out. He was in part still reverberating with the blow of having had his guess confirmed. He certainly didn't expect the words to have the effect on Laurent that they did. They stopped Laurent in his tracks. Damen didn't think he'd ever seen Laurent caught completely without words before, and since he couldn't imagine the circumstance was going to last long, he hurried to press his advantage.

'If you bind your men to you with deception, how can you ever trust them? You have qualities they will come to admire. Why not let them grow to trust you naturally, and in that way—'

'*There isn't time,*' said Laurent.

The words pushed themselves with sheer force out of whatever wordless

state Laurent had been shocked into.

‘There isn’t time,’ Laurent said again. ‘I have two weeks until we reach the border. Don’t pretend that I can woo these men with hard work and a winning smile in that time. I am not the green colt my uncle pretends. I fought at Marlas and I fought at Sanpelier. I am not here for niceties. I don’t intend to see the men I lead cut down because they will not obey orders, or because they cannot hold a line. I intend to survive, I intend to beat my uncle, and I will fight with every weapon that I have.’

‘You mean that.’

‘I mean to win. Did you think I was here altruistically to throw myself on the sword?’

Damen made himself face the problem, stripping away the impossible, looking only at what, realistically, could be done.

‘Two weeks isn’t long enough,’ said Damen. ‘You will need closer to a month to get anywhere at all with men like these, and even then, the worst of them will need to be weeded out.’

‘All right,’ said Laurent. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yes,’ said Damen.

‘Then speak your mind,’ said Laurent. ‘Not that you have ever done anything else.’

Damen said, ‘I will help you in whatever way I can, but there will be no time for anything but hard work, and you will have to do everything right.’

Laurent lifted his chin and replied with every bit of cool, galling arrogance he had ever shown.

‘Watch me,’ he said.

CHAPTER 4

Laurent, just turned twenty, and possessing an elaborate mind with a gift for planning, detached it from the petty intrigues of the court and set it loose on the broader canvas of this, his first command.

Damen watched it happen. It began when, after their long night of tactical discussion, Laurent addressed the troop with a portrait of their shortcomings. He did it from horseback, in a clear voice that carried to the farthest of the gathered men. He had listened to everything Damen had said last night. He had listened to a great deal more than that. As he spoke, there emerged nuggets that he could only have obtained from the servants and armourers and soldiers to whom, over the last three days, he had also been listening.

Laurent regurgitated the information in a manner that was as scintillant as it was scathing. When he was done, he threw the men a bone: perhaps they had been hampered by poor captaincy. They would therefore stop here in Nesson for a fortnight to accustom themselves to their new Captain. Laurent would personally lead them in a regime that would tax them, trim them and turn them into something approximating a company that could fight. If they could keep up with him.

But first, Laurent appended silkily, they would unpack and make camp here again, from kitchens to tents to horse enclosure. In under two hours.

The men swallowed it. They would not have, had Laurent not taken on their leader and beaten him, point for point, the day before. Even then, they might have balked had the order come from an indolent superior, but from the first day, Laurent had worked hard without comment or complaint. That, too, had been calculated to within a hair.

And so they got to work. They hauled out tents and hammered in posts and pegs and unsaddled all the horses. Jord gave crisp, pragmatic orders. The

tent lines looked straight for the first time since they had ridden out.

And then it was done. Two hours. It was still too long, but it was better by far than the sprawling chaos of the last few evenings.

Re-saddle, was the first order, and there followed a series of mounted drills that were designed to be easy on the horses and brutal on the men. Damen and Laurent had planned the drills out together last night, with some input from Jord, who had joined them in the grey hours of the morning. Truthfully, Damen had not expected Laurent to take part in the drills himself, but he did, setting the pace.

Reining his horse alongside Damen's, Laurent said, 'You have your two extra weeks. Let's see what we can do with them.'

In the afternoon they switched to line work: lines that broke again, and again, and again, until finally they didn't, if only because everyone was too weary to do anything but mindlessly follow commands. The day's drills had pushed even Damen, and when they were done, he felt, for the first time in a long time, as though something had been accomplished.

The men returned to camp boneless and exhausted with no energy to complain that their leader was a blond, blue-eyed fiend, curse him. Damen saw Aimeric sprawled by one of the campfires with his eyes closed, like a man collapsed after a foot race. The stubbornness of character that had had Aimeric picking fights with men twice his size had also had him keeping up with the drills, no matter the barriers of pain and fatigue that he had had to push through physically. At least he would not be able to cause trouble in this state. No one would be picking fights: they were too tired.

As Damen watched, Aimeric opened his eyes and gave an empty-eyed stare at the fire.

Despite the complications Aimeric presented to the troop, Damen felt a stirring of sympathy. Aimeric was only nineteen, and this was obviously his first campaign. He looked out of place and alone. Damen detoured.

'It's your first time in a company?' he said.

'I can keep up,' said Aimeric.

'I've seen that,' said Damen. 'I'm sure your Captain has seen it. You did a good day's work.'

Aimeric didn't answer.

'The pace will stay steady for the next few weeks, and we've a month till we reach the border. You don't have to exhaust yourself on the first day.'

He said it in a kindly enough tone, but Aimeric answered stiffly: 'I can keep up.'

Damen sighed and rose, and was two steps on his way to Laurent's tent when Aimeric's voice called him back.

'Wait,' said Aimeric. 'You really think Jord has seen it?' And then he flushed as though he had given something away.

* * *

Pushing open the tent flap, Damen was confronted by a cool blue gaze that, by contrast, gave away nothing at all. Jord was already inside, and Laurent gestured for Damen to join them.

'The post mortem,' Laurent said.

The day's events were dissected. Damen was asked for and gave his honest opinion: the men were not beyond hope. They were not going to become a perfectly trained company in a month. But they could be taught some things. They could be taught how to hold a line and how to resist an ambush. They could be taught basic manoeuvres. Damen outlined what he thought was realistic. Jord agreed, and added a few suggestions.

Two months, said Jord frankly, would be a hell of a lot more useful than one.

Laurent said, 'Unfortunately, my uncle has tasked us with duty on the border, and as much as I would prefer it otherwise, we do have to arrive eventually.'

Jord snorted. They discussed a few of the men, and tweaked the drills. Jord had a knack for identifying the root of camp problems. He seemed to take it as a matter of course that Damen was part of the discussion.

When they were done, Laurent dismissed Jord and sat in the brazier warmth of the tent gazing leisurely at Damen.

Damen said, 'I should check over the armour before I turn in, unless you need me for something.'

'Bring it in,' said Laurent.

He did. He sat down on the seat and looked over the buckles and straps and systematically checked every part, a habit that had been ingrained in him since childhood.

Laurent said, 'What do you think of Jord?'

'I like him,' said Damen. 'You should be pleased with him. He was the right choice for Captain.'

There was an unhurried pause. Aside from the sounds Damen made when he picked up a vambrace, the tent was quiet.

'No,' said Laurent. 'You were.'

'What?' said Damen. He gave Laurent a startled look and was even more surprised to find that Laurent was gazing back at him steadily. 'There isn't a man here who'd accept orders from an Akielon.'

'I know that. It's one of two reasons I chose Jord. The men would have resisted you at first, you'd have had to prove yourself. Even with the extra fortnight, there wasn't enough time to play all of that out. It frustrates me that I cannot put you to best use.'

Damen, who had never considered himself as a contender for the captaincy, was a little chagrined at his own hubris to realise that it was because he instinctively saw himself occupying Laurent's role, or none. The idea that he might be promoted up through the ranks like a common soldier had simply not occurred to him.

'That's the last thing I expected you to say,' he admitted, a little wryly.

'Did you think I was too proud to see it? I can assure you, the pride I have invested in beating my uncle far outweighs the feelings I hold on any other account.'

'You just surprised me,' said Damen. 'Sometimes I think I understand you, and at other times I can't make you out at all.'

'Believe me, that sentiment is mutual.'

'You said two reasons,' said Damen. 'What was the other?'

'The men think you bend me over inside the tent,' said Laurent. He said it in the same calm way he said everything. Damen fumbled the vambrace. 'It would erode my authority. My carefully cultivated authority. Now I have really surprised you. Perhaps if you were not a foot taller, or quite so broad across the shoulders.'

'It's considerably less than a foot,' said Damen.

'Is it?' said Laurent. 'It feels like more when you argue with me on points of honour.'

'I want you to know,' said Damen, carefully, 'that I haven't done anything to encourage the idea that I—that you and I—'

‘If I thought you had, I’d have had you tied to a post and flogged until your front matched your back.’

There was a long silence. Outside there was the quiet of the bone-tired, sleeping camp, so that only the tent flaps and a few indeterminate sounds of shifting could be heard. Damen’s fingers were hard on the metal of the vambrace until he deliberately loosened his grip.

Laurent rose from his chair; the fingers of one hand lingered on the chair back.

‘Leave that. Attend me,’ Laurent said.

Damen rose. This was an uncomfortable duty, and he was annoyed. The garment Laurent wore today had ties in front rather than in back. Damen unlaced it gracelessly.

It opened under his hands. He moved behind Laurent to draw it off. *Shall I do the rest?* he opened his mouth to say, after he put the garment away, feeling some urge to push the point, since this was as far as his service was generally required, and Laurent could just as easily have taken his outer garments off himself.

Except that when he turned back, Laurent had lifted his hand to his shoulder and was rolling it, obviously feeling slight stiffness. His lashes had dipped. Under the shirt his limbs were unknitted with languor. He was, Damen realised, exhausted.

Damen felt no sympathy. Instead, unreasoningly, his annoyance peaked, Laurent pushing slow fingers into his golden hair in an enervated gesture somehow a reminder that his captivity and his punishment were all the doing of a single flesh and blood man.

He held his tongue. Two weeks here and two weeks travel to the border, see Laurent safely escorted, and he was done.

* * *

In the morning, they did it all again.

And again. Getting the men to follow orders designed to push them was an achievement. Some of these men enjoyed hard work, or were of the type who understood that they had to be pushed in order to be improved, but not all of them.

Laurent accomplished it.

That day, the troop was worked, moulded and shaped towards its purpose, sometimes it seemed by will alone. Laurent had no camaraderie with the men. There was none of the warm, heart's love that the Akielon armies had held for Damen's father. Laurent wasn't loved. Laurent wasn't liked. Even among his own men, who would follow him off a cliff, there was the unequivocal consensus that Laurent was, as Orlant had once described him, a cast iron bitch, that it was a very bad idea to get on his bad side, and that as for his good side, he didn't have one.

It didn't matter. Laurent gave orders and they were followed. Men found when they tried to baulk that they couldn't. Damen, who had been manoeuvred variously into kissing Laurent's foot and eating sweetmeats from his hands, understood the machinery that confronted and compelled them, deep-buried individually in each circumstance.

And, perhaps out of this, a thin thread of respect was growing. It was apparent why his uncle had kept Laurent away from the reins of power: he was good at leading. He fixed his eyes on his goals and was prepared to do whatever he had to in order to achieve them. Challenges were faced clear-eyed. Problems were seen in advance, unravelled or sidestepped. And there was something in him that was enjoying the process of bringing these hard men under his control.

Damen was aware that what he was witnessing was nascent kingship, the first flexings of command of a prince born to rule, though Laurent's brand of leadership—equal parts consummate and disturbing—was nothing like his own.

Inevitably, some of the men did resist orders. There was an incident that first afternoon when one of the Regent's mercenaries refused to follow Jord's commands. Around him, one or two of the others were sympathetic to his grievance, and when Laurent appeared, there were rumblings of genuine unrest. The mercenary had enough of the sympathy of his fellows that there was the danger of a minor insurrection if Laurent ordered him put on the post. A crowd gathered.

Laurent didn't order him put on the post.

Laurent flayed him, verbally.

It was not like his exchanges with Govart. It was cool, explicit, appalling, and it reduced a grown man in front of the troop as utterly as his sword thrust

had done.

The men got back to work after that.

Damen heard one of them say, in a tone of awed admiration, 'That boy has got the filthiest mouth I've ever heard.'

They returned to camp that evening to find that there was no camp, because the servants at Nesson had dismantled everything. On Laurent's orders. He was being generous, he said. They had an hour and a half to make camp, this time.

* * *

They trained for the better part of the two weeks, camped in the fields of Nesson. The troop would never be a precision instrument, but they were becoming a blunt but useable tool, able to ride together and fight together and hold a line together. They followed straightforward commands.

They had the luxury of being able to wear themselves out, and Laurent was taking full advantage of it. They were not going to be ambushed here. Nesson was safe. It was too far from the Akielon border to throw suspicion for an attack southward, and it was close enough to the border with Vask that any attack could lead to a political quagmire. If Akielos was the Regent's goal, there was no reason to wake the sleeping Vaskian Empire.

Besides which, Laurent had brought them so far from the route the Regent had originally planned for him to take that any traps left in wait for them would be left languishing, waiting for a company that never arrived.

Damen began to wonder if the sense of steady building and accomplishment that was growing in the troop was infecting him too, because by the tenth day, when the men were drilling like they could face an ambush with at least a chance of survival, he had begun to feel the first fragile stirrings of hope.

That evening, in a rare moment without duties, he was beckoned over to one of the campfires by Jord, who sat there alone, stealing a moment's peace. He offered Damen wine in a dented tin cup.

Damen accepted it, and sat down on the bowed log that was an impromptu resting place. They were tired enough that they were both content to sit in silence. The wine was awful; he swirled it around in his mouth, then

swallowed it. The warmth from the fire was good. After a while, Damen became aware that Jord's gaze was occupied with something on the far edges of the camp.

Aimeric was tending to his armour outside one of the tents, which showed that somewhere along the line he had picked up good habits. That probably wasn't why Jord was looking at him.

'Aimeric,' said Damen, raising his eyebrows.

'What? You've seen him,' said Jord, lips quirking.

'I've seen him. Last week he had half the camp at each other's throats.'

'He's all right,' said Jord. 'It's only that he's highborn, and not used to rough company. He's doing the right thing by what he knows, it's just that the rules are different. Like how it is with you.'

That was chastening. Damen took another mouthful of the awful wine. 'You're a good Captain. He could do a lot worse.'

'There are some lowlives in this company, and that is the truth,' said Jord.

'I think another few days like today, and the worst of them will be shaken loose.'

'Another few minutes like today,' said Jord.

Damen let out a breath of amusement. The fire was hypnotic, unless you had something better to look at. Jord's eyes returned to Aimeric.

'You know,' said Damen, 'he's going to let someone eventually. Better all round if it's you.'

There was a long silence, and then, in an oddly diffident voice:

'I've never bedded anyone highborn,' said Jord. 'Is it different?'

Damen flushed when he realised what Jord was assuming. 'He . . . We don't. He doesn't. As far as I know, he doesn't with anyone.'

'As far as anyone knows,' said Jord. 'If he didn't have a mouth on him like a harlot in a guardsroom, I'd think he was a virgin.'

Damen was silent. He drained his mug, frowning a little. He wasn't interested in these endless speculations. He didn't care who Laurent took to bed.

He was rescued from replying by Aimeric. His unlikely saviour had brought one or two armour pieces with him, and was making to sit on the opposite side of the fire. He had stripped down to his undershirt, which was partially unlaced.

'I'm not intruding, am I? The fire has better light.'

‘Why don’t you join us,’ said Damen, putting his mug down and carefully not looking at Jord.

Aimeric had no love for Damen, but Jord and Damen were the highest ranked members of the company, in their different ways, and an invitation was difficult to refuse. He nodded.

‘I hope I’m not speaking out of turn,’ said Aimeric, who had either been punched in the nose now enough times to learn circumspection, or was just naturally more deferential around Jord. ‘But I grew up at Fortaine. I lived there most of my life. I know that since the war at Marlas border duty is a formality. But . . . the Prince has us training for real action.’

‘He just likes to be prepared,’ said Jord. ‘If he has to fight, he wants to be able to rely on his men.’

‘I prefer that,’ said Aimeric, quickly. ‘I mean that I prefer to be part of a company that can fight. I’m a fourth son. I admire hard work just as . . . I admire men who can rise above their birth.’

He said that last with a look at Jord. Damen wisely made his excuses and rose, leaving them alone together.

* * *

When he stepped into the tent, Laurent was sitting in quiet thought with the map spread out before him. He glanced up when he heard Damen, then sat back in his chair and gestured for Damen to sit.

‘Considering that we are two hundred horse, not two thousand infantry, I think numbers are less important than quality of men. I’m sure you and Jord both have an informal list of men you think still need to be culled from the troop. I want yours by tomorrow.’

‘It won’t be more than ten,’ said Damen. Realising this was its own surprise; before Nesson he would have thought the number would be five times that many. Laurent nodded. After a moment, Damen said, ‘Speaking of difficult men, there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Why did you leave Govart alive?’

‘Why not?’

‘You know why not.’

Laurent didn't answer at first. He poured himself a drink from the pitcher beside the map. It wasn't the cheap mouth-rasping wine Jord was drinking, Damen saw. It was water.

Laurent said, 'I preferred to give my uncle no reason to cry that I had overstepped my bounds.'

'You were well within your rights after Govart charged at you. And there was no shortage of witnesses. There's something else.'

'There's something else,' Laurent agreed, looking at Damen with steady eyes. As he spoke he lifted his cup and took a sip.

All right.

'It was an impressive fight.'

'Yes, I know,' said Laurent.

He didn't smile when he said things like that. He sat relaxed, with the cup now dangling from his long fingers, and gazed back at Damen steadily.

'You must have spent a lot of time in training,' said Damen, and to his surprise Laurent answered him seriously.

'I was never a fighter,' said Laurent. 'That was Auguste. But after Marlas, I was obsessed with . . .'

Laurent stopped. Damen could see the moment when Laurent decided to continue. It was deliberate, his eyes meeting Damen's, his tone subtly changed.

'Damianos of Akielos was commanding troops at seventeen. At nineteen, he rode onto the field, cut a path through our finest men, and took my brother's life. They say—they said—he was the best fighter in Akielos. I thought, if I was going to kill someone like that, I would have to be very, very good.'

Damen was silent after that. The impulse to talk flickered out, like the candles in the moment before they were snuffed into darkness, like the last dying warmth of the embers in the brazier.

* * *

The next evening, he found himself in conversation with Paschal.

The physician's tent, like Laurent's tent, like the kitchens, was large enough for a tall person to walk in without crouching. Paschal had all the

equipment that he could want, and Laurent's orders meant that it had all been meticulously unpacked. Damen, as his only patient, found the vast array of medical supplies amusing. It would not be amusing once they rode out of Nesson and fought something. One physician to tend two hundred men was only a reasonable ratio as long as they were not in battle.

'Is serving with the Prince very different to serving with his brother?'

Paschal said, 'I would say that everything that was instinctive in the older is not so in the younger.'

'Tell me about Auguste,' said Damen.

'The Prince? What is there to tell? He was the golden star,' said Paschal, with a nod at the starburst crest of the Crown Prince.

'Laurent seems to hold him brighter in his mind than the image of his own father.'

There was a pause, while Pascal replaced the glass bottles onto the shelf and Damen took up his shirt.

'You have to understand. Auguste was made to be the pride of any father. It's not that there was any bad blood between Laurent and the King. More like . . . the King doted on Auguste, but didn't spare much time for his younger son. In many ways the King was a simple man. Excellence on the field was something he could understand. Laurent was good with his mind, good at thinking, good at working his way through puzzles. Auguste was straightforward: a champion, the heir, born to rule. You can imagine how Laurent felt about him.'

'He resented him,' said Damen.

Paschal gave him a strange look. 'No, he loved him. He hero-worshipped him, the way that intellectual boys sometimes do, with older boys who excel physically. It went both ways with those two. They were devoted to one another. Auguste was the protector. He would do anything for his little brother.'

Damen thought privately that princes needed seasoning not protection. Laurent in particular.

He had seen Laurent open his mouth and strip paint from the walls. He had seen Laurent lift a knife and in cold blood slit open a man's throat without so much as a flicker of his golden lashes. Laurent didn't need to be protected from anything.

CHAPTER 5

Damen didn't see it at first, but he saw Laurent's reaction to it, saw him rein in his horse and move in close to Jord, one smooth motion.

'Take the men back,' said Laurent. 'We're done for today. The slave stays with me.' A glance at Damen.

It was late afternoon. Their manoeuvres had taken them from the keep of Nesson for the day, so that the nearby hill-clustered town of Nesson-Eloy was visible from their vantage. There was a ride between the troop and the camp, over the lumpy grassed hillside with its occasional scatterings of granite. But even so, it was early to retire for the day.

The troop turned on Jord's order. They looked like a whole—like a single functioning unit, rather than a straggling collection of disparate parts. Here was the result of a fortnight's hard work. The sense of accomplishment mingled with an awareness of what this troop might have been, given more time, or a better collection of fighters. Damen moved his horse alongside Laurent's.

By that time, he had seen it for himself, a riderless horse on the far edge of the thin tree cover.

He searched the rest of the nearby terrain with a tense gaze. Nothing. He didn't relax. Seeing a riderless horse in the distance, his first instinct was not to separate Laurent from the troop. The opposite.

'Stay close,' said Laurent as he spurred his horse to investigate, giving Damen no choice but to follow. Laurent reined in again when they were close enough to clearly see the horse. It didn't spook at their approach, but continued calmly grazing. It was clearly used to the company of other men and horses. It was used to the company of these men and horses in particular.

In two weeks, its saddle and bridle were gone, but the horse bore the

Prince's brand.

In fact, Damen recognised not just the brand but the horse, an unusual piebald. Laurent had sent a messenger galloping off on this horse the morning of his duel with Govart—*before* his duel with Govart. This wasn't one of the horses that he had sent to Arles to inform the Regent of Govart's dismissal. This was something else.

But that was almost two weeks ago, and the messenger had ridden out from Baillieux, not Nesson.

Damen felt his stomach twist unpleasantly. The gelding was easily worth two hundred silver lei. Every holding between Baillieux and Nesson would have been after it, either to return it for a reward or to stamp their own brand over Laurent's. It strained credulity to believe that after two weeks it had wandered unmolested back to the troop.

'Someone wants you to know your messenger didn't get through,' said Damen.

'Take the horse,' said Laurent, 'ride back to camp, and tell Jord that I will rejoin the company tomorrow morning.'

'What?' said Damen. 'But—'

'I have something to attend to in town.'

Instinctively, Damen moved his horse to block Laurent's path.

'No. The easiest way for your uncle to get rid of you is to separate you from your men, and you know it. You can't go into town alone, you're in danger just being here. We need to rejoin the troop. Now.'

Laurent glanced at their surroundings, and said, 'It's the wrong terrain for an ambush.'

'The town isn't,' said Damen. For good measure, he took hold of Laurent's horse's bridle. 'Consider alternatives. Can you entrust the task to someone else?'

'No,' said Laurent.

He said it as a calm statement of fact. Damen forced down his frustration, reminded himself that Laurent was in possession of an able mind, and that therefore his, 'No,' had a reason behind it other than pure stubbornness. Probably.

'Then take precautions. Ride back with me to camp, and wait until nightfall. Then slip away anonymously, with a guard. You're not thinking like a leader. You're too used to doing everything on your own.'

‘Let go of my bridle,’ said Laurent.

Damen did. There was a pause in which Laurent looked at the riderless horse, then looked at the position of the sun on the horizon, then looked at Damen.

‘You will accompany me,’ said Laurent, ‘in lieu of a guard, and we leave at dusk. And that is as far as I will bend on this subject. Any further opining from you will not meet with a loving reception.’

‘All right,’ said Damen.

‘All right,’ said Laurent, after a moment had passed.

* * *

They brought the piebald back on a lead that Laurent fashioned by the simple expedient of unclipping the reins of his own horse, looping them and dropping the loop over the piebald’s head. Damen took possession of the lead rope, since Laurent had to give all his attention to the task of riding his own horse without reins.

Laurent did not divulge any further information about his business in Nesson-Eloy, and as little as he liked the idea, Damen knew better than to ask him.

At camp, Damen dealt with the horses. When he returned to the tent, Laurent was wearing an expensive version of riding leathers, and there was more clothing laid out on the bed.

‘Change into those,’ said Laurent.

The clothes, when Damen lifted them from the bed, were soft under his hands, dark like the clothing worn by the nobility, and of the same quality.

He changed. It took a long time, as it always did with Veretian clothing, though at least these were riding clothes and not court clothing. Still, it was fussier than anything Damen had ever worn in his life, and by far the most luxurious clothing he had been given to wear since his arrival in Vere. This wasn’t soldiering gear, this was the clothing of an aristocrat.

It was, he now learned first hand, much more difficult to lace when you were the one wearing it than it was when you were tying the laces on somebody else. When he was done, he felt overdressed and strange. Even the shapes of the clothes were different, they changed him into something

foreign, something that he had never imagined himself being, more so than the armour, or the crude clothing of the soldiers that he had worn.

‘This doesn’t suit me,’ he said, meaning that it didn’t suit him to wear them.

‘No. It doesn’t. You look like one of us,’ said Laurent. He looked at Damen with his intolerant blue eyes. ‘It’s dusk. Go and tell Jord to expect my return mid-morning, and to carry on as usual in my absence. Then meet me by the horses. We leave as soon as you’re done.’

* * *

The problem with tents was that you couldn’t knock. Damen leaned his weight on one of the poles and called out.

The delay from within was pronounced. Finally Jord appeared, shirtless and wide-shouldered. Rather than waste time tying laces, he was holding his pants up with a casual hand.

The raised tent flap showed the source of the delay. Pale-limbed, tangled in bedding, Aimeric had pushed himself up on one elbow, flushed from his chest all the way up past his neck.

‘The Prince has business away from the camp,’ said Damen. ‘He plans to return mid-morning. He wants you to captain the men as usual while he’s gone.’

‘Whatever he needs. How many men is he taking with him?’

‘One,’ said Damen.

‘Good luck,’ was all Jord said.

* * *

The ride to the town of Nesson-Eloy was neither long nor difficult, but when they reached the outskirts they had to give up the horses.

They left them tied off the road, knowing there was a good chance the horses were not going to be there come morning, human nature being the same everywhere. It was necessary. Where the holdings around the keep had dwindled away, the town of Nesson-Eloy, closer to the traversable mountain pass, had grown. It was a tangle of close-built houses and paved streets, and

the ringing of hooves on cobblestones would awaken the world. Laurent insisted on silence, and discretion.

Laurent claimed to know the town, since the nearby keep was a common stopping place on the journey between Arles and Acquitart. He seemed sure of directions, and kept them to smaller streets and unlit paths.

But, in the end, the precautions did little good.

‘We’re being followed,’ said Damen.

They were walking along one of the narrow streets, above them balconies and upper-storey juttings of stone and timber that sheltered the street and sometimes arched across it.

Laurent said, ‘If we’re being followed, they don’t know where we’re going.’

He took them sideways down a street that was part hidden by overhangs, then sideways again.

It wasn’t quite a chase, because the men following them kept their distance and only gave themselves away here and there with slight sounds. In daylight, it might have been a game played in thronged streets full of ample distractions, the town active and murmuring and covered with a haze of wood smoke. At night everything was conspicuous. The dark streets were thinning of people, and they stood out.

The men following them—it was more than one—had an easy task, no matter how many detours Laurent took. They couldn’t shake them.

‘This is getting irritating,’ said Laurent. He had stopped in front of a door with a circular symbol painted on it. ‘We don’t have time for cat and mouse games. I’m going to try your trick.’

‘My trick?’ said Damen. The last time Damen had seen a symbol like that on a door, it had opened to expel Govart.

Laurent raised his fist and applied it to the door. Then he turned to Damen. ‘I assume that’s right? I have no idea how one usually proceeds. This is your arena, not mine.’

The viewing slit on the door slid open, Laurent held up a gold coin, the viewing slit shut with a slam that was followed by the sound of bolts being thrown open. Fragrance billowed out of the doorway. A young woman appeared, her brown hair brushed to a high gloss. She eyed Laurent’s coin, then she eyed Damen, then she appended a murmur about Damen’s size to a demurring comment about fetching the Maitresse, and they stepped through

the doorway and into the perfumed brothel.

‘This is not *my arena*,’ said Damen.

Copper lamps hung from the ceilings from slender copper chains, and the walls were draped with silks. The fragrance was the thick sweetness of incense over the fading scent of *chalis*. The floor was carpeted, a deep pile that the feet sank down into. The room that they were led into held no flat Veretian mattresses scattered with cushions, but was ringed with a series of reclining couches of carved dark wood.

Two of the couches were occupied, not (thankfully) with public couples, but with three of the house’s women. Laurent paced in and claimed one of the empty couches for himself, adopting a relaxed posture. Damen sat more gingerly at the far end. His mind was on their pursuers, who would either stay in the street watching the door, or at any moment come bursting into the brothel. Vistas of endless ridiculousness opened up before him.

Laurent was considering the women. He was far from wide-eyed, but there was a certain quality to his gaze. For Laurent, Damen realised, this experience was wholly new and highly illicit. Compounding Damen’s sense of the ridiculous was the sudden acute awareness that he was accompanying the chaste Crown Prince of Vere to his first brothel.

From elsewhere in the house, you could hear the sound of fucking.

Of three women, one was the glossy-haired woman who had greeted them at the door, the other was a brunette, who was idly teasing the third, a blonde whose dress was mostly unlaced. The blonde’s exposed nipple had pinked and swelled under the brunette’s lazy thumbing.

‘You’re sitting so far away,’ said the blonde.

‘Then get up,’ said Laurent.

She got up. The brunette rose too, and made for Laurent. The blonde came to sit beside Damen. Damen could see the brunette on the periphery of his vision—was pricked with amused curiosity as to how Laurent would deal with her advances, but he found he had his own hands full. So to speak. The blonde had very pink lips, and freckles scattered across her nose, and her dress was open from neck to navel, trailing laces. Her exposed breasts were curved and white, the whitest part of her, except where they budded into two soft tips. Her nipples were the exact same shade of pink as her lips. It was paint.

She said: ‘M’lord, is there something I can do for you while you wait?’

Damen opened his mouth to answer no, concerned about their precarious situation, their pursuers, Laurent on the seat beside him. He was conscious of just how long it had been since he'd had a woman.

'Unlace his jacket,' said Laurent.

The blonde looked from Damen to Laurent. Damen looked at him too. Laurent had dispensed with his own woman wordlessly, perhaps with a single dismissive flick of his fingers. Elegant and relaxed, he was regarding them without urgency.

It was familiar. Damen felt the moment when his pulse kicked in, remembering the love seat in the garden bower, and Laurent's cool voice giving explicit instructions: *suck it*, and, *tongue the slit*.

Damen caught the blonde's wrist. There was not going to be a repeat *performance*. The blonde's fingers had already moved over the lacings, uncovering beneath the dark expensive fabric of his jacket the gold collar. 'You're—his pet?' she said.

'I can close the room,' came the voice of an older woman, faintly accented in Vaskian, 'if that is your wish, and give you gentlemen privacy to enjoy my girls.'

'You're the Maitresse?' said Laurent.

She said, 'I am in charge of this small house.'

Laurent rose from the reclining couch. 'If I'm paying gold, I'm in charge.'

She sank down into a deep curtsey, eyes to the floor. 'Whatever you would like,' and then, after a slight hesitation, 'Your Highness. And discretion and silence, of course.'

The golden hair, and the fine clothes, and that face of his—of course he had been identified. Everyone in the town presumably knew who was camped at the keep. The words of the Maitresse provoked from one of the other women a gasp; she had not made the same deductive leap as the Maitresse, and nor had the others. Damen was treated to the sight of the whores of Nesson-Eloy prostrating themselves almost to the floor in the presence of their Crown Prince.

'My slave and I want a private room,' said Laurent, 'at the back of the house. Something with a bed, and a latch on the door, and a window. We do not require company. If you try to send in one of your girls, you will find out the hard way that I don't like sharing.'

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ said the Maitresse.

She led them with a taper through the old house to the back. Damen was half expecting her to eject some other patron on Laurent’s behalf, but a room that fit Laurent’s requirements was unoccupied. It was furnished simply with a low cushioned chest, a curtained bed and two lamps. The cushions were of red cloth with a raised pattern of velvet. The Maitresse closed the door, leaving them alone together.

Damen threw the latch and then for good measure pushed the chest in front of the door.

There was indeed a window. It was small, and it was covered by metal grillework that was bolted into the plaster.

Laurent was staring at it, nonplussed. ‘This isn’t what I had in mind.’

‘The plaster’s old,’ said Damen. ‘Here.’ He took hold of the grille, and gave it a tug. Bits of plaster rained down from the edges of the window, but it wasn’t enough to detach the grille from the frame. He changed his grip, braced his stance and put his shoulder into it.

On the third attempt, the whole grille came away from the window. It was surprisingly heavy. He placed it carefully on the floor. The thick carpet muffled any sound, as it had done when he had moved the chest.

‘After you,’ he said to Laurent, who was staring at him. Laurent almost looked as though he was going to speak, but then he just nodded, pulled himself through the window and dropped soundlessly into the alley behind the brothel. Damen followed.

They crossed the alley under the projecting eaves, and found a dank space between two houses to push through, then went down a short series of steps. The faint sounds of their own footsteps were not echoed. Their pursuers had not flanked the house.

They had lost them.

* * *

‘Here. Take this,’ said Laurent when they were half the town away, tossing Damen his coin purse. ‘It’s better if we’re not recognised. And you should do up the collar on your jacket.’

‘I’m not the one who has to hide his identity,’ said Damen, though he

obligingly laced his jacket closed, hiding the gold collar from view. 'It's not just the streetwalkers who know you're camped at the keep. Anyone seeing a young blond man of noble birth is going to guess it's you.'

'I brought a disguise,' said Laurent.

'A disguise,' said Damen.

They had reached an inn that Laurent claimed was their destination, and were standing beneath the upper-storey overhang, two steps from the doorway. There was no place to change into a disguise, and there was little besides that could be done about Laurent's telltale yellow hair. And Laurent was empty handed.

Until he drew something delicate and glittering out of a fold in his clothing. Damen stared at him.

Laurent said, 'After you.'

Damen opened his mouth. Closed it. He put his hand on the inn door, and pushed it open.

Laurent followed him, after a moment spent affixing the long hanging sapphires of Nicaise's earring to his own ear.

The sound of voices and music mingled with the smell of roast venison and candle smoke to form a first impression. Damen looked around at a wide open room with trestle tables adorned with plates and pitchers, and a fire at one end with a spit roasting over it. There were several patrons, men and women. No one wore clothing as fine as his own, or Laurent's. To one side, a set of wooden stairs led to a mezzanine, off which opened private rooms. An innkeeper with rolled up sleeves was approaching them.

After no more than a brief, dismissive glance at Laurent, the innkeeper gave Damen his full attention, greeting him respectfully.

'Welcome, my lord. Will you and your pet require lodgings for the evening?'

CHAPTER 6

‘I want your best room,’ said Laurent, ‘with a big bed and a private bath, and if you send up the house boy, you’ll find out the hard way that I don’t like sharing.’

He delivered the innkeeper a long, cool look.

‘He’s expensive,’ said Damen to the innkeeper, by way of apology.

And then watched as the innkeeper sized up the cost of Laurent’s clothes, and his sapphire earring—a royal gift to a favourite—and the likely cost of Laurent himself, the face, the body. Damen realised that he was about to be charged three times the going rate for everything.

He decided with good humour that he didn’t mind being generous with Laurent’s coin.

‘Why don’t you find us a table. Pet.’ Enjoying the moment. And the sobriquet.

Laurent did as directed. Damen took the time to pay bountifully for the room, thanking the innkeeper.

He kept one eye on Laurent, who even at the best of times could not be predicted. Laurent made straight for the best table, close enough to the fire to enjoy its warmth but not so close as to be overwhelmed by the scent of the slow-roasting venison. Being the best table, it was occupied. Laurent emptied it with what appeared to be a glance, or a word, or the simple fact of his approach.

The earring was not a discreet disguise. Every man in the common room of the inn was taking the time to have a good look at Laurent. Pet. Laurent’s cool-eyed arrogance proclaimed that no one could touch him. The earring said that one man could. It transformed him from *unattainable* to *exclusive*, an elite pleasure no one here could afford.

But that was an illusion. Damen sat down across the table from Laurent on one of the long benches.

‘What now?’ said Damen.

‘Now we wait,’ said Laurent.

Then Laurent rose and made his way around the table, sitting himself beside Damen, close as a lover.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Verisimilitude,’ said Laurent. The earring winked at him. ‘I’m glad I brought you along. I wasn’t expecting to have to tear things out of walls. Do you visit brothels often?’

‘No,’ said Damen.

‘Not brothels. Camp followers?’ said Laurent. And then: ‘Slaves.’ And then, after the satisfaction of a pause: ‘Akielos, the garden of delights. So you enjoy slavery in others. Just not in yourself.’

Damen shifted on the long bench, and regarded him.

‘Don’t strain yourself,’ said Laurent.

‘You talk more,’ said Damen, ‘when you’re uncomfortable.’

‘My lord,’ said the innkeeper, and Damen turned. Laurent didn’t. ‘Your room will be ready shortly. The third door at the top of the stairs. Jehan will bring you wine and food while you wait.’

‘We’ll try to entertain ourselves. Who’s that?’ said Laurent.

He was looking across the room at an older man with hair like a handful of straw protruding from under a dirty woollen cap. He sat at a dark table in the corner. He was shuffling cards as though, although earmarked and greasy, they were his prize possessions.

‘That’s Volo. Don’t play him. He’s a man with a thirst. He won’t take more than a night to drink your coins, your jewels and your jacket.’

With this advice, the innkeeper left.

Laurent was watching Volo with the same expression with which he had regarded the women in the brothel. Volo tried to cajole wine out of the house boy, then he tried to cajole something altogether different out of the house boy, who was not impressed when Volo performed a sleight-of-hand trick that involved holding a wooden spoon in his hand and then vanishing it, as though into thin air.

‘All right. Give me some coin. I want to play that man at cards.’

Laurent rose, leaning his weight against the table. Damen reached for the

purse, then paused. 'Aren't you supposed to earn gifts with service?'

Laurent said, 'Is there something you want?'

His voice was sinuous with promise; his gaze was steady as a cat's.

Damen, who preferred not to be eviscerated, tossed Laurent the purse. Laurent caught it in one hand, and took for himself a handful of copper and silver. He tossed the purse back to Damen as he made his way across the inn floor, seating himself opposite Volo.

They played. Laurent bet silver. Volo bet his woollen cap. Damen watched from his table for a few minutes, then cast his eye around the other patrons to see whether any of them were close enough to him in class to make an invitation plausible.

The most respectable of them was dressed in good clothing with a fur-lined cloak thrown over his chair, perhaps a cloth merchant. Damen extended an invitation for the man to join him if he wished, which the man very much did, hiding his curiosity about Damen only imperfectly, under a blanket of merchant manners. The man's name was Charls, and he was a trading partner of a significant merchant family. They did indeed trade in cloth. Damen gave an obscure name and pedigree from Patras.

'Ah, Patras! Yes, you have the accent,' said Charls.

The talk was of trade and politics, which was natural if you were a merchant. It proved impossible to prise out news of Akielos. Charls did not support the alliance. Charls trusted the Prince to stand firm in negotiations with the bastard Akielon King more than he trusted the Regent uncle. The Crown Prince was camped at Nesson this very minute, on his way to the border to stand up to Akielos. He was a young man serious about his responsibilities, Charls said. Damen had to make an effort not to look over at Laurent, gambling, when he said it.

The food arrived. The inn provided good bread and platters. Charls eyed the plates when it became evident that the innkeeper had given Damen all the best cuts of meat.

The patrons in the common room were thinning out. Charls took his leave shortly after, heading upstairs to the second-best room of the establishment.

When he looked over at the card game, Damen saw that Laurent had managed to lose all his coin, but gain the filthy woollen cap. Volo grinned, slapped Laurent soundly on the back in commiseration, then bought him a drink. Then he bought himself a drink. Then he bought himself the house

boy, who was offering very generous rates—one copper for a poke, three coppers for the night—and who had warmed up a great deal to Volo now that he had piled in front of him all of Laurent’s coin.

Laurent took the drink and picked his way back across the room, where he put it, untouched, in front of Damen.

‘Spoils of someone else’s victory.’

Although the inn was emptying out, two of the patrons by the fire were possibly within earshot. Damen said, ‘If you wanted a drink and an old hat that badly, you could have just bought them from him. Cheaper and quicker.’

‘It’s the game I like,’ said Laurent. He reached over and appropriated another coin out of the purse Damen carried, then palmed it. ‘Look, I’ve learned a new trick.’ When he opened his hand, it was empty, as if by magic. A second later, the coin dropped out of his sleeve onto the floor. Laurent frowned at it. ‘Well, I don’t have it quite yet.’

‘If the trick is making coins disappear, I think you do have it, actually.’

‘What’s the food like?’ said Laurent, his eyes on the table.

Damen tore off a piece of bread, and held it like a treat to a house cat. ‘Try it.’

Laurent looked at the bread, and then he looked at the men by the fire, and then he looked at Damen, a long, cool look that would have been difficult to hold if Damen had not had, by now, a great deal of practice.

And then he said, ‘All right.’

It took a moment for those words to penetrate. By the time they did, Laurent had settled next to him on the long bench. Laurent straddled it, facing Damen.

Laurent was really going to do it.

Pets in Vere made a teasing production out of this, flirting and making love to their masters’ hands. Laurent, when Damen brought the mouthful of bread to his lips, did none of those things. He maintained an essential fastidiousness. There was almost nothing of pet and master about it at all, except that Damen felt, just for an instant, the warmth of Laurent’s breath against his fingertips.

Verisimilitude, thought Damen.

His gaze dropped to Laurent’s lips. When he forced it upwards, it fixed instead on the earring. The lobe of Laurent’s ear was pierced through with the ornament of his uncle’s child-lover. It suited him, in the mundane sense that

it matched his colouring. In another sense, it looked as incongruous as it felt to tear another mouthful of bread from the flat loaf, and lift it to feed him.

Laurent ate the bread. It was like feeding a predator, the same feeling. Laurent was so close that it would be easy to wrap a hand around the back of his neck and draw him closer. He remembered the feel of Laurent's hair, his skin, and fought the urge to press against Laurent's lips with the pads of his fingers.

It was the earring. Laurent was always so austere. The earring reframed him. It gave the appearance of a sensual side, sophisticated and subtle.

But that side didn't exist. The glint of sapphires was dangerous. As Nicaise had been dangerous. Nothing in Vere was as it seemed.

Another piece of bread. Laurent's lips brushed against his fingertips. It was brief and soft. This wasn't what he'd intended when he picked up the bread. He had some sense that his plans had been overturned, that Laurent knew exactly what he was doing. The touch resembled the first brush of lips in the kind of sensual kiss that begins as a series of smaller kisses, and then, slowly, deepens. Damen felt his breathing change.

He reminded himself forcefully of who this was. Laurent, his captor. He made himself recall the fall of each lash on his back, but thanks to some misfiring of the brain, found himself instead in the memory of Laurent's wet skin in the baths, the way his limbs fitted together like a hilt fitted to the blade of a balanced sword.

Laurent finished the morsel, then rested a hand on Damen's thigh, and slowly slid it upward.

'Control yourself,' said Laurent.

And shifted in, until, facing one another on the straddled bench, they were almost chest to chest. Laurent's hair tickled against Damen's cheek as he brought his lips to Damen's ear.

'You and I are almost the last ones here,' Laurent murmured.

'And so?'

The next murmur slid softly into Damen's ear, so that he felt the shape of each word, made of lips and breath.

'And so, take me upstairs,' said Laurent. 'Don't you think we've waited long enough?'

It was Laurent who led the way, trailing up the stairs, with Damen following. He was aware of each step, and he found his pulse beating fast

beneath his skin.

The third door at the top of the stairs. The room was warmed with a well-tended fire in a large hearth. It had thick plastered walls and a window with a small balcony. Its one large bed had cosy-looking bedding and a sturdy dark wooden headboard that was intricately carved with a interlocking pattern of diamonds. There were a few other pieces of furniture, a low chest, a chair by the door.

And there was a man of about thirty with a dark, closely trimmed beard sitting on the bed, who propelled himself off it and onto one knee when he saw Laurent.

Damen sat down rather heavily on the chair by the door.

‘Your Highness,’ the man said, kneeling.

‘Rise,’ Laurent told him. ‘I’m glad to see you. You must have come every night, long after the time when you were due an answer.’

‘While you were camped at Nesson, I thought there was a chance your messenger would come,’ said the man, standing.

‘He was detained. We were followed from the keep as far as the eastern quarter. I think the roads in and out will be watched.’

‘I know a way. I can leave as soon as we’re done.’

The man drew a piece of sealed parchment from inside his jacket. Laurent took it, broke the seal, and read the contents. He read it slowly. From the glimpse Damen caught, it looked like it was written in a cipher. When he was done, he dropped the parchment into the fire, where it curled up and blacked over.

Laurent took out his signet ring, and pressed it into the man’s hand.

‘Give him this,’ said Laurent, ‘and tell him that I will wait for him at Ravenel.’

The man bowed. He left by the door and made his way out of the sleeping inn. It was done.

Damen rose and gave Laurent a long look.

‘You look pleased.’

‘I’m the type who takes a great deal of pleasure in small victories,’ Laurent said.

‘You weren’t sure he’d be here,’ said Damen.

‘I didn’t think he would be. Two weeks is a long time to wait.’ Laurent unpinned the earring. ‘I think we’ll be safe on the road in the morning. The

men who followed us seemed more interested in finding him than harming me. They didn't attack us when they had the chance tonight.' And then, 'Does that door lead to the bath?' And then, halfway to the door, 'Don't worry, your services aren't required.'

When he was gone, Damen wordlessly picked up an armful of bedding and dumped it on the floor by the hearth.

Then there was nothing to do. He went downstairs. The only patrons now remaining were Volo and the house boy, who weren't paying any attention to anyone else. The house boy's sand-coloured hair was a tousled mess.

He went all the way outside the inn and stood for a moment; the cool night air was calming. The street was empty. The messenger was gone. It was very late.

It was peaceful here. He couldn't stay out here all night. Recalling that Laurent had eaten nothing but a few fraught mouthfuls of bread, he stopped by the kitchens on his way back upstairs and requisitioned a plate of bread and meats.

When he went back into the room, Laurent had emerged from the bath and was half clothed and sitting drying his damp hair by the fire, taking up the majority of the space on Damen's impromptu bed.

'Here,' said Damen, and passed him the plate.

'Thank you,' said Laurent, looking at the plate with a blink. 'The bath is free. If you like.'

He bathed. Laurent had left him clean water. The towels that were hung over the side of the copper basin were warm and soft. He dried off. He chose to clothe himself once again in pants rather than towels. He told himself that this was no different from two dozen nights together inside of a warfield tent.

When he returned, Laurent had carefully eaten half of everything on the plate, and had placed it on the chest where Damen could get at it if he wanted it. Damen, who had eaten his fill downstairs and who didn't think Laurent should be able to take over his bed when he had left untouched the vast comfort of his own, ignored the plate and came to stake his claim beside Laurent, on the blankets by the hearth.

'I thought that Volo was your contact,' said Damen.

'I just wanted to play him at cards,' said Laurent.

The fire was warm. Damen enjoyed the feel of it against the bare skin of his torso.

After a moment, Laurent said, 'I don't think I would have arrived here without your help, at least not without being followed. I am glad you came. I meant that. You were right. I'm not used to . . .' He broke off.

His damp hair, pushed back as it was, exposed the elegantly balanced planes of his face. Damen gave him a look.

'You're in a strange mood,' said Damen. 'Stranger than usual.'

'I'd say I'm in a good mood.'

'A good mood.'

'Well, not as good a mood as Volo,' said Laurent. 'But the food's decent, the fire's warm, and no one's tried to kill me in the last three hours. Why not?'

'I thought you had more sophisticated tastes than that,' said Damen.

'Did you?' said Laurent.

'I've seen your court,' Damen reminded him gently.

'You've seen my uncle's court,' said Laurent.

Would yours be any different? He didn't say it. Maybe he didn't need to know the answer. The king that Laurent would be, he was becoming with every passing day, but the future was another life. Laurent would not then be leaning back on his hands, lazily drying his hair before an inn-room fire, or climbing in and out of brothel windows. Nor would Damen.

'Tell me something,' said Laurent.

He spoke after a long and surprisingly comfortable silence. Damen looked over at him.

'What really happened to make Kastor send you here? I know it was not a lover's quarrel,' said Laurent.

As the comfortable warmth of the fire turned to chill, Damen knew that he had to lie. It was beyond dangerous to talk about this with Laurent. He knew that. He just didn't know why the past felt so close. He swallowed down the words rising in his throat.

As he had swallowed everything, since that night.

I don't know. I don't know why.

I don't know what I did to make him hate me as much as this. Why we couldn't go as brothers to mourn—

—our father—

'You were half right,' he heard himself say, as though from a distance. 'I had feelings for . . . There was a woman.'

‘Jokaste,’ said Laurent, amused.

Damen was silent. He felt the ache of the answer in his throat.

‘Not really? You fell for the King’s mistress?’

‘He was not the King then. And she was not his mistress. Or if she was, no one knew it,’ said Damen. Once the words started, they wouldn’t stop.

‘She was intelligent, accomplished, beautiful. She was everything I could have asked for in a woman. But she was a king maker. She wanted power. She must have thought her only path to the throne was through Kastor.’

‘My honourable barbarian. I wouldn’t have picked that as your type.’

‘Type?’

‘A pretty face, a devious mind and a ruthless nature.’

‘No. That isn’t—I didn’t know she was . . . I didn’t know what she was.’

‘Didn’t you?’ said Laurent.

‘Perhaps I . . . I knew she was ruled by her mind, not her heart. I knew she was ambitious, and, yes, at times ruthless. I admit there was something . . . attractive about it. But I never guessed that she would betray me for Kastor. That I learned too late.’

‘Auguste was like you,’ said Laurent. ‘He had no instinct for deception; it meant he couldn’t recognise it in other people.’

‘And what about you?’ said Damen, after a difficult breath.

‘I have a highly developed instinct for deception.’

‘No, I meant—’

‘I know what you meant.’

Damen had asked it in an attempt to turn the questioning back on Laurent. Anything to close the doors. Now, after a night of earrings and brothels, he thought: Why not ask him about it? Laurent didn’t look uncomfortable. The lines of his body were relaxed and easy. His soft lips, so often drawn into harder lines, their sensuality suppressed, at this moment expressed nothing more dangerous than mild interest. He had no difficulty returning Damen’s gaze. But he hadn’t given an answer.

‘Shy?’ said Damen.

‘If you want an answer, you’ll need to ask the question,’ said Laurent.

‘Half the men riding in your company are convinced you’re a virgin.’

‘Is that a question?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m twenty years old,’ said Laurent, ‘and I’ve been the recipient of offers

almost as long as I can remember.'

'Is that an answer?' said Damen.

'I'm not a virgin,' said Laurent.

'I wondered,' Damen said, carefully, 'if you reserved your love for women.'

'No, I—' Laurent sounded surprised. Then he seemed to realise that his surprise gave something fundamental away, and he looked away with a muttered breath; when he looked back at Damen there was a wry smile on his lips, but he said, steadily, 'No.'

'Have I said something to offend you? I didn't mean—'

'No. A plausible, benign and uncomplicated theory. Trust you to come up with it.'

'It's not my fault that no one in your country can think in a straight line,' said Damen, frowning a touch defensively.

'I'll tell you why Jokaste chose Kastor,' said Laurent.

Damen looked at the fire. He looked at the log that was half consumed, flames licking the sides and embers at the base.

'He was a prince,' said Damen. 'He was a prince and I was just—'

He couldn't do this. The muscles across his shoulders were knotted so hard they hurt. The past was coming into focus; he didn't want to see it. Lying meant facing the truth of not knowing. Not knowing what he had done to provoke betrayal, not once, but twice, from beloved, and brother.

'That isn't why. She would have chosen him even if you'd had royal blood in your veins, even if you'd had the same blood as Kastor. You don't understand the way a mind like that thinks. I do. If I were Jokaste and a king maker, I'd have chosen Kastor over you too.'

'I suppose you are going to enjoy telling me why,' said Damen. He felt his hands curl into fists, heard the bitterness in his throat.

'Because a king maker would always choose the weaker man. The weaker the man, the easier he is to control.'

Damen felt the shock of surprise, and looked at Laurent only to find Laurent gazing back at him without rancour. The moment stretched out. It wasn't . . . it wasn't what he had expected Laurent to say. As he gazed at Laurent, the words moved through him in unexpected ways, and he felt them touch something jagged-edged within him, felt them shift it a first, tiny fraction, something lodged hard and deep, that he had thought immovable.

He said:

‘What makes you think Kastor is the weaker man? You don’t know him.’

‘But I’m coming to know you,’ said Laurent.

CHAPTER 7

Damen sat with his back to the wall, on the bedding that he'd assembled by the hearth. The sounds of the fire had grown infrequent; it had long ago burned down to a last few glowing embers. The room was warmly slumberous and quiet. Damen was wide awake.

Laurent was asleep on the bed.

Damen could make out the shape of him, even in the darkness of the room. The moonlight that crept in the cracks of the balcony shutters revealed the spill of Laurent's pale hair against the pillow. Laurent slept as though Damen's presence in the room didn't matter, as though Damen was no more threatening to him than a piece of furniture.

It wasn't trust. It was a calm judgement of Damen's intentions, coupled with a brazen arrogance in his own assessment: there were more reasons for Damen to keep Laurent alive than to harm him. For now. It was as it had been when Laurent had handed him a knife. As it had been when Laurent had invited him into the palace baths and, calmly, unclothed. Everything was calculated. Laurent didn't trust anyone.

Damen didn't understand him. He didn't understand why Laurent should have spoken as he did, nor did he understand the effect that those words had had on him. The past was heavy upon him. In the quiet of this nighttime room, there were no distractions, nothing to do but think, and feel, and remember.

His brother Kastor, the illegitimate son of the King's mistress Hypermenestra, had for the first nine years of his life been raised to inherit. After countless miscarriages, it had been commonly believed that Queen Egeria could not bring a child to term. But then had come the pregnancy that had taken the Queen's life but produced in its final hours a legitimate male

heir.

He had grown up admiring Kastor, striving to outdo him because he admired him, and because he was aware of the incandescence of his father's pride in the moments when he managed to surpass his brother.

Nikandros had drawn him from his father's sickroom and said, in a low voice, *Kastor has always believed that he deserved the throne. That you took it from him. He cannot accept fault for defeat in any arena, instead he attributes everything to the fact that he was never given his 'chance'. All he has ever needed was someone to whisper in his ear that he should take it.*

He had refused to believe it. Any of it. He wouldn't hear words spoken against his brother. His father, who lay dying, had called Kastor to his side, and told him of his love for him and his love for Hypermenestra, and Kastor's emotions at his father's sickbed had seemed as true as his pledge to serve the heir Damianos.

Torveld had said, *I saw Kastor in his grief. It was genuine.* He had thought that too. Then.

He remembered the first time he had unpinned Jokaste's hair, the feel of it falling over his fingers, and the memory tangled with a stirring of arousal, which a moment later became a jolt, as he found himself confusing blond hair with brown, remembering the moment downstairs when Laurent had pushed forward almost into his lap.

The image shattered as he heard, muffled by walls and distance, a pounding on the door downstairs.

Danger drove him to his feet—the urgency of the moment pushed his prior thoughts aside. He shrugged on his shirt and jacket, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He was gentle when he put a hand on Laurent's shoulder.

Laurent was sleep-warm in the blanketed bed. He came awake instantly under Damen's hand, though there was no overt start of panic or surprise.

'We have to go,' said Damen. There was a new set of sounds from downstairs, of the innkeeper, roused, unbolting the inn door.

'This is becoming a habit,' said Laurent, but he was already pushing himself up from the bed. While Damen threw open the shutters to the balcony, Laurent pulled on his own shirt and jacket—though he had no time to do up any of the lacings, because Veretian clothing was frankly useless in an emergency.

The shutters opened on a cool, fluttering night breeze, and a two-storey

drop.

It was not going to be as easy as it had been in the brothel. Jumping was not possible. The drop to street level might not be fatal, but it was forbidding enough to break bone. There were voices now, perhaps from the stairs. They both looked up. The outside of the inn was plastered, and there were no handholds. Damen's gaze shifted, looking for a way to climb. They saw it at the same time: beside the next balcony, there was a section of stripped plaster, with jutting stone and a set of places to grip, a clear passage to the roof.

Except that the next balcony was perhaps eight feet away, further than was comfortable considering that the jump had to be made from a standing start. Laurent was already judging the distance, calm-eyed.

'Can you make it?' Damen asked him.

'Probably,' Laurent said.

They both swung themselves over the railing of the balcony. Damen went first. He was taller, which gave him an advantage, and he was confident of the distance. He jumped and landed well, catching the railing of the next balcony and pausing for a moment to make sure that he had not been heard by the occupant of the room, before he quickly drew himself over the railing and onto the balcony.

He did it as quietly as possible. The outer shutters of this balcony were closed, but they were not soundproofed: Damen had expected the snores of Charls the merchant, but instead he heard the muted but unmistakable sounds of Volo getting his money's worth.

He turned back. Laurent was wasting a precious few seconds re-judging the distance. Damen suddenly realised that 'probably' did not mean 'definitely', and that in answering Damen's question, Laurent had calmly given a truthful assessment of his own abilities. Damen felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

Laurent jumped; it was a long way, and things like height mattered, as did the propulsion that came from muscle power.

He landed badly. Damen instinctively grabbed hold of him and felt Laurent surrender his weight to Damen's grasp, clutching at him. He'd had the wind knocked out of him by the railing of the balcony. He didn't resist when Damen hauled him up and over, nor did he immediately pull away, just stood breathless in Damen's arms. Damen's hands were on Laurent's waist;

his heart was hammering. They froze, too late.

The sounds inside the room had stopped.

'I heard something,' said the house boy, distinctly. 'On the balcony.'

'It's the wind,' said Volo. 'I'll keep you warm.'

'No, it was something,' the boy insisted. 'Go and—'

The rustle of sheets and the sound of the bed creaking—

It was Damen's turn to have the breath knocked from him as Laurent pushed him, hard. His back hit the wall beside the shuttered window. The shock of the impact was only slightly less than the shock that came from Laurent pressing against him, pinning him firmly to the wall with his body.

It was not a moment too soon. The shutters swung open, trapping them in the small triangle of space between the wall and the back of the open shutter. They were hidden as precariously as a cuckold behind an open door. Neither of them moved. Neither of them breathed. If Laurent moved back even a half-inch, he'd bump the shutter. To prevent this, he was plastered so tightly against Damen that Damen could feel every crease in the fabric of his garments, through which, the warm, transmitted heat of his body.

'There's no one here,' said Volo.

'I was sure I heard something,' said the boy.

Laurent's hair tickled his neck. Damen stoically endured it. Volo was going to hear his heartbeat. He was surprised that the walls of the building weren't pounding with it.

'Just a cat, maybe. You can make it up to me,' said Volo.

'Mmm, all right,' said the boy. 'Come back to bed.'

Volo turned from the balcony. But of course there was a final act to the farce. In his eagerness to resume his activities, Volo left the shutter open, trapping them there.

Damen suppressed the urge to groan. The whole length of Laurent's body was flush against his own, thigh against thigh, chest against chest. Breathing was dangerous. Damen needed, increasingly, to interpose a safe distance between their bodies, to push Laurent forcefully away, and couldn't. Laurent, oblivious, shifted slightly, to look behind himself and view the proximity of the shutter. *Stop moving around*, Damen almost said; only some thin thread of self-preservation prevented him from speaking aloud. Laurent shifted *again*, having seen, as Damen saw, no way for them to squeeze out of hiding without giving themselves away. And then Laurent said, in a very quiet, very

careful voice, 'This is . . . not ideal.'

That was an understatement. They were hidden from Volo, but they could be seen very clearly from the other balcony, and the men pursuing them were somewhere in the inn by now. And there were other imperatives.

Damen said, quietly, 'Look up. If you can climb, we can get out that way.'

'Wait until they start fucking,' Laurent said even more softly, the murmured words unheard beyond the curve of Damen's neck. 'They'll be distracted.'

The word *fucking* sank down into him, even as there was an unmistakable moan from the boy inside the room, '*There. There—put it in me right there*—' and it was time, beyond time, for them to go—
—and the door to Volo's room slammed open.

'They're in here!' called an unfamiliar man's voice.

There was a moment of total confusion, an indignant squawk from the house boy, a shouted protest from Volo, 'Hey, let go of him!' the sounds only making sense when Damen realised what might naturally happen to a man who had been sent to apprehend Laurent, and had heard him described, but had never actually seen him.

'Stay back, old man. It isn't your business. This is the Prince of Vere.'

'But—I only paid three coppers for him,' said Volo, sounding confused.

'And you should probably put some pants on,' said the man, adding awkwardly, 'Your Highness.'

'What?' said the boy.

Damen felt Laurent start shaking against him, and realised that, silently, helplessly, he was laughing.

There came the sound of at least two more sets of footsteps striding into the room, greeted with: 'Here he is. We found him fucking this derelict, disguised as the tavern prostitute.'

'This is the tavern prostitute. You idiot, the Prince of Vere is so celibate I doubt he even touches himself once every ten years. You. We're looking for two men. One was a barbarian soldier, a giant animal. The other was blond. Not like this boy. Attractive.'

'There was a blond lord's pet downstairs,' said Volo. 'Brained like a pea and easy to hoodwink. I don't think he was the Prince.'

'I wouldn't call him blond. More like mousy. And he wasn't that

attractive,' said the boy, sulkily.

The shaking, progressively, had worsened.

'Stop enjoying yourself,' Damen murmured. 'We're going to be killed, any minute.'

'Giant animal,' said Laurent.

'Stop it.'

Inside the room: 'Check the other lodgings. They're here somewhere.' The footsteps retreated.

'Can you give me a boost?' said Laurent. 'We need to get off this balcony.'

Damen cupped his hands, and Laurent used them as a stepping stone, pushing himself up to the first handhold.

More lightly built than Damen, but possessing the upper body strength that came with extensive sword practice, Laurent climbed quickly and silently. Damen, turning carefully in the confined space in order to face the wall, soon followed.

It wasn't a difficult climb, and it was only a minute before he was pulling himself up and onto the roof, the town of Nesson-Eloy splayed out before him, the sky above, a handful of scattered stars. He found himself laughing a little breathlessly, and saw his expression twinned on Laurent's face. Laurent's blue eyes were full of mischief.

'I think we're safe,' said Damen. 'Somehow, no one saw us.'

'But I told you. It's the game I like,' said Laurent, and with the toe of his boot he deliberately pushed a loose roof tile until it slid off the rooftop and shattered in the street below.

'They're on the roof!' came the call from below.

This time, it was a chase. They fled over the rooftops, dodging chimneys. It was half obstacle course, half steeplechase. The tiles beneath their feet appeared and disappeared, opening up into narrow alleyways that must be leaped over. The visibility was poor. The levels were all uneven. They went up one side of a roof slope, and, slipping and sliding, came down the other.

Below, their pursuers ran too, over smooth streets with no loose tiles to threaten a sprain or a fall, flanking them. Laurent sent another roof tile into the street, aimed this time. From below, a yelp of alarm. When they found themselves on another balcony on their way over a narrow street, Damen tipped over a flowerpot. Beside him, Laurent unpinned some hanging laundry

and dropped it; they saw the ghostly white entangle someone below and become a writhing shape, before they sped on.

They sprang from rooftop ledge to balcony and onto a crossway across a narrow street. The careening chase across the skyline called on a lifetime of training in Damen, on reflexes, speed and stamina. Laurent, light and agile, kept up. Above them, the sky was lightening. Below them, the town was waking up.

They could not stay on the rooftops forever—they risked broken limbs, siege and dead ends—so when they had drawn a precious minute or two ahead, they used the time to make their way down a drainpipe onto the street.

There was no one in sight when they touched the cobblestones, and they had a clear run. Laurent, who knew the town, took the lead, and after two turns they were in a new quarter. Laurent led them down a narrow, arched passageway between two houses, and they paused there a moment, to catch their breath. Damen saw that the street that this passage fed into was one of the main streets of Nesson, already peopled. These grey hours of dawn were some of the busiest in any town.

He stood with his palm flat against the wall, chest rising and falling. Beside him, Laurent was breathless again, and brilliant with the run. ‘This way,’ Laurent said, moving out towards the street. Damen found that he had caught Laurent’s arm, and was holding him back.

‘Wait. It’s too exposed. You stand out, in this light. Your mousy hair’s like a beacon.’

Wordlessly, Laurent pulled Volo’s woollen cap from his belt.

Damen felt it then, the first dizzy edge of new emotion, and he let go his hold of Laurent like a man fearing a precipice; and yet was helpless.

He said, ‘We can’t. Didn’t you hear it, earlier? They’ve split up.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean if the idea is to lead them on a merry chase through the town so that they don’t follow your messenger, it’s not working. They’ve split their attention.’

‘I,’ said Laurent. He was gazing at Damen. ‘You have very good ears.’

‘You should go,’ said Damen. ‘I can take care of it.’

‘No,’ said Laurent.

‘If I wanted to escape,’ said Damen, ‘I could have tonight. While you bathed. While you slept.’

‘I know that,’ said Laurent.

‘You can’t be in two places at once,’ said Damen. ‘We need to separate.’

‘It’s too important,’ said Laurent.

‘Trust me,’ said Damen.

Laurent looked at him for a long moment without speaking.

‘We’ll wait for you for a day at Nesson,’ Laurent said, eventually. ‘After that, catch up.’

Damen nodded, and moved away from the wall as Laurent set out onto the main street, his jacket still trailing a few laces, his blond hair hidden under the filthy woollen cap. Damen watched him until he was out of sight. Then he turned, and made his way back the way they had come.

* * *

It wasn’t difficult to double back to the inn.

He had no fear for Laurent. He was quite certain that the two men in pursuit of him would be on a fruitless search for half the morning, stumbling along whatever path Laurent’s demented brain thought up for them.

The trouble, as Laurent had implicitly acknowledged, was that the remaining pursuers might have peeled off in order to cut down Laurent’s messenger. A messenger who carried the Prince’s seal. A messenger who was important enough that Laurent had risked his own safety on the chance that he would be here waiting, two weeks later, for an overdue rendezvous.

A messenger who had worn his beard closely trimmed, in the Patran style.

Damen could feel, as he had only begun to feel in the palace, the inexorable machinery of the Regent’s plans. For the first time, he had a glimpse of the effort and planning that it took to hold him back. That Laurent, serpent-minded as he was, might be all that stood between the Regent and Akielos was a chilling thought. Damen’s country was vulnerable, and he knew his own return would temporarily weaken Akielos even further.

He was careful when he approached the inn, but it seemed quiet, at least from the outside. And then he saw the familiar face of Charls, awake merchant-early and on his way to the outbuilding to speak to an ostler.

‘My lord!’ said Charls, as soon as he saw Damen. ‘There were men here

looking for you.'

'Are they still here?'

'No. The whole inn is in uproar. Rumours are flying. Is it true that the man you accompanied was,' Charls lowered his voice, '*the Prince of Vere?* Disguised as a,' his voice lowered again, '*prostitute?*'

'Charls. What happened to the men who were here?'

'They left, and then two of them returned to the inn to ask questions. They must have learned what they wanted because they rode out of here. Perhaps a quarter of an hour ago.'

'They rode?' said Damen, his stomach sinking.

'They were heading southwest. My lord, if there is anything that I can do for my Prince, I am at your service.'

Southwest, along the Veretian border to Patras. Damen said to Charls, 'Do you have a horse?'

* * *

And so began the third chase of what was becoming a very long night.

Except that by now it was morning. Two weeks of pouring over maps in Laurent's tent meant that Damen knew exactly the slender mountain road that the messenger would take—and how easy it would be, on that empty winding path, to cut him down. The two men in pursuit presumably knew it too, and would try to catch him on the mountain road.

Charls had a very good horse. Catching up to a rider in a long chase was not difficult if you knew how to do it: you could not ride full pelt. You had to choose a steady pace that your horse could sustain, and hope that the men you were chasing burned their own mounts out in a burst of early enthusiasm, or were riding inferior horses. It was easier when you knew the horse, knew exactly what it was capable of. Damen didn't have that advantage, but the bay of Charls the merchant set off at a good clip, shook his muscular neck and implied that he was capable of anything.

The terrain grew rockier as they drew closer to the mountains. There were increasingly huge protuberances of granite heaving up on either side, like the bones of the landscape showing through the soil. But the road was clear, at least this section of it near the town; there were no splinters of granite to

maim and fell a horse.

He was lucky, at first. The sun was not yet at the midpoint of the sky when he overtook the two men. He was lucky to have chosen the right road. He was lucky that they had not conserved their sweat-lathered horses, and that when they saw him, instead of splitting up or pushing their exhausted horses forward, they wheeled and turned, wanting to fight. He was lucky they didn't have bows.

Damen's bay gelding was a merchant's horse without battle training, and Damen didn't expect him to be able to run at sharp, waving swords without shying, so he swerved his mount on approach. The two men were thugs not soldiers; they knew how to ride, and they knew how to use swords, but struggled with doing both at the same time—more good luck. When the first man was sent by Damen crashing down from his horse, he didn't get up. The second lost his sword but kept his seat for a while. Long enough to put his heels into his horse and take off.

Or try to. Damen had crowded his mount, causing a minor commotion among the horses, which Damen weathered, but the man did not. He detached from the saddle, but unlike his friend managed to quickly scramble up and try to run for it—again—this time across the countryside. Whoever was paying him obviously wasn't paying him enough to stand and fight, at least not without the odds heavily skewed in his favour.

Damen had a choice: he could leave things as they stood. All he really had to do now was drive off the horses. By the time the men recovered them (if they managed to do so at all) the messenger would be so far ahead that whether he was pursued or not would matter not one whit. But he had hold of the tail end of this plot, and the temptation to learn exactly what was going on was too great.

So he chose instead to conclude the chase. Since he couldn't run his horse across that rocky, uneven ground without breaking its forelegs, he dismounted. The man scrabbled over the landscape for a while before Damen caught up with him under one of the sparse, gnarled trees. There the man tried ineffectually to throw a rock at Damen (which he dodged) and then, turning to run again, twisted his ankle on a loose chunk of granite and fell down.

Damen dragged him up. 'Who sent you?'

The man was silent. His pasty skin was patched over with white fear.

Damen judged the best way to get him to talk.

The blow snapped the man's head to one side, and blood welled and spilled from his split lip.

'Who sent you?' said Damen.

'Let me go,' said the man. 'Let me go, and you might have time to save your Prince.'

'He doesn't need saving from two men,' said Damen, 'especially not if they're as incompetent as you and your friend.'

The man gave a thin smile. A moment later, Damen drove him back into the tree hard enough for his teeth to clack together.

'What do you know?' Damen said.

And that was when the man started talking, and Damen realised he was not lucky at all. He looked up again at the position of the sun, then he looked around himself at the vast, empty terrain. He was half a day's hard ride away from Nesson, and he no longer had a fresh horse.

I'll wait for you for a day at Nesson, Laurent had said. He was going to be too late.

CHAPTER 8

Damen left the man behind him, broken and empty, having spilled out all he knew. He yanked his horse's head around and rode, hard, for the camp.

He had no other choice. He was too late to help Laurent in the town. He had to focus on what he could do. Because there was more than Laurent's life at stake.

The man was one of a group of mercenaries camped in the hills of Nesson. They had planned a three-stage assault: after the attack on Laurent in the town, there was to follow an uprising within the Prince's troop. And if troop and Prince somehow survived and managed, in their damaged state, to continue south, they would fall to a mercenary ambush in the hills.

It had not been easy to prise out all the information, but Damen had provided the mercenary with a sustained, methodical and unrelenting incentive to talk.

The sun had already reached its zenith and had begun to inch back down. To have any chance of making it back to the camp before it was taken apart by the planned insurgency, Damen would need to take his horse off the road, and ride straight, as the crow flies, cross country.

He didn't hesitate, spurring his horse up the first slope.

The ride was a crazy, perilous race across the crumbled edges of the hills. Everything took too long. The uneven ground slowed down his horse. The granite rocks were treacherous and razor sharp, and his horse was tired, so the danger of stumbling was greater. He kept it on the best ground that he could see; when he had to, he gave the horse its head and let it pick its own way across the pitted earth.

Around him was the silent granite-flecked landscape of blocky earth and

rough grass, and with him the knowledge of this threefold threat.

It was a tactic that reeked of the Regent. All of this was: this convoluted trap reaching across the landscape to splinter the Prince from his troop and his messenger, so that to save one meant to sacrifice the other. As Laurent had proven. Laurent, to save his messenger, had surrendered his own safety, sending away his only protector.

Damen tried, for a moment, to think his way into Laurent's situation, to guess how Laurent would evade his pursuers, what he would do. And realised he didn't know. He couldn't even make a first guess. Laurent was impossible to predict.

Laurent, the infuriating, obstinate man that he was, was impossible, wholly and completely. Had he been anticipating this attack all along? His arrogance was unbearable. If he had deliberately left himself open to attack, if he was caught by one of his own games . . . Damen swore, and focused his attention on the ride to the camp.

Laurent was alive. Laurent sidestepped everything he deserved. He was slippery and sly and he had escaped the attack in the town with chicanery and arrogance, as usual.

Curse Laurent for this. The Laurent who had sprawled out by the fire seemed so far away, limbs unwound, relaxed, talking . . . Damen found that memory was inextricably tangled with the glint of Nicaise's sapphire earring, the murmur of Laurent's voice in his ear, the breathless brilliance of the chase, rooftop to rooftop, all of it woven into one long, mad, endless night.

The ground cleared beneath him, and the instant it did so he put his heels again into the flanks of his flagging horse, and rode, hard.

* * *

He was not met by outriders, which made his heart pound. There were columns of smoke, black smoke that he could smell, thick and unpleasant. Damen drove his horse the last of the way to the camp.

The neat lines of tents were demolished, poles snapped and canvas slung at odd angles. The ground was blackened where fire had passed through the camp. He saw men alive but dirt-streaked, weary and grim. He saw Aimeric, white-faced and with a bandaged shoulder, the cloth dark with dried blood.

That the fight was over was obvious. The fires that were burning now were pyres.

Damen swung down from the saddle.

Beside him, his horse was exhausted, blowing hard through flared nostrils, its flanks heaving. Its neck was shiny and dark with sweat, and further patterned with a cross-hatching of raised veins and capillaries.

His eyes raked the faces of the men closest to him; his arrival had garnered attention. None of the men he saw was a yellow-haired prince in a woollen cap.

And just as he feared the worst, just as all that he had not let himself believe for the long ride began to push itself to the front of his mind, Damen saw him, drawn out of one of the mostly intact tents not six steps away, and gone still at the sight of Damen.

He was not wearing the woollen cap. His newly minted hair was uncovered, and he looked as fresh as he had emerging from the baths the night before, as he had waking beneath Damen's hands. But he had resumed the cool restraint, his jacket laced, his expression disagreeable from the haughty profile to the intolerant blue eyes.

'You're alive,' Damen said, and the words came out on a rush of relief that made him feel weak.

'I'm alive,' said Laurent. They were gazing at one another. 'I wasn't sure you'd come back.'

'I came back,' said Damen.

Anything else that he might have said was forestalled by the arrival of Jord.

'You missed the excitement,' said Jord. 'But you're in time for the clean up. It's over.'

'It's not over,' said Damen.

And he told them what he knew.

* * *

'We don't have to ride though the pass,' said Jord. 'We can detour and find another way south. These mercenaries may have been hired to lay ambush, but I doubt they'll follow an army through the heart of its own lands.'

They sat in Laurent's tent. With the damage of the insurgency still awaiting his attention outside, Jord had reacted to Damen's warning of an ambush as to a blow; he had tried to hide it but he was surprised, demoralised. Laurent had shown no reaction whatsoever. Damen tried to stop looking at Laurent. He had a hundred questions. How had he escaped his pursuers? Had it been easy? Difficult? Had he suffered any injury? Was he all right?

He could ask none of them. Instead Damen forced his eyes down to the map spread out on the table. The fight took precedence. He passed a hand over his face, sweeping away any weariness, and oriented himself in the situation. He said, 'No. I don't think we should detour. I think we should face them. Now. Tonight.'

'Tonight? We've barely recovered from the bloodshed this morning,' said Jord.

'I know that. They know that. If you want to have any chance of taking them by surprise, it has to be tonight.'

He had heard from Jord the short, brutal story of the uprising within the camp. The news was bad but it was better than he had feared. It was better than it had appeared when he had first ridden into the camp.

It had begun mid-morning, in Laurent's absence. There had been a small handful of instigators. To Damen, it seemed obvious that the uprising was planned, that the instigators were paid, and that their plan had relied on the fact that the rest of the Regent's men, rabble-rousers, thugs and mercenaries looking for an outlet, would take the first excuse to lash out at the Prince's men, and join in.

They would have, two weeks ago.

Two weeks ago, the troop had been a rabble split into two factions. They had not developed the fledgling camaraderie that now held them together; they hadn't been sent to their sleeping rolls night after night exhausted from trying to outdo one another at some mad, impossible exercise; finding to their surprise after they had stopped cursing their Prince's name, how much they had enjoyed themselves.

If Govart had been in charge, it would have been pandemonium. It would have been faction against faction, the troop splintered, fractured and bearing grudges, and captained by a man who did not wish the company to survive.

Instead, the uprising had been swiftly thwarted. It had been bloody but

brief. No more than two dozen men were dead. There was minor damage to tents and stores. It could have been far, far worse.

Damen thought of all the ways that this might have played out: Laurent dead, or returned to find his troop in tatters, his messenger cut down on the road.

Laurent was alive. The troop was intact. The messenger had survived. This day was a victory, except that the men didn't feel it. They needed to feel it. They needed to fight something, and to win. He pushed the sleep-fog from his mind and tried to put that into words.

'These men can fight. They just—need to know it. You don't have to let the threat of attack chase you halfway across the mountains. You can stand and fight,' he said. 'It's not an army, it's a group of mercenaries small enough to camp in the hills without being noticed.'

'They're big hills,' said Jord. And then: 'If you're right, they're camped and watching us with scouts. The second we ride out, they'll know it.'

'That's why our best chance is to do it now. We're not expected, and we'll have the cover of night.'

Jord was shaking his head. 'Better to avoid the fight.'

Laurent, who had allowed this argument to develop, now with a slight gesture indicated that it should cease. Damen found that Laurent's gaze was on him; a long, impenetrable look.

'I prefer to think my way out of traps,' said Laurent, 'rather than use brute force to simply smash through.'

The words had the air of finality to them. Damen nodded and began to rise when Laurent's cool voice stopped him.

'That's why I think we should fight,' said Laurent. 'It's the last thing I would ever do, and the last thing that anyone, knowing me, would expect.'

'Your Highness—' began Jord.

'No,' said Laurent. 'I have made my decision. Call in Lazar. And Huet, he knows the hills. We plan the fight.'

Jord obeyed, and for a brief moment Damen and Laurent were left alone together.

'I didn't think you'd say yes,' said Damen.

Laurent said, 'I have recently learned that sometimes it is better to simply smash a hole in the wall.'

* * *

There was no time, then, for anything but preparations.

They were to ride out at nightfall, as Laurent announced when he addressed the men. To strike with any chance of success they must work swiftly, as they had never worked. There was a great deal to prove. They had just had their nose bloodied, and now was the moment when they either crawled away snivelling or proved themselves man enough to return the blow and fight.

It was a succinct speech that was equal parts rallying and infuriating, but it certainly had the effect of provoking the men into action—of taking the sullen, nervy energy of the troop, forging it into something useable, and directing it outward.

Damen had been right. They wanted to fight. There was a determination among many of them now that was replacing weariness. Damen heard one of the men mutter that they would hit the ambushers before they knew what was coming. Another swore that he would strike a blow for his fallen comrade.

As he worked, Damen learned the full extent of the damage done by the uprising, some of it unexpected. Asking the whereabouts of Orlant, he was told, simply: ‘Orlant’s dead.’

‘Dead?’ said Damen. ‘He was killed by one of the insurgents?’

‘He was one of the insurgents,’ he was told, shortly. ‘He attacked the Prince as he was returning to camp. Aimeric was there. He was the one who took Orlant down. Got cut up doing it.’

He remembered Aimeric’s tense, white face, and thought it best, before riding out into a fight, to check on the boy. He grew concerned when he learned from one of the Prince’s men that Aimeric had left the camp. He followed the man’s finger-point.

Pushing his way through the trees, he saw Aimeric, who was standing with one hand on the twisted branch of a tree, as though for support. Damen almost hailed him. But then he saw that Jord was weaving through the scattered trees, following Aimeric. Damen stayed silent, not announcing his presence.

Jord put a hand on Aimeric’s back.

‘After the first few times, you stop throwing up,’ he heard Jord say.

‘I’m fine,’ said Aimeric. ‘I’m fine. I just, I’ve never killed anyone before.’

I'll be fine.'

'It's not an easy thing,' said Jord. 'For anyone.' And then: 'He was a traitor. He would have killed the Prince. Or you. Or me.'

'A traitor,' Aimeric echoed hollowly. 'Would you have killed him for that? He was your friend.' And then he said it again in a different voice, 'He was your friend.'

Jord murmured something that was too soft to hear, and Aimeric let himself be folded into Jord's arms. They stayed that way for a long moment, under the swaying branches of the trees; and then Damen saw Aimeric's hands slide into Jord's hair, heard him say, 'Kiss me. Please, I want—' and he stepped away to give them privacy, as Jord tilted Aimeric's chin up, as the branches of the trees moved back and forth, a gentle, shifting veil, covering them up.

* * *

Fighting at night was not ideal.

In the dark, friend and foe were one. In the dark, the terrain took on new importance; the hills of Nesson were rocky and fissured, as Damen now knew intimately, having scoured them with his eyes for hours on the ride that day, picking out a path for his horse. And that was during daylight.

But, in some ways, it was a standard mission for a small troop. Raids from the Vaskian mountains were troublesome to many townships, not only in Vere, but also in Patras and northern Akielos. It was not uncommon for a commander to be sent with a party to clean raiders out of the foothills. Nikandros, the Kyros of Delpha, had spent half his time doing just that, and the other half petitioning the King for monies, on the grounds that the Vaskian raiders he was dealing with were in fact supplied and funded by Vere.

The manoeuvre itself was simple.

There were several sites where the mercenaries might be camped. Rather than playing the odds, they were simply going to draw them out. Damen and the group of fifty men he led were the bait. With them were the wagons that mimicked the appearance of a full troop making an attempt at tiptoeing their way stealthily south, under cover of night.

When the enemy attacked, they would appear to fall back, and instead lead the way to the remainder of the troop led by Laurent. The two groups would trap the attackers between them, cutting off any escape. Simple.

Some of the men had experience with this kind of fighting. They were also at least somewhat familiar with night missions. They had been hoisted out of their beds more than once during the time they'd spent at Nesson, and set to work in the dark. Those were their advantages, alongside the hoped for element of surprise that would leave their attackers scrambling and disorganised.

But there had been no time for scouts, and of the men in the troop, only Huet had even a hazy knowledge of this particular piece of ground. Lack of familiarity with the terrain had been a concern from the start. And as they rode, carts and wagons trundling behind, cheerfully making the right amount of muted noise to announce their presence to anyone scouting for them, the ground around them changed. Granite cliffs heaved up on either side, and the road was becoming a mountain road, with a gentle but steepening slope to the left and a sheer rock face to the right.

It was different enough from the terrain that Huet had imperfectly described to cause concern. Damen looked again at the cliffs and realised his concentration was slipping. It occurred to him that it was his second night in a row without sleep. He shook his head to clear it.

It was not the right terrain for an ambush, or at least, not the type of ambush for which they had prepared. There was no place in the terrain above them for any group of sufficient size to lie in wait with bows, nor could men ride down those cliffs to attack. And no one in their right mind would attack from below. Something was wrong.

He reined his horse in, hard, suddenly aware of the true danger of this location.

'*Stop!*' He sent up the call. 'We need to get off the road. Leave the wagons and ride for that tree line. Now.' He saw the flash of confusion in Lazar's eyes and thought for a single heart-pounding second that his order might not be followed—despite the authority that Laurent had lent him for this mission—because he was a slave. But his words carried. Lazar was the first to move, then the others followed. First the tail of the column, reining around the wagons, then the middle section, and finally the head. *Too slow*, thought Damen, as they struggled past the abandoned wagons.

A moment later, they heard the sound.

It was not the hiss and spit of arrows or the metallic sound of swords. Instead, there was a faint rumbling, a sound familiar to Damen, who had grown up on the cliffs of Ios, the high white cliffs that every now and again during his childhood would crack, break off and tumble into the sea.

It was a rockfall.

'Ride!' went the call, and the individuals of the troop became a single lurching, streaming mass of horseflesh pounding towards the trees.

The first of the men reached the tree line moments before the sound became a roar, the crack and crash of stones, of huge granite boulders large enough to smash into other parts of the cliff and send them driving downwards. The thundering sound, echoing off the walls of the mountain, was frightening and panicked the horses almost more than the boulders at their heels. It was as though the whole surface of the cliff loosened, dissolved into a liquid surface: a rain of stone, a rolling wave of stone.

Wheeling, racing, plunging into the trees, not everyone saw the rockfall hit the road where they had been moments before, cutting them off from the wagons, but falling short of the tree line, as Damen had predicted.

As the dust cleared, the men, coughing, steadied their horses and found their stirrups. Looking about themselves, they found they were intact in number. And while they were cut off from the wagons, they were not cut off from their Prince and the other half of their band, as they would have been if not for this ride, the rockfall slicing the road.

Damen dug in his spurs and forced his horse back to the edge of the road, giving the order for the company to ride for their Prince.

It was a hard, breathless ride. They arrived at the distant ridge of black trees just in time to see a stream of black shapes detach from the ridge and attack the Prince's convoy, in a manoeuvre that was supposed to split the Prince's troop in half, but which was prevented from doing so by Damen and the fifty horse he brought with him, riding into their attack, wrecking their lines and disrupting their momentum.

And then they were in the thick of it, fighting.

In the dense forest of slash and thrust, Damen saw that their attackers were indeed mercenaries, and that after the initial attack they had little in the way of tactics holding them together. Whether this disorganisation was indeed due to the speed with which they had been forced to muster, he

couldn't know. But certainly they had been surprised by the arrival of Damen and his men.

Their own lines held, their discipline held. Damen took point and saw Jord and Lazar close by, on the front. He caught a glimpse of Aimeric, looking pinched and white, but fighting with the same determination he had shown during the drills when he had pushed himself almost to exhaustion to keep up with the other men.

Their attackers fell back, or simply fell. Pulling his sword from the man who had tried to knife him, Damen saw the mercenary at his right fall victim to a precise killing.

'I thought you were supposed to be the bait,' said Laurent.

'There was a change of plan,' said Damen.

There was another brief burst of close fighting. He felt the shift, the moment when the fight was won. 'Form up. Make a line,' Jord was saying. Of the attackers, most were dead. Some had surrendered.

It was over; perched on the side of a mountain, they had won.

A cheer went up, and even Damen, whose standards in these situations were exacting, found he was satisfied with the outcome, considering the quality of the troop and the fighting conditions. This was a job well done.

When the lines were formed and heads were counted it turned out they had only lost two men. Apart from that, a few slices, a few cuts. It would give Paschal something to do, the men said. Victory buoyed everyone. Not even the revelation that they must now dig out their supplies and see about making camp could dampen the happy spirits of the men. Those who had ridden with Damen were particularly proud; they hammered each other on the back and boasted to the others about their escape from the rockfall, which, when they returned to the site to see about unearthing the wagons, everyone agreed was impressive.

In fact, only one of the wagons was smashed beyond repair. It was not the one that held the food or the mouth-rasping wine, another cause for cheer. This time the men hammered Damen on the back. He had achieved new status among them as the quick thinker who had saved half the men and all of the wine. They made camp in record time, and when Damen looked out at the neat lines of the tents, he found himself smiling.

* * *

It was not all revelry and relaxation, as there was inventory to be made, repairs to be started, outriders to be assigned, and men to be set on guard. But the campfires were lit, the wine was passed around, and the mood was jovial.

Caught between duties, Damen saw Laurent speaking with Jord on the far side of the camp, and when Laurent's business with Jord was done, he made his way over.

'You're not celebrating,' said Damen.

He leaned his back against the tree beside Laurent, and let his limbs feel heavy. The sounds of merriment and success drifted over to them, the men drunk on the euphoria of victory, sleeplessness and bad wine. It would be dawn soon. Again.

'I'm not used to my uncle miscalculating,' said Laurent, after a pause.

'It's because he's working at a distance,' said Damen.

'It's because of you,' said Laurent.

'What?'

'He doesn't know how to predict you,' said Laurent. 'After what I did to you in Arles, he thought you'd be—another Govart. Another one of his men. Another one of those men today. Ready to mutiny at a moment's notice. That was what was supposed to have happened tonight.'

Laurent's gaze passed calmly, critically over the troop, before it came to rest on Damen.

'Instead, you have saved my life, more than once. You have made fighters of these men, trained them, honed them. Tonight you handed me my first victory. My uncle never dreamed you'd be this kind of asset to me. If he had, he would never have allowed you to ride out of the palace.'

He could see in Laurent's eyes, hear in his words, a question that he did not want to answer.

He said, 'I should go and help with repairs.'

He pushed away from the tree. He felt an odd dizziness, a sense of displacement, and to his surprise he was prevented from moving off by Laurent's hand clasping his arm. He looked down at it. He thought for a strange moment that it was the first time Laurent had ever touched him, though of course it wasn't; the grip was more intimate than the flutter of Laurent's lips against his fingertips, the sting of Laurent striking his face, or

the press of Laurent's body in a confined space.

'Leave the repairs,' said Laurent. His voice was soft. 'Get some sleep.'

'I'm fine,' said Damen.

'It's an order,' said Laurent.

He was fine, but he had no choice but to do as he was told; and when he tumbled onto his slave pallet and closed his eyes for the first time in two long days and nights, sleep was there, heavy and immediate, drawing him down past the strange new feeling in his chest into oblivion.

CHAPTER 9

‘So,’ Damen heard Lazar say to Jord, ‘what’s it like having an aristocrat suck your dick?’

It was the evening after the rockfall at Nesson, and they were a day’s ride further south. They had set out early, after assessing damage and repairing wagons. Now Damen sat with several of the men, sprawled by one of the campfires, enjoying a moment’s rest. Aimeric, whose arrival had prompted Lazar’s question, had come to sit beside Jord. He returned Lazar a level look.

‘Fantastic,’ Aimeric said.

Good for you, thought Damen. Jord’s mouth quirked up a fraction, but he lifted his cup and drank without saying anything.

‘What’s it like having a prince suck your dick?’ said Aimeric, and Damen found that everyone’s attention was on him.

‘I’m not fucking him,’ he said, with deliberate crudity. It was perhaps the hundredth time he had said it since joining Laurent’s troop. The words were firm, intended to shut down the conversation. But of course they didn’t.

‘That,’ said Lazar, ‘is one mouth I’d love to ream out. A day of him ordering you around, you’d get to shut him up at the end of it.’

Jord gave a snort. ‘He’d take one look at you, and you’d piss your pants.’

Rochert agreed. ‘Yeah. I couldn’t get it up. You see a panther opening its jaws, you don’t get your dick out.’

That was the consensus, with a breakaway dispute: ‘If he’s frigid and doesn’t fuck, there’d not be any fun in it. A cold-blooded virgin makes for the worst ride.’

‘Then you’ve never had one. The ones that are cold on the outside are the hottest once you get in.’

‘You’ve served with him the longest,’ said Aimeric to Jord. ‘Has he

really never taken a lover? He must have had suitors. Surely one of them talked.'

'You want court gossip?' said Jord, sounding amused.

'I only came north at the beginning of this year. I lived at Fortaine before that, my whole life. We don't hear anything there—except about raids and wall repairs and how many children my brothers are having.' It was his way of saying: yes.

'He's had suitors,' said Jord. 'Just none who got him into bed. Not for lack of trying. You think he's pretty now, you should have seen him at fifteen. Twice as beautiful as Nicaise, and ten times more intelligent. Trying to tempt him was a game everyone played. If any of them had landed him, they'd have crowed about it, not kept quiet.'

Lazar made a good-natured sound of disbelief. 'For real,' he said to Damen. 'Who gets a leg over, you or him?'

'They're not fucking,' said Rochert. 'Not when the Prince took his back off just for feeling him up in the baths. Am I right?'

'You're right,' said Damen. He stood up then, and left them to the campfire.

The company was in peak condition after Nesson. The wagons were repaired, and Paschal had patched up the cuts, and Laurent was not smashed by a rock. More than that. The mood from last night had carried over into the day; adversity had drawn these men together. Even Aimeric and Lazar were getting along. After a fashion.

No one mentioned Orlant, not even Jord and Rochert, who had been his friends.

The pieces were all set. They would arrive at the border intact. There would follow an attack, a fight, much as there had been at Nesson, but probably bigger, uglier. Laurent would either survive, or he would not, and after that Damen, having discharged his obligation, would return to Akielos.

It was everything Laurent had asked for.

Damen stopped on the outskirts of the camp. He leaned his back against the trunk of one of the crooked trees. He could see the whole of the camp from here. He could see Laurent's tent, lamp-lit and streaming flags; it was like a pomegranate, its rich excesses on the inside.

Damen had woken from a cocoon of sleep this morning to the sound of a lazy, amused, 'Good morning. No, I don't need anything.' And then: 'Dress

and report to Jord. We ride out when repairs are done.'

'Good morning,' was all Damen had said, after sitting up and passing a hand over his face. He'd found himself simply gazing at Laurent, who was already dressed in riding leathers.

Laurent had raised his brows and said, 'Shall I carry you? It's at least five paces to the tent flap.'

Damen felt the solid bulk of the tree trunk at his back. The sounds of the camp carried in the cool night air, the sounds of hammering and the last of the repairs, the murmured voices of the men, the raising and lowering of hooves to earth from the horses. The men were experiencing camaraderie in the face of a common enemy, and it was natural that he was feeling it too, or something similar, after a night of chases and escapes and fighting alongside Laurent. It was a heady elixir, but he must not get swept up in it. He was here for Akielos not for Laurent. His duty only extended so far. He had his own war, his own country, his own fight.

* * *

The first of the messengers came the next morning, solving at least one mystery.

Since the palace, Laurent had dispatched and greeted riders in a steady stream. Some bore missives from the local Veretian nobility, offering resupply or hospitality. Some were scouts or messengers carrying information. This very morning Laurent had sent a man flying back to Nesson, with money and thanks, to return Charls his horse.

But this rider was nothing like that. Dressed in leathers with no sign of crest or livery, riding a good but plain horse, and most surprising of all—pushing back a heavy cloak—she was a woman.

'Have her brought to my tent,' said Laurent. 'The slave will act as chaperone.'

Chaperone. The woman, who was perhaps forty and had a face like a crag, did not look at all amorous. But the Veretian distaste for bastardry and the act that sired it was so strong that Laurent could not speak with any woman in private without an escort.

Inside the tent, the woman made obeisance, offering a cloth-wrapped gift.

Laurent nodded for Damen to take the parcel, and place it on the table.

‘Rise,’ he said, addressing her in a dialect of Vaskian.

They spoke briefly, a steady back-and-forth. Damen did his best to follow. Here and there, he caught a word. *Safety. Passage. Leader.* He could speak and understand the high language spoken at the court of the Empress, but this was the common dialect of Ver-Vassel, broken down further into mountain slang, and he could not penetrate it.

‘You can open it if you like,’ said Laurent to Damen when they were once again alone in the tent. The cloth-wrapped parcel was conspicuous on the table.

In memory of your morning with us. And for the next time you need a disguise. Damen read the message on the parchment that fluttered out of the parcel.

Curious, he unwrapped another layer of cloth to reveal more cloth: blue and ornate, it spilled out over his hands. The dress was familiar. Damen had last seen it open and trailing laces, worn by a blonde; he’d felt that embroidered ornamentation under his hands; she’d been halfway in his lap.

‘You went back to the brothel,’ said Damen. And then the words *next time* tapped him on the shoulder. ‘You didn’t *wear*—?’

Laurent sat back in the chair. His cool gaze didn’t answer the question one way or another. ‘It was an interesting morning. I don’t usually have the chance to enjoy that kind of company. You know my uncle doesn’t like them.’

‘Prostitutes?’ said Damen.

‘Women,’ said Laurent.

Damen said, ‘He must find it difficult to negotiate with the Empire.’

‘Vannis is our delegate. He needs her, and he resents that he needs her, and she knows it,’ said Laurent.

‘It’s been two days,’ said Damen. ‘The news that you survived Nesson won’t have reached him yet.’

‘This wasn’t his end game,’ said Laurent. ‘That will happen at the border.’

‘You know what he’s going to do,’ said Damen.

‘I know what I would do,’ said Laurent.

* * *

Around them, the landscape started to change.

The townships and villages that they passed, speckling the hills, took on a different aspect: long, low rooftops and other architectural hints that were unmistakably Vaskian. The influence of trade with Vask was stronger than Damen had expected. And this was summer, Jord told him. The trickles of trade swelled in the warmer months, drying up in winter.

‘And the mountain clans ride these hills,’ said Jord, ‘and there’s trade with them too. Or sometimes they just take things. Everyone that rides this stretch of road takes a guard.’

The days were getting hotter, and the nights were hotter as well. They rode south, making steady progress. They were a neat column now, the front riders efficiently clearing the road, leading the occasional wagon to one side to let them ride by. They were two days out from Acquitart, and the people in this region knew their Prince, and sometimes came out to line the roads, greeting him with warm and happy expressions, which was not the way that anyone who knew Laurent greeted him.

He waited until he saw that Jord was alone, and approached him, sitting beside him on one of the scooped-out logs near the fire.

‘Have you really been a member of the Prince’s Guard for five years?’ Damen asked him.

‘Yes,’ said Jord.

‘Is that how long you’d known Orlant?’

‘Longer,’ said Jord, after a pause. Damen thought that was all he was going to say, but: ‘It’s happened before. The Prince has chucked men out of the Guard before, I mean, for being the eyes for his uncle. I thought I was used to the idea that money trumps loyalty.’

‘I’m sorry. It’s hard when it’s someone you know—a friend.’

‘He tried to put you out that one time,’ said Jord. ‘He probably figured that with you out of the way it would be easier to get to the Prince.’

‘I’d wondered about that,’ said Damen.

There was another pause.

‘I don’t think I realised until the other night that this was a killing game,’ said Jord. ‘I don’t think half of the men have realised it. He’s known, though, this whole time.’ Jord pointed his chin in the direction of Laurent’s tent.

That was true. Damen looked across at the tent.

‘He keeps close council. You shouldn’t blame him for that.’

‘I don’t. I wouldn’t fight under anyone else. If there’s anyone alive who can strike a blow that will bloody the Regent’s nose, it’s him. And if he can’t—I’m angry enough now that I’m well pleased to go out fighting,’ Jord said.

* * *

The second Vaskian woman rode into camp the following evening, and this one did not come to deliver a dress.

Damen was given an inventory of items to retrieve from the wagons, wrap up in cloth and place into the woman’s saddlebags: three finely detailed silver drinking bowls, a casket filled with spices, bolts of silks, a set of women’s jewellery and finely carved combs.

‘What are these?’

‘Gifts,’ Laurent had said.

‘You mean bribes,’ he said, later, frowning.

He knew that Vere was on better terms with the mountain people than Akielos or even Patras. If you believed Nikandros, Vere maintained these relations through an elaborate system of payments and bribes. In exchange for funding from Vere, Vaskians raided where they were told. It was probably done exactly like this, thought Damen, eyes raking over the packs. Certainly if the bribes that flowed from Laurent’s uncle were anything like this generous, they could buy enough raiders to henpeck Nikandros forever.

Damen watched as the woman accepted a king’s ransom in silver and jewellery. *Safety. Passage. Leader.* A lot of the same words were exchanged.

It was dawning on Damen that the first woman had not come to deliver a dress either.

The next night, alone in the tent, Laurent said:

‘As we draw closer to the border, I think it would be safer—more private—to hold our discussions in your language rather than mine.’

He said it in carefully pronounced Akielon.

Damen stared at him, feeling as though the world had just been rearranged.

‘What is it?’ said Laurent.

‘Nice accent,’ said Damen, because despite everything, the corner of his mouth was beginning helplessly to curve up.

Laurent’s eyes narrowed.

‘You mean in case of eavesdroppers,’ said Damen, mostly just to see if Laurent knew the word ‘eavesdroppers’.

Steadily: ‘Yes.’

And so they talked. Laurent’s vocabulary hit its limits when it came to military terms and manoeuvres, but Damen filled in the gaps. It was of course no surprise to find that Laurent had a well-stocked armoury of elegant phrases and bitchy remarks, but could not talk in detail about anything sensible.

Damen had to keep reminding himself not to grin. He didn’t know why listening to Laurent pick his way through the Akielon language had him in good spirits, but it did. Laurent did indeed have a pronounced Veretian accent, which softened and blurred consonants and added a lilt, with stresses on unexpected syllables. It transformed the Akielon words, gave them a hint of exoticism, of luxuriousness that was very Veretian, though that effect was at least partially combatted by the precision of Laurent’s speaking. Laurent spoke Akielon as a fastidious man might pick up a soiled handkerchief, between thumb and forefinger.

For his own part, being able to speak freely in his own language was like having a weight lifted from his shoulders that he had not realised he was carrying. It was late when Laurent called a halt to the discussion, pushing a half-drunk goblet of water away from himself, and stretching.

‘We’re done for the night. Come here and attend me.’

Those words rattled around in his mind. Damen stood, slowly. Responding felt more servile when the command came in his own language.

He was presented with a familiar view of straight shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist. He was used to stripping Laurent of his armour, his outer clothes. It was a normal evening ritual between them. Damen took a step forward, and put his hands on the fabric above Laurent’s shoulder blades.

‘Well? Begin,’ said Laurent.

‘I don’t think we need a private language for this,’ he said.

‘You don’t like it?’ said Laurent.

He knew better than to say what he did or didn’t like. Laurent’s voice held a hint of interest at his discomfort that was always dangerous. They were

still speaking in Akielon.

‘Perhaps if I were more authentic,’ said Laurent. ‘How does an owner command a bed slave in Akielos? Teach me.’

Damen’s fingers were tangled in laces; they went still over a first sliver of white shirt. ‘Teach you how to command a bed slave?’

‘You said in Nesson that you had used slaves,’ said Laurent. ‘Don’t you think I should know the words?’

He forced his hands to move. ‘If you own a slave, you may command him however you like.’

‘I haven’t found that necessarily to be the case.’

‘I would prefer you to talk to me as a man,’ he heard himself say. Laurent turned under his hands.

‘Unlace the front,’ said Laurent.

He did. He pushed the jacket off Laurent’s shoulders, moving forward to do it. His hands slid into the garment. He felt rather than heard his voice change in the intimate space. ‘But if you would rather—’

‘Step back,’ said Laurent.

He stepped back. Laurent, in a shirt, seemed more himself; elegant, controlled, dangerous.

They gazed at one another.

‘Unless you need anything,’ he heard himself say, ‘I’ll go and bring in some more coals for the brazier.’

‘Go,’ said Laurent.

* * *

Morning. The sky was a startling shade of blue. The sun blazed and everyone was dressed in leathers for the ride. It was better than armour, which by noon would have baked them. Damen had an armful of tack and was talking to Lazar about the day’s itinerary, when he caught sight of Laurent across the camp. As he watched, Laurent swung up into the saddle and sat straight-backed, holding the reins in one gloved hand.

Last night, he had tended to the brazier and performed all his duties, and then he had gone out to the nearby stream to wash. The stream was pebbled at its banks and ran fresh and clear but was not dangerously fast-running; it

deepened out in the centre. Despite the lack of light, two of the servants had still been pounding linens that in this weather would be dry by morning. The water had been bracing cold in the warm night. He had dunked his head and let it run over his chest and shoulders, then he had scrubbed down and waded out and pushed the water from his hair.

Beside him, Lazar was saying, 'It's a day's ride to Acquitart, and Jord says it's our last stop before Ravenel. Do you know if—'

Laurent was well made and capable, and Damen was a man, as other men. Half the soldiers in this camp wanted Laurent under them. The body's reaction could be discounted, as it had been, determinedly, at the inn. Any man would have been roused by Laurent playing pet in his lap. Even knowing what was under the earring.

'All right,' he heard Lazar say.

He'd forgotten Lazar was there. After a long moment, he took his eyes off Laurent and looked back at Lazar, who was gazing at him with a rather dry but understanding smile quirking the side of his mouth.

'All right what?' said Damen.

'All right, you're not fucking him,' said Lazar.

CHAPTER 10

‘Welcome to my ancestral home,’ said Laurent, dryly.

Damen glanced sideways at him, then let his gaze pass over the worn walls of Acquitart.

No troops and little strategic importance, were the words Laurent had used to describe Acquitart to the court, on the day the Regent had stripped him of all his holdings except this one.

Acquitart was small and old, and the village attached to it was a cluster of impoverished stone houses adhering to the base of the inner fort. There was no land available here for farming, and hunting might provide only a couple of chamois perched on rocks, that would disappear—leaping upward at the slightest approach of men—to a vantage where a horse could not follow.

And yet, when they approached, it was not poorly maintained. The barracks were in good repair, and so was the interior courtyard, and there were supplies of food and of weapons and materials to replace the damaged wagons. Everywhere he looked, Damen saw evidence of planning. Those stores had not come from Acquitart or its surrounds, they had been brought in from elsewhere, in preparation for the arrival of Laurent’s men.

The caretaker was named Arnoul, an old man who took command of the servants and the wagons and started directing everybody. His wrinkled face unfolded in pleasure when he saw Laurent. Then folded back in on itself when he saw Damen.

‘You once said that your uncle couldn’t take Acquitart away from you,’ Damen said to Laurent. ‘Why is that?’

‘It’s an independent governance. Which is absurd. On a map, it’s a speck. But I am Prince of Acquitart, as well as Prince of Vere, and the laws of Acquitart don’t require me to be twenty one to inherit. It’s mine. There’s

nothing my uncle can do to take it,' said Laurent. And then he said, 'I suppose he could invade.' And then: 'His men could wrestle Arnoul in the stairwell.'

'Arnoul seems to have mixed feelings about us staying here,' said Damen.

'We're not staying here. Not tonight. You are going to meet me at the stables after dark, when you have finished all of your usual duties. Discreetly,' said Laurent. He said it in Akielon.

It was dark by the time Damen had finished his duties. The men who usually looked after the supplies and the wagons and the horses had been given the night off, and the soldiers too had been given license to enjoy themselves. Barrels of wine had been cracked open and the barracks were a lively place to be that night. No sentries were posted near the stables, or towards the east.

He was turning a corner in the keep when he heard voices. Laurent's directive to be discreet stopped him from announcing himself.

'I'd be more comfortable sleeping in the barracks,' Jord said.

He saw Jord being led by the hand by an intent-looking Aimeric. Jord had the same slight awkwardness about billeting in an aristocrat's chambers that Aimeric had when he attempted swearing.

'That's because you've never slept in a royal keep's residences before,' said Aimeric. 'I promise it's much more comfortable than a tent roll or a lumpy inn mattress. And besides—' He dropped his voice, shifting closer to Jord but the words were still audible. 'I really want you to fuck me in a bed.'

Jord said, 'Come here, then.'

And kissed him, a long, slow kiss with his hand cupping Aimeric's head. Aimeric went attractively pliant, giving himself to the kiss, his arms winding around Jord's neck; his antagonistic nature was apparently not one he exercised between the sheets. Jord, it seemed, brought out the best in him.

They were occupied, like the servants, like the soldiers in the barracks. Everyone in Acquitart was occupied.

Damen slipped past, and made his way to the stables.

* * *

It was more discreet and better planned than the last time they had left camp together, that lesson having been learned the hard way. It still made Damen uncomfortable to separate from the troop, but there was little he could do about it. He arrived in the quiet of the stables; amid muted whickers and shifting of straw he found that Laurent, while he was waiting, had saddled the horses. They rode east.

The sound of cicadas droned around them; it was a warm night. They left the sounds of Acquitart behind them, and the light, and rode under the night sky. As at Nesson, Laurent knew where he was going, even in the dark.

Now, he stopped. They were backed by mountains, surrounded by chasms of stone.

‘You see? There’s actually a place in worse repair than Acquitart,’ Laurent said.

It looked like a towering fortress, but moonlight shone clean through its arches, and its walls were of inconsistent heights, and trailed away in places, crumbling to nothing. It was a ruin, a once-great building that was now nothing but stones and the occasional arched wall. Everything that remained was vine- and moss-covered. It was older than Acquitart, so very old, built by some potentate long before Laurent’s dynasty, or his own. The ground was covered in a night-blooming flower, five-petalled and white, just opening to release its scent.

Laurent swung down from the saddle, then led his horse to one of the ancient protruding stone pieces, tethering it there. Damen did the same, then followed Laurent through one of the stone arches.

This place was making him uneasy, a reminder of how easily a kingdom could be lost.

‘What are we doing here?’

Laurent had walked a few steps from the archway, crushing flowers underfoot. Now he leaned his back against one of the broken-down stones.

‘I used to come here when I was younger,’ Laurent said, ‘with my brother.’

Damen went still, turning cold, but in the next moment the sound of hoofbeats had him turning, his sword singing from its sheath.

‘No. I’m expecting them,’ said Laurent.

* * *

It was women.

A few men, too. The Vaskian dialect was harder to penetrate when it was more than one voice at a time, speaking quickly.

Damen's sword was taken from him, and the knife at his belt was taken too. He didn't like it. At all. Laurent was allowed to keep his own weapons, perhaps in respect of his status as a prince. When Damen looked around, only the women were armed.

And then Laurent said something he liked even less: 'It is not permitted to see the approach to their camp. We will be taken there under blindfold.'

Blindfold. He barely had time to absorb the idea before Laurent acquiesced to the nearest woman. Damen saw the blindfold being slipped over Laurent's eyes and tied. Damen was a little stunned by the image. The blindfold covered Laurent's eyes and emphasised his other features, the clean line of his jaw, the fall of his pale hair. It was impossible not to look at his mouth.

A moment later, he felt a blindfold slipped over his own eyes and tied with a hard tug. His vision was extinguished.

They were taken on foot. It was not an elaborate, serpentine deception of a path, such as he had walked under blindfold through the palace in Arles. They simply travelled to their destination. They walked for about half an hour, before they heard the sound of drums, low and constant, growing louder. The blindfold felt more like a requirement of submission than a precaution, because it seemed very possible to trace their steps, both for a man like himself with soldier training, and probably also for Laurent's mathematical mind.

The camp, when the blindfold lifted, comprised of long tents of cured leather, picketed horses and two lit campfires. There were figures moving around the campfires, and they saw the drummers, the drumming echoing out into the night. It looked animated, a little wild.

Damen turned to Laurent. 'This is where we're spending the night?'

'It's a sign of trust,' said Laurent. 'Do you know their culture? Of food and drink, accept anything that is offered to you. The woman beside you is Kashel, she has been appointed your attendant. The woman on the dais is named Halvik. When you are presented to her, go to your knees. Then you

may sit on the ground. Do not accompany me onto the dais.'

He thought they had shown enough trust by coming here alone, under blindfold, without weapons. The dais was a fur-draped wooden structure set up beside the fire. It was half throne, half bed. Halvik sat on it, watching their approach with black eyes that reminded Damen of Arnoul.

Laurent calmly ascended the dais and arranged himself in a languid half-sprawl beside Halvik.

Damen by contrast was shoved to his knees, and a moment later was pulled back to the side of the dais, and made to sit. At least there were furs to sit upon, piled around the fire. And then Kashel came to sit beside him. She offered him a cup.

He was still annoyed, but recalled Laurent's advice. He brought the cup to his lips warily. The liquid was milky white and harsh with the rasp of alcohol; one shallow sip, and he felt hot fire run down his throat into his veins.

On the dais, he saw Laurent wave away a similar cup when it was offered to him, despite the advice he had just given Damen.

Of course. Of course Laurent wasn't drinking. Laurent surrounded himself with the opulent excesses of a courtesan, and lived in them like an ascetic. It was beyond Damen why anyone thought they were fucking. No one who knew Laurent would ever think that.

Damen drained the cup.

They watched a display fight—a wrestling match—and the woman who won was very good, subduing her opponent in a practised hold, and the fight indeed was worth watching.

He decided, after the third cup, that he liked the drink.

It was strong and rousing, and he found himself with a new appreciation of Kashel, who was refilling his cup. She was of a similar age to Laurent, and she was attractive, her body ripened and adult. She had warm brown eyes that glanced up at him through long lashes. She wore her hair in a long black plait that snaked over her shoulder, the tip resting on the firm mound of a breast.

Perhaps it was not such a terrible thing that they had come here, he thought. This was an honest culture, the women here were forthright, and the food was simple but hearty, good bread and spit-roasted meats.

Laurent and Halvik were engaged in talk. Their back-and-forth had the rhythm of a bargain being hammered out. Halvik's flinty stare was returned

by Laurent's impassive blue gaze. It was like watching one stone negotiate with another.

He turned his attention away from the dais, and let himself enjoy, instead, the open exchange with Kashel, which was achieved without language, in a series of long, lingering looks. When she took the cup from his hands, their fingers slid together.

She rose and made her way over to the dais, murmuring something into Halvik's ear.

Halvik sat back, and her attention fixed on Damen. She spoke words to Laurent, who also turned towards Damen.

'Halvik inquires, respectfully, if you will perform a service for her girls,' Laurent said to him in Veretian.

'What service?'

'The traditional service,' said Laurent, 'that Vaskian women claim from the dominant male.'

'I'm a slave. You outrank me.'

'It's not a question of rank.'

It was Halvik who answered, in thickly accented Veretian, 'He is smaller, and has the tongue of a cocotte. His seed will not breed strong women.'

Laurent looked entirely undisturbed by her description. 'In fact, my bloodline does not throw girls at all.'

Damen was watching Kashel as she made her way back to him from the dais. He could hear the sound of drums from the other campfire, a low, constant thrumming.

'Is this—are you ordering me to do this?'

'Do you need orders?' said Laurent. 'I can direct you, if you lack proficiency.'

Kashel was looking at him with open intensity as she came to sit once more beside him. Her tunic had opened a little, and slipped down over one shoulder, so that it seemed that only the swell of her breast held it up. Her chest rose and fell with her breath.

'Kiss her,' said Laurent.

He didn't need to be told what to do or how to do it by Laurent, and he proved that with a long, deliberate kiss. Kashel made a sweet, yielding sound, her fingers already following the path that her eyes had travelled moments before. His hands slid up her tunic and fit almost all the way around her small

waist.

‘You can tell Halvik that it would be my honour to lie with one of her girls,’ said Damen when he drew back, his voice low with pleasure. His thumb brushed over Kashel’s mouth, and she tasted it with her tongue. They were both breathing expectantly.

‘A buck is happiest when mounting a herd.’ He heard Halvik’s voice, speaking to Laurent in Veretian. ‘Come, we will continue our negotiation away from the coupling fire. He will be brought to you when he is done.’

He was aware of Laurent and Halvik departing, as he was aware of the presence of other couples finding their way to the furs by the fire, a flickering peripheral awareness that was subsumed in his desire for Kashel, as their bodies primed to the same task.

It was a hot and fierce joining, the first time. She was a fine, well-made young woman, and she matched him with an intensity that grew out of her laughter as she pulled at his clothes; it had been a long time since he had enjoyed a free, uninhibited exchange of pleasure. She was better at taking off the Veretian clothing than he had been, the first time. Or more determined. She was very determined. She rolled on top of him near the driving, shuddering climax, dropping her head so that her hair, loosened from its plait, hung down and shifted with her movements, curtaining them both.

The second time, he found her more sweetly boneless and willing to be explored, and he roused her to the point that she became hotly, dazedly abandoned to him, which, above all things, he liked.

Later, she lay panting and spent on the furs, and he lay beside her, propping himself up on one arm, and looking down at her sprawled body, appreciatively.

Perhaps there was something in the milky white drink. He had climaxed twice, but he was not driven into lassitude. He was feeling quite pleased with himself, and thinking that Vaskian women did not truly have the stamina that was accredited to them, when another girl came to speak in a teasing voice to Kashel, and then to fit herself into Damen’s surprised arms. Kashel rose up into the sitting position of a spectator, and offered what sounded like cheerful encouragement.

And then, as this new challenge was met, as the drums from the nearby campfire beat in his ears, Damen felt the press of a new body against his back, and realised that they had been joined by more than one girl.

* * *

Clothes were difficult. Laces eluded him. He decided, after a few attempts, that he did not require his shirt. It was taking all his attention to hold his pants up.

Laurent was asleep when Damen found his way to the correct tent, but he stirred in the furs when the tent flap opened, his golden lashes fluttering, then lifting. When he saw Damen, he pushed himself up on one arm and gave a single wide-eyed blink.

Then, soundlessly, behind the press of a hand, he started helplessly laughing.

Damen said, 'Stop. If I laugh, I'll fall over.'

Damen squinted at a separate fur pile near Laurent's, then made his best attempt: he wove, reached and then collapsed down onto it. This seemed the pinnacle of accomplishment. He rolled over on his back. He was smiling.

'Halvik had a lot of girls,' he said.

The words came out sounding like he felt, sated and sex-drenched, exhausted and happy. The furs were warm around him. He was blissfully drowsy, moments away from sleep.

He said, 'Stop laughing.'

When he turned his head to look, Laurent was lying on his side, head propped on one hand, gazing at him, eyes bright.

'This is instructive. I've seen you put half a dozen men in the dirt without breaking a sweat.'

'Not right now, I couldn't.'

'I can see that. You're relieved of your regular duties in the morning.'

'That's nice of you. I can't get up. I'll just lie here. Or did you need something?'

'Oh, how did you know?' said Laurent. 'Take me to bed.'

Damen groaned and found himself laughing after all, in the moment before he pulled the furs over his head. He heard a final sound of amusement from Laurent, and that was all he heard before sleep reached up and claimed him.

* * *

The ride back through the dawn was easy and pleasant. The sky was clear of clouds, and the rising sun was bright; it was going to be a beautiful day. Damen was in good spirits and happy to ride in contented silence. They were abreast, part-way to Acquitart before he thought to ask:

‘Your negotiations went well?’

‘We certainly left in possession of a great deal of new goodwill.’

‘You should do business with the Vaskians more often.’

His cheerfulness shone in this statement. There was a pause. Eventually, and with an odd hesitancy, Laurent asked, ‘Is it different than with a man?’

‘Yes,’ said Damen.

It was different with everyone. He didn’t say this aloud; it was self-evident. For a moment he thought Laurent was on the verge of asking him something more, but Laurent just kept looking at him, a long, unselfconsciously studying look, and said nothing at all.

Damen said, ‘Are you curious about it? Isn’t it supposed to be taboo?’

‘It is taboo,’ said Laurent.

There was another pause.

‘Bastards curse the line, and sour the milk, ruin the crops, and drag the sun out of the sky. But they don’t bother me. I pick all my fights with true-born men. You should probably bathe,’ said Laurent, ‘when we return.’

Damen, who agreed wholeheartedly with this last statement, went to do so as soon as they got back. They entered Laurent’s chamber by means of a part-hidden passage that was so narrow, Damen had to put a great deal of effort into squeezing himself through. When he pushed out of the door to Laurent’s rooms and into the hallway, he found himself face to face with Aimeric.

Aimeric stopped short and stared at Damen. Then he looked at Laurent’s door. Then back at Damen. Damen realised he was still radiating his good mood, and probably looked as if he had fucked all night and then crawled through a passage. He had.

‘We knocked and there was no answer,’ said Aimeric. ‘Jord sent men to find you.’

‘Is there some delay?’ said Laurent, appearing in the doorway.

Laurent was coolly immaculate from top to toe; unlike Damen, he looked

fresh and well rested, with not a hair out of place. Aimeric was staring again.

Then, gathering his attention back together, Aimeric said, ‘The news came an hour ago. There’s been an attack on the border.’

CHAPTER 11

Ravenel was not built to be welcoming to strangers. As they rode through the gates, Damen felt its might and its power. If the stranger was a shirker-prince who was gracing the border only because he'd been prodded and poked there by his uncle, it was less welcoming still. The courtiers who had gathered on the dais in Ravenel's great courtyard had the same stony outward appearance as Ravenel's repelling crenellations. If the stranger was Akielon, the reception was hostile: when Damen followed Laurent up the dais steps, the wave of anger and resentment at his presence was almost palpable.

He had never in his life thought that he would find himself standing inside Ravenel, that the huge portcullis would lift, the massive wooden doors would be unlatched and thrown open, allowing him to pass inside the walls. His father Theomedes had instilled in him respect for the great Veretian forts. Theomedes had ended his campaign at Marlas; to take Ravenel and push north would have meant an extended siege, an enormous allocation of resources. Theomedes had been too wise to embark on an expensive, drawn-out campaign that could lose support from the kyroi, destabilising his kingdom.

Fortaine and Ravenel had remained untouched: the dominant military powers of the region.

Conspicuous and powerful, they required that their Akielon counterparts be equally armed and constantly buffered in numbers. The result on the border was a tense bristle of garrisons, and an abundance of fighters who were not technically at war, but who had never been truly at peace. Too many soldiers and not enough fights: the gathering violence was not diffused by the minor raids and skirmishes that each side disavowed. It was not diffused by

the formal challenges and fights, organised and official, with rules and refreshments and spectators that allowed both sides, smilingly, to kill each other.

A prudent ruler would want a seasoned diplomat overseeing this fraught standoff, not Laurent, who had arrived like a wasp at an outdoor feast, annoying everybody.

‘Your Highness. We were expecting you two weeks ago. But we were glad to hear that you enjoyed the inns of Nesson,’ said Lord Touars. ‘Perhaps we can find you something equally entertaining to do here.’

Lord Touars of Ravenel had the shoulders of a soldier and a scar that ran from the corner of one eyelid all the way down to his mouth. He stared at Laurent flatly as he spoke. Beside him, his eldest son Thevenin, a pale, pudgy boy of perhaps nine years, was staring at Laurent with the same expression.

Behind that, the rest of the courtly greeting party stood unmoving. Damen could feel the eyes on him, heavy and unpleasant. These were border men and women, who had been fighting Akielos their whole lives. And each of them was charged with the news that they had heard this morning: an Akielon attack had destroyed the village of Breteau. There was war in the air.

‘I am not here to be entertained, but to hear the reports of the attack that crossed my borders this morning,’ said Laurent. ‘Assemble your captains and advisors in the great hall.’

It was usual for arriving guests to first rest and change out of their riding clothes, but Lord Touars made an acceding gesture, and the gathered courtiers began to progress inwards. Damen made to leave with the soldiers, and was surprised by Laurent’s curt order: ‘No. Follow me inside.’

Damen glanced again at the armoured walls. It was not the time for Laurent to exercise his tendentious instincts. At the entrance to the great hall a liveried servant stepped into their path, and with a shallow bow said, ‘Your Highness, Lord Touars prefers that the Akielon slave does not come into the hall.’

‘I prefer that he does,’ was all Laurent said, pacing forward, and leaving Damen no choice but to follow.

It had not been an entry into a town such as a prince would usually make, with a parade, and entertainments and days of feasts hosted by the lord. Laurent had ridden in at the head of his troop without any other spectacle, though people had come into the streets nonetheless, craning for a glimpse of

a bright gold head. Any antipathy the commons might have felt towards Laurent had disappeared the moment they saw him. Ecstatic adoration. It had been that way in Arles, in all of the towns they had passed through. The golden prince was at his best when viewed from sixty paces, out of spitting range of his nature.

Since the entry, Damen's eyes had been on Ravenel's fortifications. Now he took in the dimensions of the great hall. It was massive, and built for defence, its doors two storey high, a place in which the whole of the garrison could be called together to receive orders and from which they could rapidly be directed simultaneously upon every point of the enceinte. It could also function as a point of retreat, if the walls were forced. Of troops stationed in this fort, Damen guessed there were perhaps two thousand in total. It was more than enough to crush Laurent's contingent of one hundred and seventy-five horse. If they had ridden into a trap, they were already dead.

The next shoulder that interposed itself in his path had an armoured shoulderpiece and a cape attached to it. The cape was of an aristocrat's quality. The man who wore the cape spoke.

'An Akielon has no place in the company of men. Your Highness will understand.'

'Is my slave making you nervous?' said Laurent. 'I can understand that. It takes a man to handle him.'

'I know how to handle Akielons. I don't invite them indoors.'

'This Akielon is a member of my household,' said Laurent. 'Step back, Captain.'

The man stepped back. Laurent took his seat at the head of the long wooden table. Lord Touars sat in the lesser position to his right. Damen knew some of these men by reputation. The man in the armoured shoulderpiece and cape was Enguerran, Lord Touars's troop commander. Further down the table was the advisor Hestal. The nine-year-old son Thevenin was joining them also.

Damen was not given a seat. He stood behind Laurent and to the left, and watched as another man entered—a man Damen knew very well, though this was the first time Damen had ever faced him standing, having been trussed up on every other occasion.

It was the Ambassador to Akielos, who was also Councillor to the Regent, Lord of Fortaine, and Aimeric's father.

‘Councillor Guion,’ said Laurent.

Guion did not greet Laurent, but simply let the distaste on his face show plainly as his eyes passed over Damen.

‘You have brought a beast to the table. Where is the Captain your uncle appointed you?’

‘I stuck my sword through his shoulder, then had him stripped and run out of the company,’ said Laurent.

A pause. Councillor Guion regrouped. ‘Your uncle knows of this?’

‘That I spayed his dog? Yes. I think we have more important things to speak of?’

As the silence stretched out, it was Captain Enguerran who simply said, ‘You are correct.’

They began to discuss the attack.

Damen had heard the first reports alongside Laurent in Acquitart that morning. Akielons had destroyed a Veretian village. That was not what had made him angry. The Akielon attack was retaliation. The day before, a border raid had swept through an Akielon village. The familiarity of being angry with Laurent had sustained him through several exchanges. Your uncle paid raiders to cut down an Akielon village. ‘Yes.’ People are dead. ‘Yes.’ Did you know this would happen? ‘Yes.’

Laurent had said to him calmly, ‘You knew my uncle wanted to provoke conflict at the border. How else did you think he was going to do it?’ At the end of those exchanges, there had been nothing left to do but get on his horse and ride to Ravenel, spending the ride with his gaze fixed on the back of a yellow head that was infuriatingly not to blame for these attacks, no matter how much he wanted to think so.

In those initial reports at Acquitart, they had not been told the size and extent of the Akielon retaliation. It had begun before dawn. It was no small band of attackers, nor was it a strike that tried to disguise itself. It was an Akielon troop, full sized, armed and armoured, claiming retribution for a raid on one of their own villages. By the time the sun rose, they had slaughtered several hundred in the village of Breteau, among them Adric and Charron, two members of minor nobility who had detoured their small retinue from a camp a mile or so off to fight to protect the villagers. The Akielon raiders lit fires, they killed livestock. They killed men and women. They killed children.

It was Laurent who, at the end of the first round of discussion, said, ‘An

Akielon village was also attacked?’ Damen looked at him in surprise.

‘There was an attack. It was not of this scale. It was not done by us.’

‘Who was it done by?’

‘Raiders, mountain clans, it hardly matters. Akielons will take any excuse to spill blood.’

‘So you have not tried to find out the perpetrator of the original attack?’ said Laurent.

Lord Touars said, ‘If I did find him, I would shake his hand, and send him on his way with my thanks for his killings.’

Laurent tipped his head back on the chair and looked at Touars’s son Thevenin.

‘Is he that lenient with you?’ Laurent said to Thevenin.

‘No,’ said Thevenin, incautiously. And then he flushed, finding his father’s black eyes on him.

‘The Prince is light in his manner,’ said Councillor Guion, with his eyes on Damen, ‘and does not seem to like to blame Akielos for any wrongdoing.’

‘I don’t blame insects for buzzing when someone kicks their hive over,’ said Laurent. ‘I find myself curious about who it is that wants to see me stung.’

Another pause. Lord Touars’s gaze flickered coldly to Damen, then back again. ‘We will not discuss this further in the presence of an Akielon. Send him out.’

‘Out of respect to Lord Touars, leave us,’ said Laurent, without turning around.

Laurent had made his point earlier. Now he had more to gain by asserting his authority in Damen’s direction. This was a meeting that might spark a war—or stop one, Damen told himself. This was a meeting that might determine the future of Akielos. Damen bowed, and did as he was told.

* * *

Outside, he walked the length of the fort, throwing off the sticky feel of the Veretian web of politics and manoeuvring.

Lord Touars wanted a fight. Councillor Guion was openly warmongering. He tried not to think that the future of his country now came down to

Laurent, talking.

He understood that these border lords represented the heart of the Regent's faction. They were of his generation. They would have spent the last six years receiving his favours. And with land here on the border they had the most to lose from the uncertain leadership of a young, untried prince.

As he walked, he let his eyes pass over the walls of the fort. Ravenel's Captain had them manned in meticulous formation. He saw excellent sentry postings and well-organised defences.

'You. What are you doing here?'

'I'm part of the Prince's Guard. I'm returning to the barracks on his orders.'

'You're on the wrong side of the fort.'

Damen let his brows rise on a wide-eyed expression, and pointed. 'That's west?'

The soldier said, '*That's* west.' A gesture to one of the soldiers nearby. 'Escort this man to the barracks where the Prince's men are stationed.' In the next moment, a firm grip on his upper arm.

He was steered with personal attention all the way to the entry to the barracks, where he was deposited in front of Huet, who was on watch. 'Keep him from wandering off again.'

Huet grinned. 'Lose your way?'

'Yes.'

The grin continued. 'Too tired to concentrate?'

'I wasn't given directions.'

'I see.' Grin.

And, of course, there was this. From Aimeric, growing in the retelling since this morning, had risen a very particular tale. Damen had been receiving grins and slaps on the back all day. Laurent was the recipient meanwhile of newly appreciative looks. Laurent had risen yet another notch in the esteem of the men, now that they understood that whatever they had previously assumed of his habits in bed, the Prince clearly galloped his barbarian slave under a tight rein.

Damen ignored it. It was not the time for trivial matters.

Jord looked surprised to see him returned so quickly, but said that Paschal had asked for someone to be assigned to him, which should suit Damen, since the Prince would likely be all night, knocking sense into hard border heads.

He should have realised, before he walked into the long room, what he'd been sent to do.

'Jord sent you?' said Paschal. 'He has a sense of irony.'

'I can go,' said Damen.

'No. I asked for someone with strong arms. Boil some water.'

He boiled water and brought it to Paschal, who was engaged in the business of holding men together after they had been cut apart.

Damen kept his mouth shut and simply performed the tasks as Paschal directed. One of the men had his clothes folded open over a wound to his shoulder, too near the neck. Damen recognised the diagonal downward slice that Akielons practised to take advantage of limitations in Veretian armour.

Paschal talked as he worked.

'A few lowborn survivors from Adric's retinue were recognised, and brought back. A journey of miles bouncing around on a litter. It brought them the services of the fort physicians, who have done, as you can see, very little. The lowborn who are not soldiers get the least patching. Bring me that knife. Is your stomach as strong as your arms? Hold him down. Like this.'

Damen had seen physicians at work before. As a commander he had done the rounds of the injured. He had also some rudimentary field knowledge of his own, taught to him in case he should ever find himself wounded and separated from his men, which as a boy had been a thrilling prospect, though it had not, in those days, ever been likely. Tonight was the first night he had ever worked alongside a physician trying to keep life inside of men. It was ceaseless, involved and physical.

Once or twice, he glanced at the low stretcher in the shadowed back of the room with a sheet passed over it. After a few hours, the door hanging was pushed open and tied back, as a party entered.

They were all lowborn, three men and a woman, and the man who had tied back the hanging directed them to the stretcher. The woman sat down heavily beside it and made a low sound.

She was a servant, perhaps a washerwoman judging by the forearms and the cap. She was young too, and Damen wondered if this was her husband, or her kin, a cousin, a brother.

Paschal quietly to Damen, 'Return to your Captain.'

'I'll leave you to the room,' said Damen, nodding.

The woman turned, wet-eyed. He realised that she had heard his accent.

He knew that he possessed the colouring characteristic of Akielos, especially of the southern provinces. That alone might not have been enough to identify him as Akielon here on the border, except that he had spoken.

‘What is one of them doing here?’ she said.

Paschal said to Damen, ‘Go.’ It was too late.

‘You did this. Your kind.’ She moved past Paschal, who was stepping forward.

It wasn’t pleasant. She was strong, a woman in the prime of her life, with strength born of hauling water and pounding linen. Damen had to exert himself to hold her off, gripping her by the wrists, and one of Paschal’s tables was knocked over. It took her two male companions to pull her back. Damen raised a hand to his cheek where one of her nails had scratched him. It came back with a smear of blood.

They took her out. Paschal said nothing but silently began righting implements. The men returned after a while and took out the body, bearing it on a wooden support between. One of them paused his progress in front of Damen and just regarded him steadily. Then the man spat on the ground in front of him. They left.

Damen tasted something unpleasant in his mouth. He recalled with perfect clarity the herald who had spat on the ground in front of his father, in the war tent at Marlas. It was the same expression.

He looked at Paschal. He knew this about Veretians.

‘They hate us.’

‘What did you expect?’ said Paschal. ‘The raids are constant. And it was only six years ago that Akielons drove these men out of their homes, out of their fields. They have seen friends, family killed, children taken as slaves.’

‘They kill us too,’ said Damen. ‘Delpha was taken from Akielos in the days of King Euandros. It was right that she revert to Akielon rule.’

‘As she has,’ said Paschal. ‘For now.’

* * *

Laurent’s cool blue gaze revealed nothing about the meeting, not even that it had been long: four hours of talking. He still wore his jacket, and his riding boots. He regarded Damen expectantly.

‘Report.’

‘I didn’t manage to make a full circuit of the walls, I was stopped on the west side. But I’d say there are between fifteen and seventeen hundred men stationed here. It looks like Ravenel’s usual defensive contingent. The storehouses are full enough, but not at capacity. I didn’t see any signs of war preparations, aside from the outriders and doubled guard since this morning. I think this attack took them by surprise.’

‘It was the same in the great hall. Lord Touars did not have the manner of a man who was expecting a fight, for all he wants one.’

Damen said, ‘So the border lords are not working with your uncle to incite this war.’

‘I don’t think Lord Touars is,’ Laurent said. ‘We ride to Breteau. I have won us two or three days. It was grudging. But it will take that long for any communication from my uncle to arrive, and Lord Touars is not going to wage a breakaway war on Akielos all by himself.’

Two or three days.

It was coming; it was visible on the horizon. Damen drew in a breath. Long before troops assembled on either side of the border, he would return to fight on the side of Akielos. Damen looked at Laurent, and tried to imagine facing him over battle lines.

He had been caught up in the energy of—creating something. Laurent’s determination, the ability he had to beat odds had infected him. But this wasn’t a chase through a town, or a game of cards. This was Vere’s most powerful lords unfurling their banners for war.

‘Then we ride to Breteau,’ said Damen.

And he stood, without looking again at Laurent, and began the last preparations for bed.

* * *

They were not the first to arrive at Breteau.

Lord Touars had sent out a contingent of men to protect what remained, and to bury or burn the bodies, so that they would not attract disease or scavengers looking for carrion.

They were a small group of men. They had worked hard. Each of the

barns, huts and outbuildings had been checked for survivors, and those few there were had been taken into one of the physician's tents. The quality of the air was thick with the smell of burnt wood and straw, but there were no smouldering patches of ground. The fires had been put out. The pits were already half dug.

Damen's eyes passed over a deserted hut, a broken spear-shaft protruding from a lifeless form, the remains of an outdoor gathering with knocked-over cups of wine. The villagers had fought. Here and there, one of the fallen Veretians was still clutching a hoe or a rock, or a pair of shears, or any of the crude weapons that a villager could muster at short notice.

Laurent's men gave the respect of quiet hard work, clearing methodically, a little gentler when the body was that of a child. They didn't seem to remember who and what Damen was. They gave him all the same tasks and worked alongside him. He felt awkward, conscious of the obtrusiveness, the disrespect of his presence. He saw Lazar draw a cloak over a woman's body and make a small gesture of farewell, such as was used in the south. He felt all the way down to his bones how unprotected this place had been.

He told himself that this was an eye-for-an-eye retaliation for a raid on Akielos. He even understood how and why it might have happened. An attack on an Akielon village demanded retribution, but the Veretian border garrisons were too strong to target. Not even Theomedes, with all the might of the kyroi behind him, had wanted to challenge Ravenel. But a smaller party of Akielon soldiers might cross the border between the garrisons, might penetrate into Vere, find a village that was unprotected, and smash it.

Laurent had come to stand beside him.

'There are survivors,' said Laurent. 'I want you to question them.'

He thought of the woman, struggling in his arms. 'I shouldn't be the one who—'

'Akielon survivors,' said Laurent, shortly.

Damen drew in a breath, not liking this at all.

He said, carefully, 'If Veretians had been captured after this kind of attack on an Akielon village, they would have been executed.'

'They will be,' said Laurent. 'Find out what they know about the raid on Akielos that provoked this attack.'

There were no restraints such as he had briefly supposed, but as he drew close to the pallet in the dark hut he saw how little need the Akielon prisoner

had for them. In and out, his breathing was audible. The wound to his stomach had been tended. It was not of the sort that could be healed.

Damen sat down by the pallet.

It was no one he knew. It was a man with thick curling dark hair and dark eyes with heavy lashes; the hair was sweat-tangled, and sweat filmed his brow. The eyes were open, and watching him.

In his own language, Damen said, 'Can you speak?'

The man gave a rattling, unpleasant breath and said, 'You are Akielon.'

Under the blood, he was younger than Damen had first thought. Nineteen or twenty.

'I'm Akielon,' said Damen.

'We have—retaken the village?'

He owed this man honesty; he was a countryman and close to the end. He said, 'I serve the Veretian Prince.'

'You dishonour your blood,' said the man, in a voice thick with hate. He flung the words with all his remaining strength.

Damen waited for the spasm of pain and effort that wracked him after that to pass, for his breathing to return to the laboured rhythm it had had when he entered the sickroom. When it did, he said, 'A raid on Akielos provoked this attack?'

Another breath, in and out. 'Did your Veretian master send you to ask that?'

'Yes.'

'Tell him—his coward's attack on Akielos killed less than we did.' Proudly.

Anger was not useful. It came over him in a wave, and so for a long time he didn't speak, just stared at the dying man, flatly.

'Where was the attack?'

A breath like bitter laughter, and the man closed his eyes. Damen thought he wasn't going to say more, but: 'Tarasis.'

'It was clan raiders?' Tarasis lay in the foothills.

'They pay raiders.'

'They rode through the mountains?'

'What does your master care for—this?'

'He is trying to stop the man who attacked Tarasis.'

'Is that what he told you? He's lying. He's Veretian. He will—use you for

his own ends—as he uses you now, against your own people.’

The words were growing more laboured. Damen’s eyes passed over the haggard face, the sweat-drenched curls. He spoke in a different voice.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Naos.’

‘Naos, you fought under Makedon?’ For Naos wore the notched belt. ‘He used to buck even at the edicts of Theomedes. But he was always loyal to his people. He must have felt them badly wronged to break Kastor’s treaty.’

‘Kastor,’ said Naos, ‘the false king. Damianos—should have been our leader. He was the prince-killer. He understood what Veretians are. Liars. Deceivers. He would never have—climbed into their—beds as Kastor has done.’

‘You’re right,’ said Damen, after a long moment. ‘Well, Naos. Vere is rousing its troops. There is very little to stop the war you want.’

‘Let them come—Veretian cowards hide in their forts—afraid of an honest fight—let them step outside—and we will cut them down—as they deserve.’

Damen said nothing, he just thought of an unprotected village now turned to stillness and silence outside. He stayed by Naos until the rattle was quiet. Then he rose and went out of the hut, through the village, and back to the Veretian camp.

CHAPTER 12

Damen gave the story of Naos a stark, unadorned retelling. When it was finished Laurent said in an inflectionless voice, ‘The word of a dead Akielon, unfortunately, is worth nothing.’

‘You knew before you sent me in to question him that his answers would lead to the foothills. These attacks were timed to coincide with your arrival. You are being drawn away from Ravenel.’

Laurent gave Damen a long, pensive look and said, eventually, ‘Yes, the trap is closing and there is nothing else to be done.’

Outside Laurent’s tent, the grim clean up continued. On his way to saddle the horses, Damen came across Aimeric, dragging tent canvas that was slightly too heavy for him. Damen looked at Aimeric’s tired face and his dust-covered clothes. He was a long way from the luxuries of his birth. Damen wondered for the first time what it felt like to Aimeric to ally himself against his own father.

‘You’re leaving camp?’ said Aimeric, looking at the packs Damen held. ‘Where are you going?’

‘You wouldn’t believe me,’ said Damen, ‘if I told you.’

* * *

It was a case where numbers were not helpful, only speed, stealth and knowledge of the territory. If you were going to spy for evidence of a strike force in the hills, you did not want the sound of pounding hooves and the flash of burnished helmets announcing your intentions.

The last time that Laurent had chosen to separate himself from the troop, Damen had argued against it. *The easiest way for your uncle to get rid of you*

is to separate you from your men, and you know it, he'd said at Nesson. This time Damen didn't put any of his arguments, though the ride Laurent was proposing this time was through one of the most heavily garrisoned regions on the border.

The route they would travel would take them a day's ride south, then into the hills. They would seek out any obvious evidence of an encampment. Failing that, they would attempt to rendezvous with the local clans. They had two days.

An hour put several miles between them and the rest of Laurent's men, and that was when Laurent pulled on a rein and circled his horse around Damen's briefly; he was watching Damen as though he was waiting for something.

'Think I'm going to sell you to the nearest Akielon troop?' said Damen.

Laurent said, 'I'm quite a good rider.'

Damen looked at the distance that separated his horse from Laurent's—about three lengths. It was not much of a head start. They were now circling each other.

He was ready for the moment when Laurent put his heels into his horse. The ground flashed by and an interval passed breathlessly with some very fast riding.

They couldn't maintain the pace: they only had one set of horses, and the first declivity was lightly forested, so that weaving was essential and a gallop or fast canter impossible. They slowed, found leaf-strewn paths. It was mid afternoon, the sun high-flung in the sky, and the light streamed down through the tall trees, dappling the ground and turning the leaves bright. Damen's only experience of long, cross-country riding was in a group—not two men alone on a single mission.

It was a good feeling, he found, with the flash of Laurent's insouciant riding ahead of him. It felt good to ride out knowing that the outcome of the ride was dependant upon his own actions, rather than being delegated away to someone else. He understood that the border lords, determined on a course of action, would find a way to dismiss or ignore any evidence that did not fit their plans. But he was here to follow the thread of Breteau to its conclusion, regardless. He was here to find out the truth. That idea was satisfying.

After a few hours, Damen emerged from the trees into the clearing on the edge of a stream, where Laurent was waiting, resting his horse. The stream

flowed quick and clear. Laurent let his horse stretch out its neck, let six inches of reins slip through his fingers, easy in the saddle as his horse dropped its head, seeking out water, blowing across the surface of the stream.

Relaxed in the sunlight, Laurent watched him approach, as one expecting an arrival welcome and familiar. Behind him the light was bright on the water. Damen let his horse grasp the bit and draw him forward.

Cleaving the silence came the sound of an Akielon horn.

It was loud and sudden. The birds in the nearby trees made disrupted notes of their own and flew upwards out of the branches. Laurent whirled his horse in the direction of the sound. The horn came from over the rise, which could be seen from the disturbance of the birds. With a single look at Damen, Laurent pressed his mount over the stream, towards the crest of the hill.

As they rode up the slope, a sound began to intrude over the noise of the fast-running stream water, as if many feet were in half-regular march. It was a sound he knew. It did not come only from the tramp of leather boots on the earth but from hooves, the clinks of armour and the turning of wheels, all of which gave it its irregular pattern.

Laurent reined in his horse as they crested the hill together, barely hidden from sight behind outcrops of granite.

Damen looked out.

The men spanned the length of the adjoining valley, a line of red cloaks in perfect formation. At this distance, Damen could see the man blowing the horn, the ivory curve that he raised to his lips, the flash of bronze at the tip. The standards that were flying were the standards of the commander Makedon.

He knew Makedon. He knew that formation, he knew the weight of that armour, he knew the feel of the spear-shaft in his hand—everything was familiar. The sense of home and the yearning for home threatened to overwhelm him. It would feel so right to rejoin them, to emerge from the grey maze of Veretian politics, and return to something that he understood: the simplicity of knowing his enemy, and facing a fight.

He turned.

Laurent was watching him.

He remembered Laurent sizing up the distance between two balconies and saying, '*Probably,*' which, once appraised, had been enough for him to jump. He was looking at Damen with the same expression.

Laurent said, 'The nearest Akielon troop is nearer than I expected.'

'I could throw you over the back of my horse,' Damen said.

He wouldn't even need to do that. He would just need to wait. Outriders would be galloping through these hills.

The horn split the air again; every mote of Damen's body seemed to ring with it. Home was so close. He could take Laurent down the hill and deliver him into Akielon captivity. The desire to do that thrummed in his blood. Nothing was standing in his way. Damen pressed his eyes closed briefly.

'You need to take cover,' Damen said. 'We're inside their scouting lines. I can ride as lookout until they've moved on.'

'Very well,' Laurent said, after a heartbeat passed with his eyes watching Damen steadily.

* * *

They agreed on a rendezvous, and Laurent took off with the restrained urgency of a man who has to find some way to hide sixteen hands of bay gelding behind a shrub.

Damen's job was harder. Laurent had not been out of sight ten minutes before Damen heard the unmistakable vibration of hooves, and he barely had time to dismount and hold his horse silently, pressed into a tangle of undergrowth, before two riders thundered by.

He had to be cautious—not only for Laurent's sake, but also his own. He was wearing Veretian clothing. Under normal circumstances, an encounter with an Akielon outrider would not be a threat to a Veretian. At worst, there would be some unpleasant posturing. But this was Makedon, and among his forces were the men who had destroyed Breteau. To men like that, Laurent would be a prize beyond measure.

But because there were things that he needed to know, he left his horse in the best hiding place he could find, a dark, quiet gap between outcroppings of rock, and went on foot. It took perhaps an hour before he knew the pattern of their riding, and all he needed of the main troop, their number, intent and direction.

It was at least a thousand men, armed and provisioned, and travelling west, which meant that they were being sent to supply a garrison. These were

the sorts of war preparations that he had not seen at Ravenel, the filling of storehouses, the recruitment of men. War happened like this, with an arrangement of defences and strategy. The news of the attacks on the border villages would not have reached Kastor yet, but the northern lords knew well enough what to do.

Makedon, whose attack on Breteau had thrown down the gauntlet for this conflict, was likely presenting these troops to his Kyros, Nikandros, who must be in residence in the west, maybe even at Marlas. Other northern men would follow suit.

Damen returned to his horse, mounted, and picked his way carefully along the wide, rocky stream bank to the shallow cave that, to his searching eyes, appeared empty at first. It was a well chosen spot: the entrance was hidden from most angles, and the danger of discovery was low. An outrider's job was simply to ensure the terrain was clear of any obstacles that might impede an army. It was not to check every crack and crevasse on the unlikely chance a prince might be squeezed in there.

There was the dull rattle of hooves moving on stone; Laurent emerged from the shadows of the cave on horseback, his manner carefully casual.

'I thought you'd be halfway back to Breteau by now,' said Damen.

The negligent posture didn't change, though somewhere in it was a well-hidden hint of wariness, of a man en garde, as though Laurent was ready at any moment to bolt. 'I think the chances that those men would kill me are fairly low. I'd be too valuable as a political game-piece. Even after my uncle disavowed me, which he would, though I'd quite like to see his reaction when he heard the news. It would not present an ideal situation for him at all. Do you think I'd get on well with Nikandros of Delpha?'

The idea of Laurent let loose on the political landscape of northern Akielos did not make for appealing thoughts. Damen frowned.

'I wouldn't have to tell them you were a prince to sell you to that troop.'

Laurent held his ground. 'Not really? I would have thought twenty was a little grown up for that. Is it the blond hair?'

'It's the charming temperament,' said Damen.

Though the thought existed: If I took him with me to Akielos, he wouldn't be given as a prisoner to Nikandros. He'd be given to me.

'Before you carry me off,' said Laurent, 'tell me about Makedon. Those were his standards. Is he riding with the sanction of Nikandros? Or did he

break orders when he attacked my country?’

‘I think he broke orders.’ After a moment, Damen answered truthfully. ‘I think he was angry and struck out at Breteau in independent action. Nikandros would not retaliate like that, he would wait for an order from his King. That is his way as Kyros. But now that it’s done, you can expect Nikandros to support Makedon. Nikandros is like Touars. He would be well pleased by a war.’

‘Until he lost one. The northern provinces are destabilising to Kastor. It would be in Kastor’s best interests to sacrifice Delpha.’

‘Kastor wouldn’t—’ He stopped. The tactic, sprung from Laurent’s brain, might not immediately occur to Kastor, as it would mean sacrificing something he had worked hard to gain. If the tactic didn’t occur to Kastor, it would certainly occur to Jokaste. Damen had known, of course, for a long time, that his own return would destabilise the region even further.

Laurent said, ‘To get what you want, you have to know exactly how much you are willing to give up.’ He was regarding Damen steadily. ‘You think your delightful Lady Jokaste doesn’t know that?’

Damen drew in a steadying breath, and let it out. He said, ‘You can stop stalling for time. The outriders have passed by now. Our way is clear.’

* * *

It should have been clear. He had been so careful.

He had watched for the pattern of the outriders, and he had made certain of their retreat, following the lines of the army. But he had not accounted for mistakes or disruption, for a single outrider who had come off his horse and was making his way back to the troop on foot.

Laurent had reached the opposite bank; but Damen was only halfway across the stream when he saw a hint of red in the undergrowth close to Laurent’s horse.

That was all the warning he had. Laurent had none at all.

The man lifted a crossbow and shot a bolt straight at Laurent’s unprotected body.

In the awful blur of motion that followed, several things happened at once. Laurent’s horse, sensitive to sudden motion, to the hiss of air, the rustle

and swish, violently shied. There was no sound of a bolt thudding into a body, but that would not be heard anyway over the horse's scream as its hoof skidded wrongly on one of the slippery, water-smooth river stones, so that it foundered and went down.

The sound of a horse hitting wet stony ground was a crash of flesh, heavy and terrible. Laurent was lucky enough, or knew well enough how to fall, that he was not crushed by the horse's weight, as might easily have happened, smashing his legs or back. But he had no time to get up.

Even before Laurent had hit the ground, the man had drawn his sword.

Damen was too far away. He was too far to get between the man and Laurent, he knew that, even as he drew his sword—even as he wheeled his horse, felt the powerful bunch of the animal beneath him. There was only one thing he could do. As the spray of water sheared up from under his horse, he hefted his sword, changed his grip, and threw.

It was, emphatically, not a throwing weapon. It was six pounds of Veretian steel, forged for a two-handed grip. And he was on a moving horse, and many feet away, and the man was moving too, towards Laurent.

The sword drove through the air and took the man in the chest, ramming him into the ground and pinning him there.

Damen swung off his horse, and landed on one knee on the wet stones beside Laurent.

'I saw you fall.' Damen heard the rough sound of his own voice. 'Are you hurt?'

'No,' said Laurent. 'No, you got to him.' He had pushed himself up into a splayed sitting position. 'Before.'

Damen was passing a hand from the join of Laurent's neck and shoulder down over his chest, frowning. But there was no blood, no protruding bolt or fletching. Had the fall injured him? Laurent sounded dazed. Damen's attention was all on Laurent's body. Concerned with the possibility of injury, he was only distantly aware of Laurent looking back at him. Laurent's body was very still under his hands as the water from the stream soaked into his clothes.

'Can you stand? We need to move out. It's not safe for you here. Too many people want to kill you.'

After a moment, Laurent said, 'Everyone to the south, but only half the people to the north.'

He was staring at Damen. He had clasped the forearm that Damen had extended to him, and used it to lever himself up, dripping.

Around them, there was no sound but the rushing of the stream, and a slight rattle of river stones; Laurent's gelding, who with a massive push of its hindquarters had heaved itself up minutes ago, saddle askew, was now moving a few paces off favouring its left foreleg ominously.

'I'm sorry,' said Laurent. Then he said, 'We can't leave him here.'

He wasn't talking about the horse.

Damen said, 'I'll do it.'

When it was finished, he walked out of the undergrowth and found a place to clean his sword.

'We have to go,' was all he said when he returned to Laurent. 'They will notice when he doesn't report back.'

* * *

It meant sharing a horse.

Laurent's gelding had a limp, which Laurent, on one knee, drawing a steady hand down its lower leg until it pulled its hoof up sharply, pronounced a sprained ligament. It could follow on a lead carrying the packs, he said. It couldn't carry a rider. Damen brought his own horse over, then paused.

'My proportions are better suited to riding pillion than yours are,' said Laurent. 'Mount. I will mount behind.'

So Damen swung into the saddle. A moment later he felt Laurent's hand on his thigh. Laurent's toe nudged into the stirrup. Laurent pushed up behind him, shifting until he was snug in position. His hips fitted unselfconsciously to Damen's. Once he had settled, he clasped his arms around Damen's midsection. Damen knew this about riding pillion: closer, it was easier on the horse.

He heard Laurent's voice from behind him, a little more oddly strapped-down than usual, 'You have me over the back of your horse.'

'It's not like you to give up the reins,' Damen couldn't help saying.

'Well, I can't see the way over your shoulders.'

'We could try some other arrangement.'

'You're right: it should be me in front and you carrying the horse.'

Damen closed his eyes briefly, then spurred the horse forward. He was aware of Laurent behind him, damp, which could not be comfortable. They were lucky to be in riding leathers rather than armour, or they would not be able to do this easily, jabbing and poking into one another. The horse's rolling gait pushed their bodies together in constant rhythm.

They had to follow the stream to hide their tracks. It would be an hour perhaps before it was noticed that the outrider was missing. Another interval before they found the man's horse. They would not find the man. There were no tracks to follow and no obvious place to start searching. They would decide: was a search worthwhile, or should they keep on their way? Where to search and what for? That decision would also take time.

Even riding double with a pack horse, evasion was therefore possible, although it was pushing them far out of their way. Damen took them up out of the stream bed several hours later, where the thick undergrowth would mask their passing.

By dusk they knew that they did not have an Akielon army following them, and slowed. Damen said: 'If we stop here, we can build a fire without too much fear of discovery.'

'Here, then,' said Laurent.

Laurent saw to the horses. Damen saw to the fire. Damen was aware that Laurent was taking more time with the horses than was necessary or usual. He ignored it. He built the fire. He cleared the earth, gathered fallen branches and broke them down to the correct size. And then sat down beside it and said nothing.

He would never know what had provoked that man to attack. Maybe he'd been thinking of the safety of his troop. Maybe whatever he had lived through at Tarasis or Breteau had stirred violence in him. Maybe he had just wanted to steal the horse.

A third-rate soldier from a provincial troop; he would not have expected to meet his Prince, a commander of armies, and face him in a fight.

It was a long time before Laurent brought the packs over and began to strip out of his wet clothes. He hung his jacket on an overhanging branch, toed off his boots, and even partially unlaced his shirt and pants, loosening everything. Then he sat on one of the rolls from the packs, close enough to the fire to dry the rest of himself—trailing laces, dishabille, and steaming lightly. His hands were lightly clasped before him.

‘I thought killing was easy for you,’ said Laurent. His voice was rather quiet. ‘I thought you did it without thinking.’

‘I’m a soldier,’ said Damen, ‘and I have been for a long time. I’ve killed on the sawdust. I’ve killed in battle. Is that what you mean by easy?’

‘You know it isn’t,’ said Laurent, in that same quiet voice.

The fire was burning steadily now. The orange flames had begun hollowing out the base of the wide centre log.

‘I know your feelings towards Akielos,’ said Damen. ‘What happened at Breteau . . . it was barbaric. I know it must mean very little to you to hear me say that I’m sorry for it. And I don’t understand you, but I know that war will bring worse, and you are the only person I have seen working to stop it. I couldn’t let him hurt you.’

‘In my culture, it is customary to reward for good service,’ said Laurent, after a long pause. ‘Is there something you want?’

‘You know what I want,’ said Damen.

‘I am not going to release you,’ said Laurent. ‘Ask for something short of that.’

‘Take off one of the wrist-cuffs?’ said Damen, who was learning—he realised somewhat to his surprise—what Laurent liked.

‘I give you too much leeway,’ said Laurent.

‘I think you give no more or less than you want to give, with anyone,’ said Damen, because Laurent’s voice had not been at all displeased. Then Damen looked down and away.

‘There is something I want.’

‘Go on.’

‘Don’t try to use me against my own people,’ said Damen. ‘If it comes to—I can’t do this again.’

‘I would never have asked that of you,’ said Laurent. Then, when Damen looked at him with flat disbelief: ‘Not out of sweetness. There is little sense in pitting a lesser sense of duty against a greater one. No leader could expect loyalty to hold under those circumstances.’

Damen said nothing to that, but looked back at the fire.

‘I’ve never seen a throw like that,’ said Laurent. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it. Every time I see you fight, I wonder how it is Kastor got you in chains and onto a ship to my country.’

‘It was . . .’ He stopped. It was more men than I could handle, he almost

said. But the truth was simpler, and tonight he was honest with himself. He said, 'I didn't see it coming.'

He had never, in those days, sought to put himself inside the mind of Kastor, of the men around him, their ambitions, their motivations; those who were not openly his enemies, he'd believed, were basically like himself.

He looked at Laurent, at the controlled pose, the cool, difficult blue eyes.

'I'm sure you would have sidestepped it,' said Damen. 'I remember the night your uncle's men attacked you. The first time he tried to kill you. You weren't even surprised.'

There was a silence. Damen felt from Laurent a careful immanence, as though he was deciding whether or not to speak. Around them night was falling, but the fire kept the light warm.

'I was surprised,' said Laurent, 'the first time.'

'The first time?' said Damen.

Another silence.

'He poisoned my horse,' said Laurent. 'You saw her, the morning of the hunt. She was already feeling it, even before we rode out.'

He remembered the hunt. He remembered the horse, fractious and covered in sweat.

'That . . . was your uncle's doing?'

The silence stretched out.

'It was my doing,' Laurent said. 'I forced his hand when I had Torveld take the slaves to Patras. I knew when I did it . . . it was ten months to my ascension. Time was running out for him to make a definitive move against me. I knew that. I provoked him. I wanted to see what he would do. I just—'

Laurent broke off. His mouth twisted in a small smile that had no humour in it at all.

'I didn't think he'd really try to kill me,' he said. 'After everything . . . even after everything. So you see I can be surprised.'

Damen said, 'It's not naive to trust your family.'

'I promise you, it is,' said Laurent. 'But I wonder, is it less naive than the moments when I find myself trusting a stranger, my barbarian enemy, whom I do not treat gently.'

He held Damen's gaze, as the moment lengthened.

'I know you're planning to leave when this border fight is done,' said Laurent. 'I wonder if you're still planning to use the knife.'

‘No,’ said Damen.

‘We’ll see,’ said Laurent.

Damen looked away, his gaze raking the dark beyond the campsite. ‘You really think it’s still possible to stop this war from happening?’

When he looked back, Laurent nodded, a slight but steady and deliberate movement, the answer clear, unmistakable and impossible: Yes.

‘Why didn’t you call a halt to the hunt?’ said Damen. ‘Why ride and cover up your uncle’s treachery, if you knew your horse had been poisoned?’

‘I—assumed it had been made to look as though one of the slaves had done it,’ said Laurent, a little quizzically, as though the answer was so obvious that he wondered if he had misunderstood the question.

Damen looked down, and let out a breath of what might have been laughter except that he was not sure what emotion provoked it. He thought of Naos, who had been so certain. He wanted to lay the blame for what he felt on Laurent, but what he felt had no easy name, and in the end he said nothing at all, but banked the fire in silence, and when the time came he lay down on his roll to sleep.

* * *

He woke with a crossbow bolt in his face.

Laurent—who had been on watch—was standing a few feet off, with a clan rider’s hand gripped hard around his bicep. His blue eyes were narrowed, but he was not making any of his usual enunciated remarks. Damen now knew the precise number of arrows Laurent needed to have trained on him in order to shut him up. It was six.

The man standing over Damen gave him a curt order in Vaskian dialect, his thick fingers ready on the crossbow. The order sounded like, ‘Get up.’ With their camp overrun by the clans and his attention fixed on the crossbow bolt, Damen realised he was going to have to bet his life on it.

Laurent said clearly in Veretian: ‘Get up.’

And then stumbled, as the rider restraining him twisted his arm brutally behind his back, then took a fistful of his golden hair and shoved his head down. Laurent didn’t struggle when his hands were lashed behind his back with strips of leather, and a wider strip fitted over his eyes as a blindfold. He

just stood with his head bowed. His golden hair fell about his face, but for one restraining fistful. He didn't resist the gag either, though it came as a surprise; Damen saw his head jerk back a little, reflexively, as a cloth was shoved into his mouth.

Damen, who had risen, could do nothing. There was an arrow pointed at him. There were arrows pointed at Laurent. He had killed to avoid being taken like this by his own people. Now he could do nothing, as his limbs were tightly corded and his vision blocked out.

CHAPTER 13

Lashed hard to one of the shaggy horses, Damen endured a dark, endless ride of sensation and of sound: the clustered beats thrown by horse hooves, the blowing of equine breath, the creak of saddlery. He could feel from the straining of the horse that for the most part they travelled up—away from Akielos, away from Ravenel—into mountains full of narrow paths on either side of which was vertiginous, beetling nothing.

Guessing at the identity of his captors, he strove desperately to find opportunity. He strained against his bonds until he felt them cut into his flesh, but he was too well tied. And they didn't stop. His horse plunged beneath him, then pushed with its hind legs up a rise, and he was forced to give his attention to staying astride, rather than rolling from its back. There was no way free. Struggling or throwing himself sideways from the back of a horse would mean a fall of many cliff-lengths before coming to a stop, or—more likely considering the bindings—a long period of being dragged along sharp rocks. And it would not help Laurent.

After what seemed like hours, he felt his horse finally slow, then stop. A second later, Damen was pulled from the horse roughly, and landed badly. The gag was pulled from his mouth, the blindfold was pulled from his eyes. His hands remained tied behind his back as he pushed up onto his knees.

His first impression of the camp flickered. Far to his right, the flames of a large, central campfire leapt high in the light evening wind, casting gold and red over the faces that ringed it. Closer to where he knelt, the men were dismounting from horses, and the air was shadowed and mountain-cool, outside the fire's circle of heat.

Seeing the camp confirmed his worst guess.

He knew the clans as stateless riders without settlements, fringing the

hills. They were ruled by women and lived off wild meats, fish from the streams, sweet roots, and for the rest, they raided the villages.

These men were not that. This was an entirely masculine force, who had been riding together for some time, and knew how to use their weapons.

These were the men who had destroyed Tarasis—the men that he and Laurent had been seeking, but who had found them, instead.

They needed to get away, now. Out here, Laurent's death would have a believability that might never be achieved again. And Damen was sickly aware of all the reasons why they might have been brought back to camp beforehand—but there was no form of fireside sport that didn't end with them both dead.

He looked instinctively for a pale head. And found it to his left: Laurent was dragged forward, by the same man who had ordered him bound, and he hit the ground as Damen had done, shoulder-first.

Damen watched Laurent push himself up into a sitting position, and from there—with the slightly altered balance of a man whose hands are lashed behind his back—to his knees. He received a sideways blue-eyed glance at the halfway point, and saw everything he believed reflected in that hard single look.

'This time, don't get up,' was all Laurent said.

Laurent rose to his feet, calling out something to the leader of the clansmen.

It was a mad, reckless gambit, but there was no time. Akielos was moving troops along the border. The Regent's messenger was riding southward to Ravenel. They were now almost two days ride from these events, at the mercy of these clansmen, while the workings of the border spun further out of control.

The clan leader didn't want Laurent on his feet, and strode forward, snapping an order.

Laurent didn't comply. Laurent answered him back in Vaskian, but—for once in his life—Laurent got only two words out before the man simply did what most people wanted to do when speaking with Laurent: he hit him.

It was the sort of blow that had sent Aimeric sprawling against a wall and then to the floor. Laurent staggered back a step, paused, then returned his glittering gaze to the man and said something deliberately and liltingly clear in impenetrable Vaskian dialect that caused several of the onlookers to

double over with laughter, clutching each other's shoulders, while the man who had hit Laurent rounded on them, and started shouting.

It almost worked. The other men stopped laughing. They started shouting back. Attention shifted. Bows lowered.

Not all the bows: Damen had no doubt that, given a day or two, Laurent could have these men at each other's throats. But they didn't have a day or two.

Damen felt the moment when the tension threatened to burst into violence, felt that it did not have quite enough energy to push it over.

They didn't have time for missed opportunities. Damen's questing gaze found Laurent's. If this was to be their only chance, they were going to have to make the attempt now, despite the unworkable odds, but Laurent, judging the odds and returning a different conclusion, minutely shook his head.

Damen felt frustration twist in his stomach, but by that time it was already too late. The clan leader had stopped, and swung all his attention back to Laurent, who stood alone and vulnerable, his pale hair marking him out despite the lack of light here in the dark space near the horses, away from the main gathering of the camp and its central fire.

It was not going to be a single blow this time. Damen knew that, from the way that the clan leader approached. Laurent was about to get the beating of his life.

A sharp order, and Laurent was restrained by two men, one at each shoulder, their arms interlocking around his arms, which remained tied behind his back. Laurent did not try to tear his shoulders from the grip of the men, or wrench himself from their hands. He just waited for what was coming, his body taut in a hard grip.

The clan leader stepped in close, too close to hit Laurent—close enough that he was breathing all over Laurent when he slid his hand slowly down over Laurent's body.

Damen moved before he realised it, heard the sounds of impact and resistance, felt the burn in his veins. His faculties were obliterated by anger. He was not thinking about tactics. That man had laid hands on Laurent, and Damen was going to kill him.

When he came back to himself, more than one man was holding him down. His hands were still tied behind his back, but around him, there was chaos and physical disruption, and two of the men were dead. One had been

driven onto the point of another's blade. One had hit the ground and then had Damen's foot applied to his throat.

No one was paying any attention to Laurent now.

But it hadn't been enough—his hands were tied, and there were too many men. He could feel the iron grip of his captors on him now, and, against the strain of his arms and shoulders, the resistance of the rope that bound his wrists.

In the moment that followed—muscles bunched and chest heaving—he understood what he had done. The Regent wanted Laurent dead. These men were different. They probably wanted Laurent alive until they no longer wanted him. This far south it was, as Laurent himself had insouciantly speculated, at least partly the blond hair.

None of that applied to Damen.

There was a harsh to-and-fro of words in Vaskian, and Damen did not need to understand the dialect to understand the orders: Kill him.

He was a fool. He had let this happen. He was going to die out here, in the middle of nowhere, and Kastor's claim would be made true. He thought of Akielos; of the view from the palace out over the high white cliffs. He had really believed, throughout this whole, drawn-out mess on the border, that he was going to make it home.

He struggled. It did very little. His hands, after all, were tied, and the men were bringing all their force to bear on the task of holding him back. He heard the sound of a sword being unsheathed to his left. The edge of the blade touched the back of his neck, then lifted—

And Laurent's voice cut across the scene, in Vaskian.

From one heartbeat to the next, Damen waited for the sword to descend—it didn't. There was no bite of metal; Damen's head stayed where it was, attached to his neck.

In the ringing silence, Damen waited. It did not seem possible, at this point, that there existed any words that could better this situation—let alone a handful of words that could get the sword removed from his neck, get the leader to rescind his order, and gain Laurent a hint of approval from the clan. But that was, impossibly, what was happening.

If Damen wondered dazedly what it was Laurent had said, he did not have to wonder long. The clan leader was so pleased by Laurent's words that he was inspired to draw close to Damen, and translate.

The words emerged in guttural, thickly accented Veretian:
‘He says, “Fast death doesn’t hurt,”’ just before a fist was applied to Damen’s stomach.

* * *

Damen’s left side took the worst of it: blunt, unimaginative pain. Struggling earned him a crack on the head with a club, which turned the camp wavy. He held hard to consciousness, which paid off. When brutalising their prisoner began distracting the other men from their duties about camp, the clan leader ordered the business end of things to be taken elsewhere.

Four men dragged Damen up, then prodded him at sword point until the light from the campfire winked out of sight and the sound of the drums dropped away.

They did not take any extraordinary precautions to secure him. They thought the ropes binding his hands were enough. They had not considered his size, or the fact that, by now, he was seriously annoyed, having long ago reached the threshold of what he would tolerate. That indeed, what he would tolerate in a camp of fifty men, with another captive’s welfare to consider, was very different to what he would tolerate alone, with four.

Since Laurent had decided not to follow through on his own reckless gambit, it was going to be Damen’s pleasure to escape the hard way.

Getting free of the ropes was only a matter of slamming the man to his left into the incline, and dragging the ropes down his trapped sword. Hands on the sword hilt, he drove it backwards into the man’s stomach, which caused him to curl over, choking.

Then he had freedom and a weapon. He used it, lifting his arm, to knock the sword of his attacker out of the way, then punched it forward to run the man through. He felt it slice through leather and fleece, then muscle; he felt the weight of the man on his blade. It was an inefficient way to kill someone, because it wasted precious seconds to withdraw the blade. But he had the time. The other two men were holding back now.

He pulled the blade out.

If he had had any doubts that these were the men who had attacked Tarasis, they were banished when the two men changed formation into one

that was used to take advantage of Akielon sword tactics. Damen's eyes narrowed.

He let the man clutching his stomach stand up, so that his opponents would feel confident with the odds of three on one, and attack rather than run for the camp. Then he killed them, with hard, brutal strokes, and took the best sword and knife to replace his own.

He took his time searching for weapons, cataloguing his surroundings, and taking stock of his own physical condition—his left side was now a weakness, but functional. That Laurent was still trapped in the camp while he did so did not worry him unduly. Laurent was the one who had insisted on this mode of escaping. Laurent was no passive virgin trembling at the thought of his own deflowering.

He frankly expected that Laurent, by this time, would have used his brain to pick off a few clansmen of his own.

As it turned out, he had.

* * *

Damen arrived just in time to witness chaos.

It must have been like this for the villagers in Tarasis, when the raiders hit it: a rain of death from out of the darkness, and then the sound of hooves.

The men had no warning, but that was the way in clan warfare. One of the men near the campfire looked down to find an arrow in his chest. Another man toppled to his knees—another arrow. And then without pause after the arrows came the riders. Damen felt the satisfying irony as this camp of men—these men who had raided and killed across the border—were overrun by riders from another clan.

As Damen watched, the newcomers divided seamlessly, five riders to go through the camp, and ten each on either side. At first they were dark, unidentifiable moving shapes. Then there was a sudden flare of light—two of the riders had snatched up half-burnt branches from the fire, and dropped them on tents, whose skins burst into flame. Lit-up, the scene showed that the newcomers were women—the traditional warriors of the clans—riding ponies that could leap like chamois and dart about in formations like fish in clear stream water.

But the men were familiar with these tactics, being of the clans themselves. Instead of dissolving into panic and disorder, they only scrambled briefly before several of them peeled off, and made hard for the rocks and the surrounding dark, slashing and searching, to cut down the archers. Others made for the horses, and with a leap were astride.

It was different to every kind of fighting that Damen knew; the vicious blade cuts were different, the horsemanship, the uneven ground, the twisting tactics in the dark. This was clan warfare at night. Under the same conditions, Laurent's men would have been overrun in an instant. So too would an Akielon troop. The clans knew more about mountain fighting than anyone alive.

He wasn't here to watch them. He had his own purpose.

With his pale head, Laurent was easy to pick out. Laurent had found his way to the fringes of the camp, and, while other people were doing his fighting for him, he was calmly looking about himself for a way to untie his hands.

Damen emerged from cover, took a firm hold of him and spun him around. Then he pulled out the knife and cut his hands free.

Laurent said, 'What took you so long?'

'You planned this?' said Damen. He didn't know why it came out as a question. Of course Laurent had planned this. The second part did not come out like a question. 'You arranged a counterattack with the women, then came out here as bait to draw out the men.' Grimly, 'If you knew we were going to be rescued—'

'I thought evading that Akielon troop drove us too far out of our way, and that we'd missed our rendezvous with the women. He did hit me too,' said Laurent.

'Once,' said Damen. And swept up his sword in the way of the man coming towards them. The man, expecting a kill, was startled to find his slashing blow met. Then he was dead. Laurent withdrew the point of the knife from the man's ribcage and did not argue further, because by now, the fighting was on them.

Laurent, beside him, was percipient. Acquiring the fallen man's short clan sword, Laurent inserted himself at Damen's left, which, Damen noted without surprise, let Damen do all the heavy fighting. Until the moment when a clansman attacked from the left, and Damen, bracing himself to call hard on

the muscles of his bruised side, found that Laurent was there, meeting the man's blade, dispatching him with efficient grace, and shoring up Damen's weak side. Damen, disconcerted, let him.

From that moment on, they fought side by side. The place Laurent had chosen to position them was not a random spot on the edge of the fighting—it was the northern path out of the camp, the same route along which Damen had been taken. If Laurent had been any other man, Damen might have suspected him of coming this way to find him. Because Laurent was Laurent, the reason was different.

For this was the only way out of the camp that was not defended by women. Trying to flee, men came in ones and twos, charging towards them. Better for everyone if no men escaped to tell their tale to the Regent, and so they fought together, killing with efficient purpose. It worked, until a man came galloping towards them on a horse.

It was difficult to kill a galloping horse with a sword. It was more difficult to kill the man riding the horse, high up out of range. Damen, seeing Laurent in the horse's path, appraising the situation like a mathematical problem, took a handful of the fabric at the back of Laurent's jacket and pulled him hard out of the way. The rider was killed by a woman, also on horseback, riding hard after him. The man flopped forward in the saddle while his horse slowed, then stopped.

Around them, the tents had burned down almost to nothing, but there was enough light to see that victory was emerging. Of the men in the camp, half were dead. The other half had surrendered. Surrendered wasn't the word. They had been subdued, one by one, and were being bound as prisoners.

Moonlight and the last smouldering remnants of the fire: a new woman had arrived on horseback, flanked by two attendants, and was being led through the camp towards them.

'One of us needs to view the dead and the prisoners, to make sure no one escaped,' said Damen, watching her approach.

Laurent said, 'I'll do it. Later.'

He felt Laurent's hand wrap around his bicep in a firm grip, and exert a pull.

'Down,' said Laurent.

Damen went to his knees, and Laurent lay punctuating fingers on Damen's shoulder to keep him there.

The clanswoman swung down from her stocky horse. She showed her status with a great cloak of fur that wrapped around her shoulders. She was older than the other women, by at least thirty years. Black-eyed and stony-faced, Damen recognised her. It was Halvik.

The last time he had seen her, she had been enthroned on a dais of furs, giving orders. Her flinty voice was exactly as he remembered, although this time when she spoke, it was in heavily accented Veretian:

‘We will re-light the fires. We camp here tonight. The men will be guarded. A good fight, many captives.’

Laurent said, ‘The clan leader is dead?’

‘He is dead.’ To Laurent she said, ‘You fight well. It’s a shame you do not have the size to breed great warriors. But you are not malformed. Your woman may not be displeased.’ Then, in the spirit of benevolence, ‘Your face is well balanced.’ She slapped him encouragingly on the back, ‘You have very long eyelashes. Like a cow. Come. We will sit together, drink, and eat meats. Your slave is virile. Later he will service at the coupling fire.’

Damen felt the tenderness in his left side with each breath, and in his arms, when he did not repress it, was the fine tremor that occurs in muscles that have been restrained in bindings for too long, or pushed for an extended period beyond their usual limitations.

Laurent answered in a hard, unyielding voice, ‘The slave lies in no bed but mine.’

‘You couple with men, in the Veretian style?’ said Halvik. ‘Then he will be taken and prepared for you; he will be given good cuts of meat, and *hakesh*, so that when he mounts you, his endurance will bring you great pleasure. You see? This is Vaskian hospitality.’

* * *

Damen braced himself, gathering his remaining strength, for what was to follow, but almost to his surprise, he did not have his mouth prised open and *hakesh* poured immediately down his throat. He wasn’t forced into anything. He was treated as a guest, or at least, as the possession of a guest, to be buffed and polished and taken to where the guest would want him.

That was to the other side of the camp, to be washed of the dirt that was

the inevitable result of a day's ride during which one has been thrown to the ground several times by one's captors, then killed several of them.

The women flung buckets of water at him, then scrubbed him with brushes, then dried him, briskly. Then they dressed him in a Vaskian man's loincloth, a single leather string tied around the hips, then between the legs, with a hanging panel in front that could be lifted to one side for convenience at the appropriate time, as one of the women helpfully demonstrated. He weathered the demonstration.

By this time, the camp was cleared, and the newly pitched tents looked like softly glowing globes, the light from lamps inside turning the tent skins to warm gold. The prisoners were placed under guard, the campfire was re-lit, the dais erected. Damen was presented with food, generously and courteously, also to his surprise.

He was under no illusion that he was going to be taken to the campfire to roll around with Laurent. If anything, he was going to be taken to the campfire to watch Laurent do some inventive sidestepping.

But he wasn't taken to the campfire. He was taken to a low tent. The *hakesh* was poured into a jug, and placed with a carved cup inside the tent for him to drink at his leisure. The woman lifted the flap of the tent with the same economic motion she had used on the loincloth.

Laurent was not inside the tent. Laurent would, Damen was made to understand, join him later.

Laurent had already done the sidestepping.

It was a very small tent; long, and low, the inside intimate, thick with furs, layers of chamois, and on the top fox fur, treated and softer than the underbelly of a rabbit. And it was hospitably equipped, for men's pleasure. The foot of the tent held the jug of *hakesh*, a second jug of water, a hanging lamp, cloths, and three small stoppered bottles containing oils that were not for the lamp.

Entering, Damen could sit, but with barely a foot to spare above his head. If he stood up, he would take the tent with him. Having nothing else to do, he lay down on the furs, in his minimal garment.

The furs were warm and the tent was a cosy nook to lie with a partner, but alone it was hard not to think about where he was, and what might have happened today, if things had fallen out differently. He let all the aches of his body settle, stretching out.

His foot hit the tent hide with his knee still bent. He shifted onto a diagonal. Not that way either. On his side, he bumped the tent pole at his back. Looking around for somewhere to put his left leg, he let out a breath of amusement. Weary as he was, he could see the humour in this situation. Considering the size of the tent, it was lucky that Laurent was not going to be joining him until morning. He curled, found a position for all of his limbs, and let them grow heavy against the soft furs and cushions.

And that was when the flap lifted on a golden head.

Framed in the entry, Laurent had also been washed and dried and dressed. His skin was fresh, and he was wrapped in a Vaskian cloak of fur, like the one Halvik had worn. In the lamplight, it looked like a rich garment that a prince might swathe himself in, on a throne.

Damen pushed himself up on an elbow, and propped his head on his hand, his fingers in his hair. He saw that Laurent was looking at him. Not watching him, as he did sometimes, but looking at him, as a man might look at a carving that has caught his attention.

Meeting Damen's eyes eventually, Laurent said, 'Here's to Vaskian hospitality.'

'It's a traditional garment. All the men wear them,' Damen said, eyeing Laurent's fur cloak with curiosity.

Laurent dropped the cloak from his shoulders. Beneath it he wore some kind of Vaskian bedclothes, a tunic and pants of very fine white linen, with a series of loose ties in front.

'Mine has a little more fabric. Are you disappointed?'

'I would be,' said Damen, rearranging his legs again, 'if the lamp weren't behind you.'

It arrested Laurent's motion, in a pose with one knee on the furs and a palm too, just for a moment, before he stretched his body out alongside Damen's.

Unlike Damen, he did not fully lie himself down on the furs, but sat, leaning his weight on his hands.

Damen said: 'Thank you for—' There was no delicate way of saying it, so he gestured generally to the inside of the tent.

'Asserting droit de seigneur? . . . How inflamed are you?'

'Stop it. I didn't drink the *hakesh*.'

'I'm not sure that's quite what I asked,' said Laurent. His voice had the

same quality as his gaze. 'This is close quarters.'

'Close enough to see your eyelashes,' said Damen. 'It's lucky you do not have the size to breed great warriors.' And then he stopped himself. This was the wrong mood. This was the mood if he were here with a warm, amenable partner, someone he could tease and pull in towards himself, not Laurent, chaste as an icicle.

'My size,' said Laurent, 'is the usual. I am not made in miniature. It's a problem of scale, standing next to you.'

It was like being pleased by a thorn bush, feeling fond of every prickly. Another second and he was going to say something ridiculous like that.

The soft fur had warmed with his skin, and he gazed up at Laurent feeling languorous and comfortable. He knew that the corners of his mouth were curved up a little.

After a slight pause, Laurent said, almost carefully, 'I realise that in my service you do not have a great deal of opportunity to pursue the usual—avenues for release. If you need to avail yourself of the coupling fire—'

'No,' said Damen. 'I don't want a woman.'

The drums outside were a low, continuous throb.

Laurent said, 'Sit up.'

Sitting up meant taking up all of the extra space in the tent. He found himself looking down at Laurent, his eyes passing slowly over the delicate skin, the lamp-darkened blue eyes, the elegant curve of cheekbone, interrupted by a stray strand of blond hair.

He almost didn't notice when Laurent drew a cloth from his cloak, except that Laurent was holding it bunched in his hand like a poultice, and was looking at Damen's body as though he was planning to apply it with his own hands.

'What are you—' he said.

'Hold still,' said Laurent, and lifted the cloth.

A shock of cold, as something wet and freezing was pressed to his ribcage, just below his pectoral muscle. His abdominal muscles flinched at the contact.

'Were you expecting a salve?' said Laurent. 'They brought it for you from further up the slope.'

Ice. It was ice wrapped in cloth, pressed steadily to the bruising on his left side. His ribcage rose and fell with his breath. Laurent held it firm. After the

initial discomfort, Damen felt the ice start to draw out the heat of the bruising, spreading cool numbness, so that the tense muscles around it began to relax as the ice melted.

Laurent said, 'I told the clansmen to make it hurt.'

Damen said, 'It saved my life.'

After a pause, Laurent said, 'Since I can't throw a sword.'

Damen took hold of the cloth himself, as Laurent withdrew. Laurent said:

'You know by now that these were the same men who attacked Tarasis. Halvik and her riders will escort ten of them with us to Breteau, and from there to Ravenel, where I will use them to try to lever this border deadlock open.' Adding, almost apologetically: 'Halvik receives the rest of the men, and all of the weapons.'

He followed that thought to its conclusion. 'She has agreed to use the weapons raiding Akielos to the south, rather than anywhere inside your borders.'

'Something like that.'

'And at Ravenel, you mean to expose your uncle as the sponsor of the attack.'

'Yes,' said Laurent. 'I think . . . things are about to become very dangerous.'

"About to become," said Damen.

'Touars is the one who needs convincing. If you hated Akielos,' said Laurent, 'more than anything, and you'd been given one chance to hit them as never before, what would stop you? Why would you put down your sword?'

'I wouldn't,' said Damen. 'Maybe if I was angrier at someone else.'

Laurent let out a strange breath, then looked away. Outside, the drums were ceaseless, but seemed like something distant, apart from the quiet space in the tent.

'This is not the way I planned to spend the eve of war,' said Laurent.

'With me in your bed?'

'And in my confidences,' said Laurent.

Laurent said it as his eyes returned to Damen's. For a moment it seemed as if he would say something more, but instead of speaking he pushed the cloak out of the way, and lay himself down. The shift in position signalled the end of the conversation, though Laurent drew his wrist to his forehead, as

though still locked in thought.

He said: 'Tomorrow will be a long day. Thirty miles of mountains, with prisoners. We should sleep.'

The ice had melted, leaving a wet cloth. Damen removed it. There were droplets of water on the planes of his torso; he wiped them off, then tossed the cloth to the far end of the tent. He was aware that Laurent was looking at him again, even as Laurent lay relaxed, his pale hair mingling with the soft fur, a line of very fine skin visible all the way down the loose opening of his Vaskian bedclothes. But after a moment Laurent turned his eyes elsewhere, and then closed them, and they both made their way to sleep.

CHAPTER 14

‘Your Highness!’ Jord, on horseback, was hailing them. He was accompanied by two other riders with torches, lighting up the dark. ‘We’d sent out scouts to find you.’

‘Call them back,’ said Laurent.

Jord reined in, nodding.

Thirty miles of mountains, with prisoners. It had taken twelve hours, a slow plodding trip with the men swaying and struggling in the saddles, occasionally clubbed into stupefied obedience by the women. Damen remembered what that felt like.

It had been a long day with an abstemious beginning. He had woken stiff, with his body protesting any change in position. Beside him, a pile of markedly empty furs. No Laurent. All signs of recent occupancy had been a handspan away from his own body, suggesting a night spent in close but not transgressive proximity: some kind of self-preservation had apparently prevented Damen from rolling inward during the night; from throwing his arm over Laurent’s torso and drawing them together to make the small tent seem larger than it was.

As a result, Damen was in possession of all his limbs, and even had his clothing restored to him. Thank you, Laurent. Nosing down steep declines on horseback was not something he preferred to do in a loincloth.

The day’s ride that had followed had been almost unsettlingly uneventful. They had reached gentler slopes by mid-afternoon, and—for once—there had been no ambushes or interruptions. The spreading rise and fall of the hillside had been quiet, stretching out to the south and the west, the only break in its peace the unlikeliness of their own procession: Laurent riding at the head of a band of Vaskian women on shaggy ponies, escorting his ten prisoners, roped

and tied, and lashed to their horses.

Now it was nightfall, and the horses were exhausted, dropping their necks, some of them, and the prisoners had long since stopped struggling. Jord fell into formation beside them.

‘Breteau is cleared,’ Jord was saying. ‘Lord Touars’s men rode back to Ravenel this morning. We chose to stay on and wait. There has been no word from any direction—the border or the forts or—yourself. The men were starting to get twitchy. They’ll be glad of your return.’

‘I want them ready to ride out at dawn,’ said Laurent.

Jord nodded, then glanced helplessly at the band and its prisoners.

‘Yes, they are the men who caused these border attacks,’ said Laurent, answering the question that had not been asked.

‘They don’t look Akielon,’ said Jord.

‘No,’ said Laurent.

Jord nodded grimly, and they crested the last rise to see the shadows and the points of light of the nighttime camp.

* * *

The embroidery came later, in the retelling, as the story was told again and again by the men, taking on its own character as it passed over camp.

The Prince had ridden out, with only one soldier. Deep in the mountains, he had chased down the rats responsible for these killings. Had ripped them out of their hiding holes and fought them, thirty to one, at least. Had brought them back thrashed, lashed and subdued. That was their Prince for you, a twisty, vicious fiend who you should never, ever cross, unless you wanted your gullet handed to you on a platter. Why, he once rode a horse to death just to beat Torveld of Patras to the mark.

In the men’s eyes the feat was reflected as the wild, impossible thing it was—their Prince vanishing for two days, then appearing out of the night with a sackful of prisoners thrown over his shoulder, tossing them at the feet of his troop and saying: You wanted them? Here they are.

‘You took a beating,’ said Paschal, later.

‘Thirty to one, at least,’ said Damen.

Paschal snorted. Then he said, ‘It’s a good thing you’re doing, standing

with him. Staying with him, when you have no love for this country.'

Instead of accepting the invitations to the campfire, Damen found himself walking the edges of the camp. Behind him, the voices grew distant: Rochert saying something about blond hair and temperament. Lazar reliving Laurent's duel with Govart.

Breteau looked very different to the last time Damen had seen it. Instead of piles of burning wood, there was cleared ground. The half-open pits were filled in. The broken spears and the signs of fighting were gone. Dwellings that were damaged beyond repair had been neatly stripped down for materials.

The camp itself was a series of ordered geometric tents pitched west of the village. Sloping canvas was pulled taut in rigorous lines, and at the far end of the camp stood Laurent's tent, which had been prepared for him despite his absence. Between the ranked columns, men proceeded in friendlier, less rigid paths to and from the campfires.

It was not a victory. Not yet. They were still a day's ride out from Ravenel. That meant their absence would be four days, at least. Assuming good horses and good roads, the Regent's messenger would certainly have arrived by then, beating them to Ravenel by at least a day.

It had probably happened this morning, while Damen was waking to an empty tent—the messenger pounding into the fort's dwarfing open courtyard, being quickly ushered into the great hall, and all the lords of Ravenel gathering around to hear his message. This, in the absence of the wastrel prince who had flitted off during a crisis and not returned as he had promised, missing the moment when he most needed to be taken seriously, to forge decisions and shape events. In that sense, they were already too late.

But today's unlikely procession through the hills was planning on a level he had not previously attributed to Laurent. Laurent had negotiated the counterstrike with Halvik the evening *before* hearing the first news of attacks on his border. The messages and bribes that had flowed from Laurent to Halvik's clan had begun days earlier than that. Laurent must have guessed the way in which his uncle would trigger a border conflict, and begun his own preparations to counter it, well in advance.

Damen remembered the first night at Chastillon, the sloppy work, the fights, the poor standard of soldiering. The Regent had thrown his nephew a chaotic rabble of men, and Laurent had stamped it into ordered lines; had

given him an ungovernable captain, and Laurent had vanquished him; had unleashed a dangerous force on the border, and Laurent had brought it back, neutered and strapped down. Check, check, and check, as each element of disorder was brought under Laurent's monumental control.

Heart, body and mind, these men belonged to the Prince. Their hard work and discipline were evident in every part of the camp and the surrounding village.

Damen let the cool evening air pass over him, and let himself feel down to his bones the virtuosity of this journey he was a part of, and just how far they had come.

* * *

And in the cool evening air, he let himself face it, in a way he had not allowed himself to face it before.

Home.

Home lay right on the other side of Ravenel. The moment when he would leave Vere was approaching.

Like his own heartbeat, he knew the steps in his return. Escape would take him across the border to Akielos, where any blacksmith would willingly take the gold from his wrists and neck. The gold would buy him access to his northern supporters, the strongest of whom was Nikandros, whose implacable animosity towards Kastor was of long standing. Then he would have the force to ride south.

He looked at Laurent's tent of silks, the pennants unfurled in the breeze, their starbursts undulating. The distant voices of the men swelled briefly, then dropped away. It would not be like this. It would be a systematic campaign moving southwards towards Ios, building on the support he had from the kyroi factions. He would not be stealing out of camp at night to spin mad plans, to dress in unfamiliar clothes and forge alliances with rogue clans, or to fight alongside pony-riding warriors, capturing bandits improbably in the mountains.

It would not be like this again.

* * *

Laurent was seated with an elbow on the table, studying a map, when Damen came into the tent. Braziers warmed the space; lamps illuminated with the gleam of flame light.

‘One more night,’ said Damen.

‘Keep the prisoners alive, keep the women on side, keep my men from the women,’ said Laurent, as though reciting from a checklist. ‘Come over here and talk geography.’

He came as he was bid, and took a seat opposite Laurent, across the map.

Laurent wished to discuss—again, and in meticulous detail—every inch of land between here and Ravenel, as well as along the northeastern section of border. Damen called on all he knew, and they talked for several hours, drawing comparisons in quality of slopes and ground with the country they had just ridden through.

The camp outside had fallen into the quiet of deep night when Laurent finally detached his attention from the map and said, ‘All right. If we do not stop now, we will go all night.’

Damen watched him rise. Laurent did not tend to show any of the usual outward signs of fatigue. The control that he asserted and maintained over the troop was an extension of the control with which he ruled himself. A few tells existed. The words, perhaps. Laurent’s jaw was bruised, a sphaleritic print where the clan leader had struck him. Laurent had the kind of fine, overbred skin that bruised like soft fruit to the touch. Lamplight played over Laurent as he absently lifted his hand to his wrist to begin unfastening the lacing there.

‘Here,’ said Damen. ‘Let me.’

Habit—Damen rose himself and stepped in, let his fingers make work with the laces at Laurent’s wrists, then at his back. The jacket split open like a pea shell, and he pushed it off.

Released from the weight of the jacket, Laurent rolled his shoulder, as he did sometimes after a long day in the saddle. Instinctively, Damen brought his hand up to squeeze Laurent’s shoulder gently—and then stopped. Laurent went very still, as Damen became aware of what he had just done, and that his grip was still on Laurent’s shoulder. He felt the locked muscles like hard wood beneath his hand.

‘Stiff?’ said Damen, casually.

‘A little,’ said Laurent, after a moment in which Damen’s heart knocked twice against the inside of his chest.

Damen brought his other hand up to Laurent's other shoulder, more to keep Laurent from turning unexpectedly, or dislodging him. He stood behind Laurent, and kept his matter-of-fact grip as impersonal as he could make it.

Laurent said, 'The soldiers in Kastor's army are trained in massage?'

'No,' said Damen. 'But I think the rudiments are easy to master. If you like.'

He applied a gentle pressure with his thumbs. He said, 'You brought me ice, last night.'

'This,' said Laurent, 'is a little more—' It was a word of sharp points: '—intimate,' he said, 'than ice.'

'Too intimate?' Damen said. Slowly, he was kneading Laurent's shoulders.

He did not usually think of himself as someone with suicidal impulses. Laurent did not relax at all, just stood unmoving.

And then, at the apex of his thumbs, a muscle shifted beneath pressure, unlocking a sequence all the way down Laurent's back. Laurent said, unwillingly, 'I . . . There.'

'Here?'

'Yes.'

He felt Laurent subtly give himself up to his hands; yet as with a man closing his eyes on the edge of a cliff, it was an act of continuous tension, not surrender. Instinct kept Damen's movements undeviating, utilitarian. He breathed carefully. He could feel the entire framework of Laurent's back: the curvature of his shoulder blades, and between them, under Damen's hands, the unyielding planes that, when Laurent used a sword, would be working muscle.

The slow kneading continued; there was another shift in Laurent's body, another slight, half-repressed reaction.

'Like this?'

'Yes.'

Laurent's head had dropped forward a little. Damen had no idea what he was doing. He was distantly aware that he had had his hands on Laurent's body once before, and couldn't believe it, because it felt so impossible now; yet that moment felt connected to this one, even if only in contrast, his current caution against the unguarded way he had let his hands slide down over Laurent's wet skin.

Damen looked downwards and saw the way that the white fabric shifted slightly under his thumbs. Laurent's shirt hung on his body, a containing layer. Then Damen's eyes travelled up along the balanced nape, to a wick of golden hair tucked behind an ear.

Damen let his hands move only enough to seek out new muscles to unknot. In Laurent's body, always, that flickering tension.

'Is it so hard to relax?' said Damen, quietly. 'You only have to walk outside to see what you've accomplished. Those men are yours.' He didn't pay attention to the signs, the slight stiffening. 'Whatever happens tomorrow, you've done more than anyone could—'

'That's enough,' said Laurent, pushing himself away unexpectedly.

When Laurent turned to face him, his eyes were dark. His lips were parted uncertainly. He had lifted his hand to his own shoulder, as though chasing a ghost touch there. He did not look exactly relaxed, but the movement did look a little easier. As if realising that, Laurent said, almost awkwardly, 'Thank you.' And then, in wry acknowledgement: 'Getting tied up leaves an impression. I didn't realise being captured was so uncomfortable.'

'Well, it is.' The words sounded close to normal.

'I promise I'll never tie you to the back of a horse,' said Laurent.

There was a pause in which Laurent's mordant gaze was on him.

'That's right, I'm still captured,' said Damen.

'Your eyes say, "For now,"' Laurent said. 'Your eyes have always said, "For now."' And then: 'If you were a pet, I would have gifted you enough by now to buy out your contract, many times over.'

'I'd still be here,' said Damen, 'with you. I told you that I would see this border dispute through to its finish. Do you think I'd go back on my word?'

'No,' said Laurent, almost as if he was realising it for the first time. 'I don't think you would. But I know you don't like it. I remember how much it maddened you in the palace, to be bound and powerless. I felt yesterday how badly you wanted to hit someone.'

Damen found he'd moved without realising it, his fingers lifting to touch the bruised edge of Laurent's jaw. He said, 'The man who did this to you.'

The words just came out. The warmth of skin under his fingers in that moment took all his attention, before he became aware that Laurent had jerked back and was staring at him, blue eyes huge with pupil.

Damen was suddenly aware of how out of control he was—he felt—and called violently on his faculties to try to put a stop to—this.

‘I’m sorry. I . . . know better than that.’ He forced himself a step back too. He said, ‘I think . . . I had better report to the watch. I can take a shift tonight.’

He turned to leave, and made it all the way to the tent’s entrance. Laurent’s voice caught him with his hand parting the canvas.

‘No. Wait. I . . . wait.’

Damen stopped, and turned. Laurent’s gaze was edged with indecipherable emotion, and his jaw was set at a new angle. The silence stretched out for such a long time that the words, when they came, were a shock.

‘What Govart said about my brother and I . . . it wasn’t true.’

‘I never thought it was,’ said Damen, uneasily.

‘I mean that whatever . . . whatever taint exists in my family, Auguste was free of it.’

‘Taint?’

‘I wanted to tell you that, because you,’ said Laurent, as though he was forcing the words out, ‘You remind me of him. He was the best man I have ever known. You deserve to know that, as you deserve at least a fair . . . In Arles, I treated you with malice and cruelty. I will not insult you by attempting to atone for deeds with words, but I would not treat you that way again. I was angry. Angry, that isn’t the word.’ It was bitten off; a jagged silence followed.

Laurent said steadily, ‘I have your oath that you will see this border skirmish through to its end? Then you have mine: stay with me until this thing is done, and I will take off the cuffs and the collar. I will release you willingly. We can face each other as free men. Whatever is to fall out between us can do so then.’

Damen stared at him. He felt a strange pressure in his chest. The lamplight appeared to wave and flicker.

‘It’s not a trick,’ said Laurent.

‘You’d let me go,’ said Damen.

This time it was Laurent who was silent, gazing back at him.

Damen said, ‘And—until then?’

‘Until then, you are my slave, and I am your Prince, and that is how it is

between us.' Then, with a return to his more usual tone, 'And you don't need to take watch,' said Laurent. 'You sleep prudently.'

Damen searched his face, but found nothing in it that he could read, which, he supposed, as he lifted his hands to the laces of his own jacket, was typical.

CHAPTER 15

Long before dawn, he was awake.

There were duties to be performed, inside the tent and out of it. Before he got up and performed them, he lay for a long time with an arm on his forehead, his shirt strewn open, the bedding on his pallet loose around him, staring up at long, hanging folds of twilled silk.

Outside, when he went outside, any signs of activity were not yet those of waking, but an extension of work that continued in a camp throughout the night: men tending to torches and campfires, the silent pacing of the watch, scouts dismounting and reporting to their night-commanders, who were also awake.

For himself, he began his early work readying Laurent's armour, laying out each piece, pulling hard on each strap, checking each rivet. The intricate worked metal with its fluted edges and decorative borders was as familiar to him as his own. He had learned how to handle Veretian armour.

He turned to the inventory he must make of weapons: check each blade was immaculately free of nicks and marks; check the hilts and pommels were smooth of anything that could catch or impede; check that there was no change in balance that could even for a moment disconcert the man wielding it.

Returning, he found the tent empty. Laurent had left on some early business. The camp around him was still dark-shrouded, with closed tents, in blissful sleep. The men, he knew, were anticipating riding into Ravenel to the same kind of approbation with which Laurent had ridden into their own camp: cheers for the men who brought in the offenders on a rope.

Truthfully, Damen found it difficult to imagine how exactly Laurent would use his prisoners to coax Lord Touars down from a fight. Laurent was

good at talking, but men like Touars had very little patience for talking. Even if the Veretian border lords could be persuaded, Nikandros's commanders were rattling their swords. More than rattling them. There had been attacks on both sides of the border, and Laurent had seen the movements of the Akielon forces with his own eyes, as Damen had.

A month ago, he would have expected, much like the men, that the prisoners would be dragged before Touars, the truth loudly proclaimed, the Regent's dealings exposed before all. Now . . . Damen could just as easily envisage Laurent denying any knowledge of the culprit, letting Touars find his own way to the Regent—could practically see Laurent's blue-eyed feigned concern for the truth, followed by his blue-eyed feigned surprise when it was revealed. The search itself would work as a delaying tactic, would draw things out, would take its own time.

Deception and double dealing; it seemed sufficiently Veretian. He even thought, if Laurent held to his purpose, it could be done.

And then? The exposure of the Regent, culminating in the night Laurent came to him and freed him with his own hands?

Damen found himself past the edges of the tent rows, with Breteau forever silent behind him. Soon the dawn would come, the first sounds from the throats of birds, the sky growing lighter, the stars fading as the sun came up. He closed his eyes, feeling his chest rise and fall.

Because it was impossible, he allowed himself to imagine, just once, what it would be like to face Laurent as a man . . . if there had been no animosity between their countries, Laurent journeying to Akielos as part of an embassy, Damen's attention superficially caught by the blond hair. They'd attend banquets and sports together, and Laurent . . . he had seen Laurent with those he cultivated, charming and edged without being lethal; and he was honest enough with himself to admit that if he had encountered Laurent in that mode, all golden lashes and needling remarks, he might well have found himself in some danger.

His eyes came open. He heard the sound of riders.

Following the sound, he pushed through the trees and found himself right on the edge of the Vaskian camp. Two women riders had just pounded in on lathered horses, and another was leaving. He remembered that Laurent had spent some time in negotiations and dealings with the Vaskians last night. He remembered that no men were supposed to come here, just as a spearpoint

appeared in his path, held steady.

He raised his hands in a surrendering gesture. The woman holding the spear didn't run him through with it. Instead, she gave him a long speculative look, then gestured him forward. Spear at his back, he came into the camp.

Unlike Laurent's camp, the Vaskian camp was active. The women were already awake, and were seeing to the business of untying their fourteen prisoners from their nighttime bonds and retying them for the coming day. And something else was occupying their attention. Damen saw that he was being taken towards Laurent, deep in dialogue with the two riders who had dismounted and were standing beside their exhausted horses. When Laurent saw him, he concluded his business, and approached. The woman with the spear had vanished.

Laurent said, 'I'm afraid you don't have time.'

The tone was limpid. Damen said, 'Thank you, but I came because I heard the horses.'

Laurent said, 'Lazar said he came because he took a wrong turning.'

There was a pause, in which Damen discarded several replies. Eventually, matching Laurent's tone, 'I see. You prefer privacy?'

'I couldn't if I wanted to. A batch of blond Vaskians really would get me disinherited. I've never,' said Laurent, 'with a woman.'

'It's very pleasurable.'

'You prefer it.'

'For the most part.'

'Auguste preferred women. He told me I would grow into it. I told him that he could get heirs and I would read books. I was . . . nine? Ten? I thought I was already grown up. The hazards of overconfidence.'

On the verge of a reply, Damen stopped. That Laurent could talk, endlessly, like this, he knew. It wasn't always apparent what was behind the talking, but sometimes it was.

Damen said, 'You can rest easy. You are ready to face Lord Touars.'

He watched Laurent stop. The light was dark blue now rather than pitch, and growing lighter; he could make out Laurent's fair hair, though not his face.

Damen found there was something that, for a long time, he had wanted to ask.

'I don't understand how your uncle has you backed this far into a corner.'

You can outplay him. I've seen you do it.'

Laurent said, 'Maybe it seems that I can outplay him now. But when this game began I was . . . younger.'

They reached the camp. The first calls came from the tent lines. The troop, in the grey light, began waking.

Younger. Laurent had been fourteen at Marlas. Or . . . Damen moved months around in his head. The battle had been waged in early spring, Laurent reached his maturity in late spring. So, no. Younger. Thirteen, on the cusp of fourteen.

He tried to picture Laurent at thirteen, and experienced a total failure of imagination. It was just as impossible to imagine him fighting in battle at that age as it was to imagine him trailing around after an older brother he adored. It was impossible to imagine him adoring anyone.

The tents came down, the men swung up into their saddles. Damen's view was of a straight back and a blond head lighter in colour than the rich gold of the prince he had faced all those years ago.

Auguste. The one honourable man on a treacherous field.

Damen's father had invited the Veretian herald into his tent in good faith. He had offered the Veretians fair terms: surrender their lands, and live. The herald had spat on the ground and said, *Vere will never surrender to Akielos*, even as the first sounds of a Veretian attack had come from outside. Attack under the guise of parley: the ultimate affront to honour, with kings on the field.

You fight them, his father had said. *You don't trust them*. His father had been right. And his father had been ready.

Veretians were cowards and deceivers; they should have scattered when their duplicitous attack met the full force of the Akielon army. But for some reason they hadn't fallen at the first sign of a real fight, they had stood firm, and shown metal, and, for hour upon hour, they had fought, until the Akielon lines had begun to slip and falter.

And their general wasn't the King, it was the twenty-five year old Prince, holding the field.

Father, I can beat him, he'd said.

Then go, his father had said, *and bring us back victory*.

* * *

The field was called Helay, and Damen knew it as a half-inch of a familiar map, studied in lamplight across from a bent golden head. Discussing the quality of the ground here with Laurent last night he had said, 'It has not been a harsh summer. It will be grass fields, gentle for riders if we need to depart from the road.' It turned out to be true. The grass was thick and soft on either side of them. Hills rolled out before them, flowing one into another, and there were hills also to the east.

The sun climbed the sky. They had ridden from a pre-dawn departure, but by the time they reached Helay there was plenty of light to differentiate rise from flat, grass from sky—sky from what lay under it.

The sun was shining down on them when the crest of the southern hill detached itself: a moving line that thickened and began to glint with silver and red.

Damen, riding at the head of the column, reined in and to one side, and Laurent beside him did the same, his eyes never leaving the southern hill. The line was no longer a line, it was shapes, recognisable shapes, and Jord was calling for a troop-wide halt.

Red. Red, the colour of the Regency, scrawled over with the iconography of the border forts, growing, fluttering. These were the banners of Ravenel. Not only the banners, but men and riders, flowing over the hilltop like wine from an over-full cup, staining and darkening its slopes, and spreading.

By now, columns were visible. It was possible to roughly estimate numbers, five or six hundred riders, two lots of hundred-and-fifty-man infantry columns. Judging from what Damen had seen of the lodgings at the fort, this was in fact Ravenel's full contingent of horse, and a lesser but substantial portion of its infantry. His own horse moved skittishly under him.

In the next moment, it seemed, the slopes to their right also grew figures, much closer—close enough to recognise the shape and livery of the men. It was the detachment that Touars had sent to Breteau, who had, a day ago, departed. Not gone, but here, waiting. Add another two hundred to the number.

Damen could feel the nervous tension of the men behind him, surrounded by colours that half of them down to their bones distrusted, and outnumbered ten to one.

Ravenel's forces on the hill began to split into a widening v-shape.

'They're moving to flank us. Have they mistaken us for an enemy troop?' said Jord, confused.

'No,' said Laurent.

'There is still a path open to us, to the north,' said Damen.

'No,' said Laurent.

A parcel of men detached itself from Ravenel's main column, and began making right for them.

'You two,' said Laurent, and dug his heels into his horse.

Damen and Jord followed, and they rode out over the long fields of grass, to meet Lord Touars and his men.

In form and protocols, from the beginning, it was wrong. It happened sometimes between two forces that there was some parley between messengers, or meeting between principals, for final discussion of conditions or posturing before a fight. Galloping across the field, Damen felt down to his bones unease at the assertion of wartime arrangements, made worse by the size of the party they rode to meet, and the men it contained.

Laurent reined in. The party was led by Lord Touars, beside him Councillor Guion, and Enguerran, the Captain. Behind them were twelve mounted soldiers.

'Lord Touars,' said Laurent.

There was no preamble. 'You have seen our forces. You will come with us.'

Laurent said, 'I take it that since our last meeting, you have received word from my uncle.'

Lord Touars said nothing, as impassive as the cloaked, armoured riders behind him, so that it was Laurent, uncharacteristically, who had to break the silence and speak.

Laurent said, 'Come with you to what purpose?'

Lord Touars's scarred face was cold with contempt. 'We know you have paid bribes to Vaskian raiders. We know you are in thrall to the Akielon, and that you have conspired with Vask to weaken your country with raids and border attacks. The good village of Breteau fell to one such raid. At Ravenel, you will be tried and executed for treason.'

'Treason,' said Laurent.

'Can you deny that you have under your protection the men responsible

for the attacks, and that you have coached them in an attempt to throw blame onto your uncle?’

The words fell like the blow from an axe. *You can outplay him*, Damen had said, but it had been long weeks since he had faced the power of the Regent. It occurred to him, chillingly, that the captured men could indeed have been coached for this moment, just not by Laurent. Laurent, who had therefore brought Touars the very rope that would hang him.

‘I can deny anything I like,’ said Laurent, ‘in the absence of proof.’

‘He has proof. He has my testimony. I saw everything.’ A rider pushed out intrusively from behind the others, shoving back the hood of his cloak as he spoke. He looked different in an aristocrat’s armour, with his dark curls primped and brushed, but the pretty mouth was familiar, like the antagonistic voice and the bellicose look in his eyes.

It was Aimeric.

Reality tilted; a hundred innocuous moments showing themselves in a different light. As understanding came like a cold weight to Damen’s stomach, Laurent was already moving—not to make some kind of polished retort—but wrenching his horse’s head around, planting his mount in front of Jord’s, and saying, ‘Go back to the troop. Now.’

Jord’s skin was blanched, as though he had just suffered a blow from a sword. Aimeric watched with his chin up, but gave Jord no particular attention. Jord’s face was stripped raw with betrayal and stricken guilt as he dragged his gaze from Aimeric and met Laurent’s hard, unrelenting eyes.

Guilt—a breach of faith that cut to the heart of their troop. How long had Aimeric been missing, and how long, out of misplaced loyalty, had Jord been covering up for him?

Damen had always thought Jord a good Captain, and he was still, in that moment: white-faced, Jord made no excuses, and demanded none from Aimeric, but did as he was ordered, in silence.

And then Laurent was alone, with only his slave beside him, and Damen felt the presence of every sword edge, every arrow tip, every soldier arrayed on the hill; and of Laurent, who lifted his cold blue eyes to Aimeric as if those things didn’t exist.

Laurent said, ‘You have me as an enemy for that. You are not going to enjoy the experience.’

Aimeric said, ‘You go to bed with Akielons. You let them fuck you.’

‘Like you let Jord fuck you?’ said Laurent. ‘Except that you really let him fuck you. Did your father tell you to do that, or was it your own inspired addition?’

‘I don’t betray my family. I’m not like you,’ said Aimeric. ‘You hate your uncle. You had unnatural feelings for your brother.’

‘At thirteen?’ From his frigid blue eyes to the tips of his polished boots, Laurent could not have looked less capable of feelings for anyone.

‘Apparently I was even more precocious than you.’

This seemed to infuriate Aimeric further. ‘You thought you were getting away with everything. I wanted to laugh in your face. I would have, if it hadn’t turned my stomach to serve under you.’

Lord Touars said, ‘You will come with us willingly, or you will come after we have subjugated your men. You have a choice.’

Laurent was silent at first. His eyes passed over the arrayed troops, the contingent of horse flanking him on two sides, and the full complement of infantry, against which his own small band, their numbers never meant for waged battle.

A trial pitting his word against Aimeric’s would be a mockery, for among these men Laurent had no good name with which to defend himself. He was in the hands of his uncle’s faction. In Arles, it would be worse, the Regent himself muddying Laurent’s reputation. Coward. No accomplishments. Unfit for the throne.

He was not going to ask his men to die for him. Damen knew that, as he knew, with a feeling like pain in his chest, that they would, if he asked them. This rabble of men, who not long ago had been divided, shiftless and disloyal, would fight to the death for their Prince, if he asked them.

‘If I submit to your soldiers, and give myself up to my uncle’s justice,’ said Laurent, ‘what happens to my men?’

‘Your crimes are not theirs. Having committed no wrongs except loyalty, they will be given their freedom and their lives. They will be disbanded, and the women will be escorted to the Vaskian border. The slave will be executed, of course.’

‘Of course,’ said Laurent.

Councillor Guion spoke. ‘Your uncle would never say this to you,’ he said, reining in beside his son Aimeric. ‘So I will. Out of loyalty to your father and your brother, your uncle has treated you with leniency you never

deserved. You have repaid him with scorn and contempt, with negligence in your duties, and with wanton disregard for the shame you bring to your family. That your selfish nature has led you to treason does not surprise me, but how could you betray your uncle's trust, after the kindness that he has lavished on you?'

'Uncle's immoderate kindness,' said Laurent. 'I promise you, it was easy.'

Guion said, 'You show no remorse at all.'

'Speaking of negligence,' said Laurent.

He lifted his hand. A long way behind him, two Vaskian women detached themselves from his troop and began to ride forward. Enguerran made a movement of concern, but Touars motioned him back—two women would hardly make a difference here one way or the other. At the halfway mark of their approach, you could see that one of the women's saddles was lumped, and then you could see what it was lumped with.

'I have something of yours. I'd chide you on your carelessness, but I've just had a lesson in the ways that the detritus of a troop can slip from one camp to another.'

Laurent said something in Vaskian. The woman dumped the bundle from her horse onto the dirt, as one shaking unwanted contents from a pack.

It was a man, brown-haired and lashed at the wrists and ankles like a boar to a pole after a hunt. His face was caked in dirt, except near the temple, where his hair was clumped with dried blood.

He wasn't a clansman.

Damen remembered the Vaskian camp. There were fourteen prisoners today, when yesterday there had been ten. He looked sharply at Laurent.

'If you think,' said Guion, 'that a fumbling final play with a hostage will stop or slow us from delivering to you the justice that you deserve, you are mistaken.'

Enguerran was saying, 'It's one of our scouts.'

'It's four of your scouts,' said Laurent.

One of the soldiers leapt down from his horse and went down on one armoured knee beside the prisoner, as Touars, frowning at Enguerran, said, 'The reports are delayed?'

'From the east. It's not unusual, when the terrain is this broad,' said Enguerran.

The soldier sliced open the bindings on the prisoner's hands and feet, and as he pulled at the gag, the prisoner lurched into a sitting position with the stupefied movements of a man fresh out of harsh bindings.

Thick-tongued, 'My lord—a force of men to the east, riding to intercept you at Helay—'

'This is Helay,' said Councillor Guion, with sharp impatience, as Captain Enguerran looked at Laurent with a different expression.

'What force?' Aimeric's sudden voice was thin and edged.

And Damen remembered a chase across a rooftop, dropping laundry on the men below while the sky above wheeled with stars—

'Your rabble of clan alliances, or Akielon mercenaries, no doubt.'

—remembered a bearded messenger falling to his knees in an inn room—

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' said Laurent.

—remembered Laurent murmuring intimately to Torveld on a perfumed balcony, gifting him with a king's ransom in slaves.

The scout was saying, '—carrying the Prince's banners alongside the yellow of Patras—'

An ear-splitting note from the horn of one of the Vaskian women drew a returning sound, like an echo, a distant, mournful note that rang out once and then again, and again, from the east. And cresting the sprawling eastern hill, the banners appeared, along with all the glinting weapons and livery of an army.

Alone of all the men Laurent did not lift his eyes to the hilltop, but kept them trained on Lord Touars.

'I have a choice?' said Laurent.

You planned this! Nicaise had flung the words at Laurent. *You wanted him to see!*

'Did you think,' said Laurent, 'if you threw down a challenge to fight, I would not accept it?'

The Patran troops filled the eastern horizon, bright under the noonday sun.

'My scorn and contempt,' said Laurent, 'are not in need of your leniency. Lord Touars, you face me in my own kingdom, you inhabit my lands, and you breathe at my pleasure. Make your own choice.'

'Attack.' Aimeric was looking from Touars to his father; his knuckles, clutching the reins, were white. 'Attack him. Now, before those other men

arrive, you don't know him, he has a way of—twisting out of things—'

'Your Highness,' said Lord Touars. 'I have received my orders from your uncle. They carry the full authority of the Regency.'

Laurent said, 'The Regency exists to safeguard my future. My uncle's authority over you is dependant on my subsequent authority over him. Without that, your duty is to break from him.'

Lord Touars said, 'I need time to consider, and to speak again with my advisors. An hour.'

'Go,' said Laurent.

An order from Lord Touars, and the greeting party streamed back over the field towards their own ranks.

Laurent whirled his horse to face Damen.

'I need you to captain the men. Take the command from Jord. It's yours. It should have been you,' said Laurent, 'from the start.' The words were hard as he spoke of Touars: 'He is going to fight.'

'He was wavering,' said Damen.

'He was wavering. Guion will hold him firm. Guion has hitched his cart to my uncle's train, and he knows that any decision that ends with me on the throne ends with his head on the block. He will not allow Touars to back down from this fight,' said Laurent. 'I have spent a month playing battle games with you over a map. Your strategy in the field is better than mine. Is it better than that of the border lords of my country? Advise me, Captain.'

Damen looked again at the hills; for a moment, between two armies, he and Laurent were alone.

Laurent, with his Patran troops flanking from the east, had equal numbers and superior position. Ultimate ascendancy was a matter of holding those positions, and not falling to overconfidence, or any one of various reversal strategies.

But Lord Touars was here, exposed on the field, and Damen's Akielon blood beat hard within him. He thought of a hundred different Akielon discourses on the impossibility of prising Veretians from their forts.

'I can win you this battle. But if you want Ravenel . . .' said Damen. He felt his battle instincts rise within him at the audacity of it, to take one of the most powerful forts on the Veretian border. It was something not even his father had dared, had ever dreamed possible. 'If you want to take Ravenel, you need to cut them off from the fort, no one in or out, no messengers, no

riders, and a swift, clean victory without the disintegration of a rout. Once Ravenel gets word of what's happened here, the defences go up. You will need to use some of the Patrans to create a perimeter, depleting the main force, then break the Veretian lines, ideally those closest to Touars himself. It will be harder.'

'You have an hour,' said Laurent.

'This would have been easier,' said Damen, 'if you had told me earlier what to expect. In the mountains. At the Vaskian camp.'

'I didn't know who it was,' said Laurent.

Like a dark flower, those words unfolded in his mind.

Laurent said, 'You were right about him. He spent his first week here starting fights, and when that didn't work, he got in bed with my Captain.' His voice was inflectionless. 'What was it, do you think, that Orlant found out, that got him skewered on Aimeric's sword?'

Orlant, thought Damen, and suddenly felt sick.

But by that time Laurent had his heels in his horse and was galloping back to the troop.

CHAPTER 16

The mood was tense when they returned. The men were on edge, surrounded by the Regent's banners. An hour was no time at all to make preparations. No one liked it. They released the carts, the servants, the extra horses. They armed and took up shields. The Vaskian women, whose allegiance was tentative, retreated with the carts—except two, who stayed to fight on the understanding that they would receive the horses of any men they killed.

'The Regency,' said Laurent, addressing the troop, 'thought to take us outnumbered. It expected us to roll over without a fight.'

Damen said: 'We will not let them cow us, subdue us or force us down. Ride hard. Don't stop to fight the front line. We are going to smash them open. We are here to fight for our Prince!'

The cry rang out, *For the Prince!* The men gripped their swords, slammed their visors down, and the sound they made was a roar.

Galloping his horse the length of the troop, Damen gave the order, and the travelling column re-formed at his word. The days of sloppiness and straggling were gone. The men were green and untested, but behind them now was a half-summer of continuous training together.

Jord, when he drew up beside him, said, 'Whatever happens to me afterwards, I want to fight.'

Damen nodded. Then he turned and let his eyes pass briefly over Touars's troops.

He understood the first truth of battle: soldiers won fights. Where there was no numerical advantage it was essential that the quality of troops was higher. The orders given by the Captain meant nothing if the men faltered in carrying them out.

They had, unquestionably, the tactical advantage. Touars's front faced Laurent, but he was flanked by the Patrans: Touars's formation advancing would have to swing around in order to make a second front facing in the Patran direction, or be quickly overrun.

But Touars's men were a veteran force drilled in large-scale manoeuvres; splitting on the field in order to fight on two fronts would be something they well knew how to do.

Laurent's men were not capable of complex field work. The secret then was not to stretch them beyond their means, but to focus on line work, the one thing they had relentlessly drilled, the one thing they knew how to do. They must break Touars's lines, or this battle was lost, and Laurent would fall to his uncle.

He recognised, in himself, that he was angry, and that it had less to do with Aimeric's betrayal than with the Regent, the malicious rumours that the Regent employed—warping the truth, warping men, while the Regent himself remained pristine and untouched as he set his men to fight against their own Prince.

The lines would break. He would make sure of it.

Laurent's horse drew alongside his own; around them, the scent of greenery and crushed grass that would soon transform into something else. Laurent was silent for a long moment before he spoke.

'Touars's men will be less unified than they appear. Whatever rumours my uncle has spread about me, the starburst banner means something here on the border.'

He didn't speak his brother's name. He was here to take up a place on the front, where his brother had always fought, except that unlike his brother, he was riding out to kill his own people.

'I know,' said Laurent, 'that a Captain's real work is done before the battle. And you have been my Captain, in the long hours with me planning drills, shaping the men. It was under your instruction that we kept the drills simple, and learned how to hold and to break.'

'Frills are for parades. An unyielding foundation wins battles.'

'It would not have been my strategy.'

'I know. You overcomplicate things.'

'I have an order for you,' Laurent said.

Across the long fields of Helay the lines of Touars's men stood

immaculately arrayed against them.

Laurent spoke clearly. “A clean victory without the disintegration of a rout.” What you meant is that this has to be done quickly, and that I cannot afford to lose half my men. So this is my order. When we are inside their lines, you and I will hunt out the leaders of this fight. I will take Guion, and if you get to him before I do,’ said Laurent, ‘kill Lord Touars.’

‘What?’ said Damen.

Each word was precise. ‘That is how Akielons win wars, isn’t it? Why fight the whole army, when you can just cut off the head?’

After a long moment, Damen said, ‘You won’t have to hunt them out. They’ll be coming for you, too.’

‘Then we’ll have a swift victory. I meant what I said. If we sleep tonight inside the walls of Ravenel, in the morning, I will take off the collar from around your neck. This is the battle you came here to fight.’

* * *

They didn’t have an hour. They had barely half of that. And no warning, Touars’s hope being to reverse their advantage of position with surprise.

But Damen had seen Veretians ignore parley before, and was waiting for it; and Laurent was of course harder to surprise than most men realised.

The first sweep across the field was smooth and geometric, as it always was. Trumpets blared, and the first large-scale movements began: Touars, attempting to swing, was confronted by Laurent’s cavalry, riding straight for him. Damen called the order: hold, even and steady. Formation was all: their own lines must not disunite in the zeal of the escalating charge. Laurent’s men held their horses to a canter, hard-reined, though they tossed their heads and wanted to break to a gallop, the thunder of hooves in their ears and rising, their blood up, the charge catching like a spark that makes racing fire. Hold, hold.

The shock of collision was like the smashing of boulders in the landslide at Nesson. Damen felt the familiar battering shudder, the sudden shift in scale as the panorama of the charge was abruptly replaced by the slam of muscle against metal, of horse and man impacting at speed. Nothing could be heard over the crashing, the roars of men, both sides warping and threatening to

rupture, regular lines and upright banners replaced by a heaving, struggling mass. Horses slipped, then regained their footing; others fell, slashed or speared through.

Don't stop to fight the front line, Damen had said. He killed, his sword shearing, shield and horse a ram, pushing in, and further in, opening a space by force alone for the momentum of the men behind him. Beside him a man fell to a spear in the throat. To his left, an equine scream as Rochert's horse went down.

In front of him, methodically, men fell, and fell, and fell.

He split his attention. He swept a sword cut aside with his shield, killed a helmed soldier, and all the while flung out his mind, waiting for the moment when Touars's lines split open. The most difficult part of commanding from the front was this—staying alive in the moment, while tracking in his mind, critically, the whole fight. Yet it was exhilarating, like fighting with two bodies, at two scales.

He could feel Touars's force beginning to give way, feel his lines buckling, the charge near to gaining ascendancy, so that living men must get out of the way or find death. They would find death. He was going to carve up Touars's force and hand it to the man he was challenging.

He heard Touars's men give the call to regroup—

Break the lines. Break them.

He set out his own call for Laurent's men to reform around him. A commander, shouting, could expect to be heard by, at best, the men next to him, but the call was echoed in voices, then in horn blasts, and the men, who had practised this manoeuvre outside Nesson over and over, came to him in perfect formation, with the majority of their number intact.

Just in time for Touars's still struggling force around them to be rocked sideways by the impact of a second Patran charge.

The first rupture, a sharp burst of chaos. He was aware of Laurent alongside him—he could not be unaware. He saw Laurent's horse stagger, bleeding from a long cut on its shoulder, while the horse in front of it went down—saw Laurent close his thighs, change his seat, and take his horse over the thrashing obstacle, landing on the other side with his sword drawn, and clearing ground for himself with two exact slices, mount wheeling. This, it was impossible not to recall, was the man who had beaten Torveld to the mark on a dying horse.

And Laurent, it seemed, had been right about one thing. The men around him had fallen back a little. For before them, all gold armour and glinting starburst, was their Prince. In the towns, in the processions, he had always impressed, as a figurehead. There was a reluctance, among the common soldiers, to strike a blow directly against him.

But only among the common soldiers. *He knows that any decision that ends with me on the throne ends with his head on the block*, Laurent had said of Guion. The moment the battle began to shift in their favour, killing Laurent became Guion's imperative.

Damen saw Laurent's banner topple first, a bad omen. It was the enemy captain Enguerran who engaged Laurent, and who, thought Damen, would learn the hard way that the Regent lied when it came to the fighting prowess of his nephew.

'*To the Prince!*' Damen called, feeling the fighting change in quality around Laurent. The men began to form up—too late. Enguerran was part of a knot of men that included Lord Touars himself. And with a clear line to Laurent, Touars had begun to charge. Damen drove his heels into his horse.

The impact of their mounts was a heavy crash of flesh against flesh, so that both horses fell, in a tangle of legs and thrashing bodies.

Armoured as he was, Damen hit the ground hard. He rolled to avoid the lashing hooves of his horse as it tried to right itself, and then, with the wisdom of experience, he rolled again.

He felt Touars's blade drive into the ground, slicing through the straps of his helm, and—where it should have hit his neck—scraping with a metallic sound down the side of his gold collar. He came up facing his opponent with his sword in one hand, felt his helm twist, a danger, and with his other hand, abandoning his shield, flung it off.

His eyes met those of Lord Touars.

Lord Touars said, 'The slave,' scornfully, and, having reclaimed his sword from the ground, tried to bury it inside Damen.

Damen cast him back with a parry and a strike that shattered Touars's shield.

Touars was a good enough swordsman that he was not overcome by the first exchange. He was not a green recruit, he was an experienced war hero, and he was comparatively fresh, not having just fought point on a charge. He cast off his shield, gripped his sword and attacked. Had he been fifteen years

younger, it might have been a match. The second exchange showed that it was not. But instead of coming at Damen again, Touars took a step back. The expression on his face had changed.

It was not, as it might have been, a reaction to the skill he faced, or the way that a man looks when he thinks that he has lost a fight. It was the dawning of disbelief, and of recognition.

'I know you,' said Lord Touars, in a sudden jagged voice, as though memory had been ripped from him. He threw himself into the attack. Damen, shock-empty, reacted by instinct, parrying once, then spearing from below, where Touars was wide open. *'I know you,'* Touars said again. Damen's sword went in, and instinct pushed forward and drove it in further.

'Damianos,' Touars said. *'Prince-killer.'*

It was the last thing he said. Damen pulled the sword out. He took a step back.

He became aware of a man drawn alongside them, frozen in stillness even in the midst of battle, and knew that what had just happened had been seen, and overheard.

He turned, the truth on his face. Stripped bare, he could not hide himself in that moment. *Laurent*, he thought, and lifted his gaze to meet the eyes of the man who had witnessed the last words of Lord Touars.

It wasn't Laurent. It was Jord.

He was staring at Damen in horror, his sword lax in his hand.

'No,' said Damen. *'It's not—'*

The final moments of the battle faded around Damen, as he came to full comprehension of what Jord was seeing. Of what Jord, for the second time that day, was seeing.

'Does he know?' said Jord.

He had no chance to answer. Laurent's men were swarming over Touars's standard, toppling the banners of Ravenel. It was happening: Ravenel's surrender spreading out from its defeated centre, and he was swept up in a surge of men, as the triumphant chant broke out in men's voices, *Hail to the Prince*, and closer to, his own name repeated, *Damen, Damen*.

* * *

Amid cheers, he was given another horse and he swung up into the saddle. His body was sheened with the sweat of the fight; the flanks of his horse were dark-stained. His heart felt as it had in the instant before the impact of the charge.

Laurent reined in beside him, still astride the same horse, dried blood in a stripe along its shoulder. ‘Well, Captain,’ he said. ‘Now we merely have to take an impregnable fortress.’ His eyes were bright. ‘Those who surrendered are to be well treated. Later, they will be given the opportunity to join me. Set up what measures you see fit for the injured and the dead. Then come to me. I want us ready to ride for Ravenel within the half hour.’

Deal with the living. The injured were sent to the Patran tents, with Paschal and his Patran equivalents. All men would receive care. It would not be pleasant. The Veretians had sent nine hundred men and no physicians, not having expected a fight.

Deal with the dead. It was usual for the victorious to take up their dead, and then, if they were magnanimous, allow the same dignity to the defeated side. But these men were all Veretians, and the dead from both sides should be treated equally.

They should then ride for Ravenel, without delays or hesitations. At Ravenel, there would be, at least, the physicians Touars had left behind. It was also necessary to preserve the element of surprise, for which they had worked so hard. Damen drew on a rein, then found himself by the man he was seeking, pushed by some solitary impulse to the far end of the field. He dismounted.

‘Are you here to kill me?’ said Jord.

‘No,’ said Damen.

There was a silence. They stood two paces apart. Jord had a knife drawn, and held it low, a white-knuckled fist around the hilt.

Damen said, ‘You haven’t told him.’

‘You don’t even deny it?’ said Jord. A harsh laugh, when Damen was silent. ‘You hated us so much, all this time? It wasn’t enough to invade, to take our land? You had to play this—sick game as well?’

Damen said, ‘If you tell him, I can’t serve him.’

‘*Tell him?*’ said Jord. ‘Tell him the man he trusts has lied, and lied again, has deceived him into the worst humiliation?’

‘I wouldn’t hurt him,’ said Damen, and heard the words drop like lead.

'You killed his brother, then got him under you in bed.'

Put like that, it was monstrous. *It's not that way between us*, he ought to have said, and didn't, couldn't. He felt hot, then cold. He thought of Laurent's delicate, needling talk that froze into icy rebuff if Damen pushed at it, but if he didn't—if he matched himself to its subtle pulses and undercurrents—continued, sweetly deepening, until he could only wonder if he knew, if they both knew, what they were doing.

'I'm going to leave,' he said. 'I was always going to leave. I stayed only because—'

'That's right, you'll leave. I won't allow you to wreck us. You'll command us to Ravenel, you'll say nothing to him, and when the fort is won, you'll get on a horse and go. He'll mourn your loss, and never know.'

It was what he had planned. It was what, from the beginning, he had planned. In his chest, the beats of his heart were like sword thrusts.

'In the morning,' said Damen. 'I'll give him the fort, and leave him in the morning. It's what I promised.'

'You're gone by the time the sun hits the middle of the sky, or I tell him,' said Jord. 'And what he did to you in the palace will seem like a lover's kiss compared with what will happen to you then.'

Jord was loyal. Damen had always liked that about him, the steadfast nature that reminded him of home. Strewn around them was the end of the battle, victory marked by silence and churned grass.

'He'll know,' Damen heard himself say. 'When word of my return to Akielos reaches him. He'll know. I wish you would tell him then that I—'

'You fill me with horror,' said Jord. His hands were tight on his knife. Both his hands, now.

'Captain,' a voice called. 'Captain!'

Damen's eyes were on Jord's face.

'That's you,' Jord said.

CHAPTER 17

Hand hard on Enguerran's arm, Damen dragged the injured Captain of Ravenel's troops into one of the round Patran tents on the edge of the battlefield, where they waited for Laurent.

If Damen was rougher than he needed to be, it was because he didn't approve of this plan. Hearing it described, he'd felt as though his body was under a weight, a hard pressure. Now he released Enguerran in the tent and watched him get to his feet without helping him. Enguerran had a wound in his side that still leaked blood.

Laurent, entering the tent, pulled off his helm, and Damen saw what Enguerran saw: a golden prince with his armour covered in blood, his hair sweat-dampened, his eyes unsparing. The wound in Enguerran's side had come from Laurent's blade; the blood on Laurent's armour was Enguerran's.

Laurent said, 'Get on your knees.'

Enguerran fell to his knees in a clank of armour.

'Your Highness,' he said.

'You address me as your Prince?' said Laurent.

Nothing had changed. Laurent was no different than he'd always been. The mildest comments were the most dangerous. Enguerran seemed to realise it. He stayed on his knees, his cape pooling around him; a muscle moved in his jaw, but he didn't lift his eyes.

'My loyalty was to Lord Touars. I served him for ten years. And Guion had the authority of his office, and of your uncle.'

'Guion does not have the authority to remove me from the succession. Nor, it transpires, does he have the means.' Laurent's eyes passed over Enguerran, his bowed head, his injury, his Veretian armour with its ornate shoulderpiece. 'We are riding for Ravenel. You are alive because I want your

loyalty. When the scales fall from your eyes about my uncle, I will expect it.'

Enguerran looked up at Damen. The last time they had faced one another, Enguerran had been trying to bar Damen from Touars's hall. *An Akielon has no place in the company of men.*

He felt himself harden. He wanted no part of what was about to unfold. Enguerran returned a hostile gaze.

Laurent said, 'I remember. You don't like him. And, of course, he out-captured you on the field. I imagine you like that even less.'

'You'll never get inside Ravenel,' Enguerran said, flatly. 'Guion made it through your lines with his retinue. He's riding for Ravenel right now, to warn them you are coming.'

'I don't think he is. I think he's riding to Fortaine, so he can lick his wounds in private, without my uncle and I forcing him to make any uncomfortable choices.'

'You're lying. Why would he withdraw to Fortaine, when he has a chance to defeat you here?'

'Because I have his son,' said Laurent.

Enguerran's eyes flew to Laurent's face.

'Yes. Aimeric. Trussed and tied and spewing pretty venom.'

'I see. So you need me to get inside Ravenel. That is the real reason I am alive. You expect me to betray the people I have served for ten years.'

'To get inside Ravenel? My dear Enguerran, I'm afraid you are quite mistaken.'

Laurent's gaze travelled over Enguerran again, his blue eyes cold.

'I don't need you,' said Laurent. 'I just need your clothes.'

* * *

That was how they would get into Ravenel: disguised, in foreign clothing.

From the beginning, there was a sense of unreality about it, hefting Enguerran's shoulderpiece, flexing his hand in Enguerran's gauntlet. Damen stood, and the cape swirled.

Not everyone got armour that fit, but they had rescued Touars's banners and righted them, and the red cloth and helms were straight, and they could be mistaken for Touars's troop from a distance of forty-six feet, which was

the height of Ravenel's walls.

Rochert got a helmet with a feather in it. Lazar got the standard-bearer's silks and gaudy tunic. As well as his red cape and his armour, Damen got Enguerran's sword and his helm, which turned the world into a slit. Enguerran had the dubious honour of riding with them not (as he might have been) stripped to his undergarments like a plucked chicken, but bound to a horse and dressed in unobtrusive Veretian clothing.

The men had just fought an action, but exhaustion had transformed into the kind of high spirits that came from the heady mix of victory, fatigue and adrenalin. This wayward adventure appealed to them. Or perhaps it was the idea of a new victory, satisfying because it would be of a different kind. First smash the Regent, then pull the wool over his eyes.

Damen was repelled by the disguise. He had argued against it. The deception was wrong, the pretence of friendship. The traditional forms of warfare existed because they gave your opponent a fair chance.

'This gives us a fair chance,' Laurent had said.

The brazen audacity of this was characteristic of Laurent, though dressing up his entire troop was on a different scale to walking into a small town inn with a sapphire in his ear, batting his lashes. It was one thing to disguise yourself, another to force your whole army to do it. Damen felt trapped by the ornate deception.

Damen watched Lazar struggling into his tunic. He watched Rochert compare the size of his feather with that of one of the Patran men.

His father, Damen knew, would not recognise today's escapade as a military action, but would scorn it as dishonourable, unworthy of his son.

His father would never have thought of taking Ravenel like this. Disguised. Without bloodshed. Before midday the next day.

He wrapped the reins around his fist, dug his heels into his horse. They sailed in through the first set of gates, with Damen's shoulderpiece winking. At the second set of gates, a soldier on the walls waved a banner from side to side, signalling the portcullis open, and at Damen's order Lazar waggled their own banner around in answer, while Enguerran jerked (gagged) in the saddle.

It should have felt daring, intoxicating, and he was dimly aware that the men were experiencing it like that—that they had enjoyed the long ride that he had hardly registered. As they passed through the second gates, the men just barely had their exhilaration strapped down under straight faces in the

long drawn-out space between heartbeats, waiting for the whistle and thunk of crossbows that never came.

As the heavy latticed iron beetled above their heads, Damen found himself wanting it, wanting disruption, a cry of outrage, or of challenge, wanting it as a release to this—feeling. *Traitor. Stop.* But none came.

Of course it didn't. Of course the men of Ravenel welcomed them, believing them to be friends. Of course they trusted in the face of a deception, leaving themselves wide open.

He forced his mind to the task. He was not here to hesitate. He knew this fort. He knew its defences and its pitfalls. He wanted it locked down. As they breached the walls, he sent men to the battlements, to the storehouses, to the spiral staircases that gave access to the towers.

The main force reached the courtyard. Laurent drove his horse up the steps and crested the dais, his golden head arrogantly bare, his men taking up the central position in the great hall behind him. No doubt now who they were, as blue pennants unfurled, and Touars's banners were thrown aside. Laurent wheeled his horse, and its hooves rang on the smooth stone. He was fully exposed, a single bright figure at the mercy of any arrows pointing downwards from the battlements.

There was a moment when any soldier of Ravenel might have cried out, *Treachery! Sound the horn!*

But by the time that moment came, Damen had men everywhere, and if one of Ravenel's soldier's reached for a blade or a crossbow, there was a swordtip in place to persuade him to put it down. Blue surrounded red.

Damen heard himself call in a ringing voice: 'Lord Touars is defeated at Helay. Ravenel is under the protection of the Crown Prince.'

* * *

It was not all bloodless. They encountered real fighting in the living quarters, the worst of it from the private guards of Touars's advisor Hestal, who was not Veretian enough, thought Damen, to feign happiness at the change in power.

It was a victory. He told himself that. The men were enjoying it fully, the classic arc of it: the swell of preparation, the cresting of the fight, and the

breaking, the heady rush of conquest. Buoyed on high spirits and success, they swept into Ravenel, the taking of the fort an extension of the elation of victory at Hellay, the skirmishes in the halls easy matters to them. They could do anything.

It was a battle won and a fort taken, a solid base secured, and Damen was alive, and facing his freedom for the first time in many months.

Around him there was celebration, an outpouring of revelry, which he allowed because the men needed it. A boy was playing a pipe, and there was the sound of drums, and dancing. The men were pink-flushed and happy. Barrels were upended into a courtyard fountain, so that men could scoop wine out as they pleased. Lazar handed him a full tankard. It had a fly in it.

Damen put down the tankard, after disposing of its contents onto the ground with a sharp movement of his hand. There was work to be done.

He dispatched men to open the gates for the returning army: the injured first, the Patrans following, the Vaskians with their loot—nine horses on a string. He dispatched men to the storehouses and to the armoury to make inventories, and to the private quarters to offer reassurance to the residents.

He dispatched men to take Touars's nine-year-old son Thevenin and hold him under house arrest. Laurent was developing quite a collection of sons.

Ravenel was the jewel of the Veretian border, and if he couldn't take pleasure in the celebrations, he could ensure that it was well manned, with a good strategy for defence. He could ensure that Laurent would have a strong foundational base. He set up shifts to man the walls and the towers, assigning each man to his strength. He picked up the threads of Enguerran's systems, and reimplemented them, or changed them to his own exacting standards, giving command duties to two men: Lazar from their own troop, and the best of Enguerran's men, Guymar. He would have an infrastructure in place. One Laurent could count on.

The work was falling into place around him when he was called from giving orders on the battlements to report to Laurent.

Inside the fort, the style was older, reminiscent of Chastillon, the ornate Veretian designs worked in curved iron and dark carved wood, without the overlays of gilt, ivory, mother of pearl. He was admitted to the inner rooms that Laurent had made his own, flame-lit and as richly furnished as his tent. The sounds of celebration were muffled into softness by the ancient stone walls. Laurent stood in the centre, his back partly to the door, a servant lifting

the last piece of armour from his shoulders. Damen came through the doors.

And stopped. Attending to Laurent's armour had lately been his own duty. He felt a pressure in his chest; everything was familiar, from the pull of the straps, to the weight of the armour, the warmth of the shirt where it had been pressed beneath padding.

Then Laurent turned and saw him, and the pressure in his chest grew like pain as Laurent greeted him, half-stripped and bright-eyed.

'How do you like my fort?'

'I like it. I wouldn't mind seeing you with a few more,' said Damen. 'To the north.'

He forced himself forward. Laurent swept him with a long, gleaming look.

'If you didn't fit Enguerran's shoulderpiece, I was going to suggest you try the panoply off his horse.'

“‘I will take Guion’?” said Damen.

'Be fair. You won the battle before I could get to him. I thought I'd have half a chance, at least. Are all your conquests that decisive?'

'Do things always work out as you plan?'

'This time they did. This time everything did. You know, we just took an impregnable fort.'

They were gazing at one another. Ravenel, the jewel of the Veretian border: a punishing ground fight at Helay, and a piece of mad trickery in mismatched clothing.

'I know,' he said, helplessly.

'It's double the men I was anticipating. And ten times the supplies. Shall I be honest with you? I thought I'd be taking a defensive position—'

'At Aquitart,' said Damen. 'You had it supplied for a siege.' He heard, as if from a distance, that he spoke in his usual voice. 'Ravenel's a little more defensible. Just have your men check under the helms before they open the gates.'

'All right,' said Laurent. 'You see? I'm learning to take your advice.' He spoke with an unselfconscious little smile that was wholly new.

Damen forced his gaze away. He thought of the work proceeding outside. The armoury was stocked, and more than stocked, meticulous rows of smooth metal and sharpened tips. Most of Touars's men stationed in the fort had transferred their loyalty.

The walls were manned, and the ordinances for defence had been laid out. The equipment was readied for use. The men knew their duty, and from storehouses to courtyard to great hall, the fort was prepared. He had made sure of that.

He said, 'What will you do next?'

'Bathe,' answered Laurent, in a tone that said he knew perfectly well what Damen had meant, 'and change into something that's not made of metal. You should do the same. I had the servants lay out some clothing for you that befits your new station. Very Veretian, you'll hate it. I have something else for you as well.'

He turned back in time to see Laurent move briefly to pick up a half-circle of metal from a small table by the wall. It felt like the slow push of a spear into his body, the awful unfolding inevitability of it, in front of servants, in this small, intimate room.

'I didn't have time to give this to you before the battle,' said Laurent.

He closed his eyes, opened them. He said, 'Jord was your Captain through most of our march to the border.'

'And you are my Captain now. That looks like it was close.' Laurent's gaze had shifted to his neck, where the collar was scarred from Touars's blade; iron had bitten deep into the soft gold.

'It was,' said Damen, 'close.'

He swallowed down hard on what crawled in his throat, turning his head to one side. Laurent held the Captain's badge of office. Damen had seen Laurent transfer it once before, from Govart to Jord. Laurent would have taken it from Jord.

He still wore full armour, unlike Laurent, who stood before him, his yellow hair sweat-tendrilled from the fight. He could see the slight red imprints where Laurent's armour had pressed through padding on his vulnerable skin. Breathing was a tight, painful thing.

Laurent's hands rose to his chest, finding the place where cape met metal. The pin under Laurent's fingers pricked fabric, slid, then fit to the clasp.

The doors to the room opened. Damen turned, unready.

A swell of people were spilling into the room, bringing with them the jovial atmosphere from outside. The change was sudden. Damen's heartbeat was at odds with it. Yet the mood of the newcomers was congruent with Laurent's, if not his own. Damen had another tankard thrust into his hand.

Unable to fight the tide of celebration, Damen was swept away by servants, by well-wishers. The last thing he heard was Laurent saying, ‘See to my Captain. Tonight he is to have anything that he asks for.’

* * *

Dancing and music wholly transformed the great hall. People in clusters laughed and clapped enthusiastically out of time with the music, rosily drunk because the wine had preceded the food, which was only now being brought.

The kitchens had rallied. The cooks cooked, the attendants attended. Nervous at first over the change in occupancy, the household staff had settled, and duty was transforming into willingness. The Prince was a young hero, coined in gold; look at those eyelashes, look at that profile. The commons had always loved Laurent. If Lord Touars had hoped for the men and women of his fort to resist Laurent, he had wished in vain. It was more like the commons rolled over and waited to be rubbed on the belly.

Damen entered, resisting the urge to tug on his sleeve. He had never been so overlaced. His new status meant an aristocrat’s clothing, which was harder to put on and take off. Dressing had taken almost an hour, and that was after bathing and all manner of attentions that had included trimming his hair. He had been forced to take reports and give orders over the heads of servants, while they meticulously attended to his laces. The last report from Guymar was what now had him scanning the crowd.

He’d been told that the small retinue that had ridden in with the last of the Patrans was that of Torveld, Prince of Patras. Torveld was here accompanying his men, though he had not taken part in the fight.

Damen moved through the hall, with Laurent’s men congratulating him on all sides, a slap on the back, a clasp of his shoulder. His eyes stayed fixed on the yellow head at the long table, so that it was almost a surprise when he found the knot of Patrans elsewhere in the room. The last time Damen had seen Torveld, he had been murmuring sweet nothings to Laurent on a darkened balcony, with the night flowers jasmine and frangipani blooming in the garden below. Damen had been half expecting to find him in intimate conversation with Laurent once again, but Torveld was with his own retinue, and when he saw Damen, he approached him.

‘Captain,’ said Torveld. ‘That is a title well earned.’

They spoke about the Patran men, and about Ravenel’s defences. In the end, what Torveld said about his own presence here was brief:

‘My brother is not happy. I’m here against his wishes, because I have a personal stake in your campaign against the Regent. I wanted to face your Prince man to man, and tell him that much. But I will ride for Bazal tomorrow, and you will have no more help from Patras. I cannot act further against my brother’s orders. This is all I can give you.’

‘We are lucky the Prince’s messenger got through with his signet ring,’ Damen acknowledged.

‘What messenger?’ said Torveld.

Damen thought the answer political circumspection, but then Torveld added, ‘The Prince approached me for men in Arles. I didn’t agree until I was six weeks out of the palace. As for my reasons, I think you must know them.’ He motioned for one of his retinue to come forward.

Slender and graceful, one of the Patrans detached himself from the group by the wall, dropping to his knees in front of Damen, and kissing the floor by his feet, so that Damen’s view was of a tumble of curls, burnished honey-gold.

‘Rise,’ said Damen, in Akielon.

Erasmus lifted his bowed head, but did not come up from his knees.

‘So humble? We’re the same rank.’

‘This slave kneels for a Captain.’

‘I’m a Captain through your help. I owe you a great deal.’

Shyly, after a pause: ‘I told you that I would repay you. You did so much to help me in the palace. And . . .’ Erasmus hesitated, looking over at Torveld. When Torveld nodded that he should speak, he lifted his chin, uncharacteristically. ‘And I didn’t like the Regent. He burnt my leg.’

Torveld gave him a proud look, and Erasmus flushed and made obeisance again with perfect form.

Damen repressed another instinct to tell him to stand up. It was odd that the usual manners of his homeland should feel so strange to him. Perhaps it was just that he had spent several months in the company of pushy, forward pets and unpredictable Veretian free men. He looked at Erasmus, the demure limbs and the lowered lashes. He had bedded slaves like this, as pliant in bed as they were out of it. He remembered enjoying it, but the memory was

distant, as though it belonged to someone else. Erasmus was pretty, he could see that. Erasmus, he recalled, had been trained for him. He would be obedient to every order, intuit every whim, willingly.

Damen turned his eyes to Laurent.

A picture of cool, difficult distance confronted him. Laurent sat in brief conversation, wrist balanced on the edge of the great table, fingertips resting on the base of a goblet. From the severe, straight-backed posture to the impersonal grace of his cupped yellow head; from his detached blue eyes to the arrogance of his cheekbones, Laurent was complicated and contradictory, and Damen could look nowhere else.

As though responding to some instinct, Laurent looked up and met Damen's eyes, and in the next moment Laurent was rising and making his way over.

'You aren't going to come and eat?'

'I should return to oversee the work outside. Ravenel should have impeccable defences. I want . . . I want to do that for you,' he said.

'It can wait. You just won me a fort,' said Laurent. 'Let me spoil you a little.'

They stood by the wall, and as Laurent spoke, he leaned a shoulder against the contoured stone. His voice was pitched for the space between them, private and unhurried.

'I remember. You take a great deal of pleasure in small victories.' Damen quoted Laurent's words back to him.

'It's not small,' said Laurent. 'It's the first time I've ever won a play against my uncle.'

He said it simply. Light from the torches reflected on his face. Conversation around them was a faded wax and wane of sound, mingling with the restrained colours, the reds, browns and dimmed blues of flame light.

'You know that isn't true. You won against him in Arles when you had Torveld take the slaves to Patras.'

'That wasn't a play against my uncle. That was a play against Nicaise. Boys are easy. At thirteen,' said Laurent, 'you could have led me around by the nose.'

'I can't believe you were ever easy.'

'Think of the greenest innocent you've ever tumbled,' said Laurent. And

then, when Damen didn't answer: 'I forgot, you don't fuck boys.'

Across the hall there was a muted burst of laughter at some distant minor antic. The hall was a hazy background of sounds and shapes. The light was a warm torch glow.

Damen said, 'Men, sometimes.'

'In the absence of women?'

'When I want them.'

'If I'd known that, I might have felt a frisson of danger, lying next to you.'

'You did know that,' said Damen.

There was a pause. Laurent pushed himself away from the wall eventually.

'Come and eat,' Laurent said.

Damen found himself at the table. In Veretian parlance, it was a relaxed affair, people already eating bread with fingers and meat from knife points. But the table was arrayed with the best the kitchens could provide at short notice: spiced meats, pheasant with apples, birds stuffed with raisins and cooked in milk. Damen reached unthinkingly for a sliver of meat, but Laurent's grip on his wrist stopped him, drawing his arm back from the table.

'Torveld tells me that in Akielos, it's the slave who feeds the master.'

'That's right.'

'Then you can't have any objection,' said Laurent, picking up the morsel, and lifting it.

Laurent's gaze was steady, with no demure lowering of his eyes. He was nothing like a slave, even when Damen allowed himself to imagine it. Damen remembered Laurent shifting inwards on a long wooden bench in the inn at Nesson to fastidiously eat bread from his fingers.

'I don't have any objection,' said Damen.

He stayed where he was. It was not the role of a master to strain after food held at arm's length.

Golden brows arched slightly. Laurent shifted in, and brought the meat to Damen's lips.

The act of biting felt deliberate. The meat was rich and warm, a delicacy with southern influences, very like the food of his homeland. Chewing was slow; he was over-aware of Laurent watching him. When Laurent picked up the next sliver of meat, it was Damen who leaned in.

He took a second bite. He didn't look at the food, he looked at Laurent, at the way he held himself, always so controlled, so that all of his reactions were subtle, his blue eyes difficult to read, but not cold. He could see that Laurent was pleased, that he was enjoying the acquiescence for its rarity, its exclusivity. It felt like he was on the edge of understanding, as though Laurent was coming into view for the first time.

Damen drew back, and that was the right thing to do too, allowing the moment to be easy: a small, shared intimacy at table, one that passed largely unnoticed by the other diners.

Around them, the conversation shifted to other things, news from the border, moments of the battle, discussion of tactics on the field. Damen kept his eyes on Laurent.

Someone had brought a kithara, and Erasmus was playing, soft, unobtrusive notes. In Akielon performances—as in all things Akielon—restraint was prized. The overall effect was one of simplicity. In the quiet between songs, Damen heard himself say, 'Play the Conquest of Arsaces,' speaking the request to the boy without thinking. In the next moment, he heard the first familiar stirring notes.

The song was old. The boy had a lovely voice. Notes pulsed, winding through the hall, and though the words from his homeland would be lost on the Veretians, Damen recalled that Laurent could speak his language.

*They are surely gods who speak to him
With steady voices*

*A glance from him drives men to their knees
His sigh brings cities to ruin*

*I wonder if he dreams of surrender
On a bed of white flowers*

*Or is that the mistaken hope
Of every would-be conqueror?*

The world was not made for beauty like his

The song ended softly, and despite the unfamiliar language, the unassuming performance of the slave had changed the mood in the hall a little. There was a smattering of applause. Damen's attention was on

Laurent's ivory and gold colouring, the overfine skin, the last traces of bruising from where he'd been tied up and hit. Damen's gaze travelled, inch by inch, taking in the proud lift of his chin, the uncooperative eyes, the arch of his cheekbone, and dropping back down to his mouth. His sweet, vicious mouth.

The pulse of desire, when it came, was a throb that re-formed blood and flesh, and transformed awareness. He stood, unthinking. He left the hall, walking out into the great courtyard.

The fort was a dark, torchlit mass around him. The walls were now manned by their own men, and the occasional shout came from the sentries on its walls; though tonight every gate-lamp was lit, and sounds mingled, laughter and raised voices flowed from the direction of the great hall.

Distance should have made it easier, but the ache only increased, and he found himself on the thick walls of the battlements, dismissing the soldiers who were manning that section, bracing his arms against the stone and waiting for the feeling to subside.

He would leave. It was for the best that he would leave. He would ride out early, would be across the border before midday. There would be no need to leave word: when his absence was noticed, Jord would bring report of his departure to Laurent. Veretians would take over the duties and the structures he had set up here at the fort. He had created them to ensure that.

Everything would be simple in the morning. Jord, he thought, would give him time to get beyond Laurent's scouts before he brought word to Laurent that his Captain, irrevocably, was gone. He focused on the pragmatic realities: a horse, supplies, a route that would avoid scouts. The intricacies of Ravenel's defence were now matters for other men. The fight they faced over the coming months was not his own. He could put it behind him.

His life in Vere, the man he was here, he could put all of it behind him.

A sound on the stone steps; he lifted his head. The battlements stretched towards the south tower, a stone walkway with toothed crenellation to the left, and torches lit at intervals. Damen had ordered the section cleared. Cresting the circular stone stairs was the only person who could have disobeyed that command.

Damen watched as alone, unattended, Laurent had left his own banquet to find him, to follow him here, up the worn steps out onto the battlements. Laurent fitted himself next to him, a comfortable, unobtrusive presence that

took up room in Damen's chest. They stood on the edge of the fort they had won together. Damen tried for a conversational tone.

'You know, the slaves you gifted to Torveld are worth almost the same as the men that he's given you.'

'I would say exactly that much.'

'I thought you helped them out of compassion.'

'No, you didn't,' said Laurent.

The breath that escaped him was not quite like laughter. He looked out at the darkness beyond the torches, the unseen expanse of the south.

'My father,' he said, 'hated Veretians. He called them cowards, deceivers. It's what he taught me to believe. He would have been just like these border lords, Touars and Makedon. War hungry. I can only imagine what he would have thought of you.'

He looked over at Laurent. He knew his father's nature, his beliefs. He knew exactly the reaction that Laurent would have provoked, if he'd ever stood before Theomedes at Ios. If Damen had argued for him, had tried to make him see Laurent as . . . he would not have understood. *You fight them, you don't trust them.* He'd never stood against his father for anything. He'd never needed to, so closely had their values aligned.

'Your own father would be proud today.'

'That I picked up a sword and put on my brother's ill-fitting clothes? I'm sure he would be,' said Laurent.

'You don't want the throne,' Damen said after a moment, his eyes passing carefully over Laurent's face.

'I want the throne,' said Laurent. 'Do you honestly think, after all you've seen, that I'd shy from power or the chance to wield it?'

Damen felt his mouth twist. 'No.'

'No.'

His own father had ruled by the sword. He had forged Akielos into one nation, and used the new might of that country to expand its borders, fiercely proud. He had launched his northern campaign to return Delpha to his kingdom after ninety years of Veretian rule. But it was not his kingdom any longer. His father, who would never stand inside Ravenel, was dead.

'I never questioned the way my father saw the world. It was enough for me to be the kind of son he was proud of. I could never bring shame to his memory, but for the first time I realise I don't want to be . . .'

His kind of King.

It would have felt like dishonour to say it. And yet he had seen the village of Breteau, innocent of aggression, cut down by Akielon swords.

Father, I can beat him, he'd said, and he'd ridden out and returned to a hero's welcome, to have his armour stripped by servants, to have his father greet him with pride. He remembered that night, all those nights, the galvanising power of his father's expansionist victories, the approbation, as success flowed from success. He had not thought about the way it had played out on the other side of the field. *When this game began, I was younger.*

'I'm sorry,' said Damen.

Laurent gave him a strange look. 'Why would you apologise to me?'

He couldn't answer. Not with the truth. He said, 'I didn't understand what being King meant to you.'

'What's that?'

'An end to fighting.'

Laurent's expression changed, the subtle signifiers of shock imperfectly repressed, and Damen felt it in his own body, a new pull in his chest at the look in Laurent's dark eyes.

'I wish it could have been different between us, I wish I could have behaved to you with more honour. I want you to know that you will have a friend across the border, whatever happens tomorrow, whatever happens to both of us.'

'Friends,' said Laurent. 'Is that what we are?'

Laurent's voice was tightly knotted, as though the answer was obvious; as though it was as obvious as what was happening between them, the air disappearing, mote by mote.

Damen said, with helpless honesty, 'Laurent, I am your slave.'

The words laid him open, truth exposed in the space between them. He wanted to prove it, as though, inarticulate, he could make up for what divided them. He was aware of the shallowness of Laurent's breath, it matched his own; they were breathing each other's air. He reached out, watching for any hesitation in Laurent's eyes.

The touch he offered was accepted as it had not been last time, fingers gentle on Laurent's jaw, thumb passing over his cheekbone, soft. Laurent's controlled body was hard with tension, his rapid pulse urgent for flight, but he closed his eyes in the last seconds before it happened. Damen's palm slid

over Laurent's warm nape; slowly, very slowly, making his height an offering, not a threat, Damen leaned in and kissed Laurent on the mouth.

The kiss was barely a suggestion of itself, with no yielding of the rigidity in Laurent, but the first kiss became a second, after a fraction of parting in which Damen felt the flicker of Laurent's shallow breathing against his own lips.

It felt, in all the lies between them, as if this was the only true thing. It didn't matter that he was leaving tomorrow. He felt remade with the desire to give Laurent this: to give him all he would allow, and to ask for nothing, this careful threshold something to be savoured because it was all Laurent would let himself have.

'Your Highness—'

They broke apart at the voice, the burst of sound, of nearby footsteps. A head was cresting the stone steps. Damen took a step backwards, his stomach twisting.

It was Jord.

CHAPTER 18

Abruptly separated, Damen stood across from Laurent in one of the islands of light where the torches flamed at intervals. The length of the battlements stretched out on either side and Jord, several feet off, was halted in his approach.

‘I ordered the section cleared,’ Damen said. Jord was intruding. At home in Akielos, he’d only have had to glance up from what he was doing and order, *Leave us*, and the intrusion would be gone. And he could go back to what he had been doing.

To what, gloriously, he had been doing. He’d been kissing Laurent and that should not be interrupted. His eyes returned warmly, possessively to their object: Laurent looked like any young man who has been pressed against a battlement and kissed. The slight disturbance of the hair at Laurent’s nape was wonderful. His hand had lain there.

‘I’m not here for you,’ said Jord.

‘Then state your business and leave.’

‘My business is with the Prince.’

His hand had lain there, and pushed up into the soft, warm golden hair. Interrupted, the kiss was alive between them, in dark eyes and heartbeats. His attention swung back to the intruder. The threat that Jord posed to him was galvanising. What had happened was not going to be threatened by anything or anyone.

Laurent pushed himself away from the wall.

‘Here to warn me about the dangers of making command decisions in bed?’ Laurent said.

There was a short, spectacular silence. The flaming of the torches, the wind striking the walls were over-loud. Jord stood very still.

‘Something to say?’ said Laurent.

Jord was holding off from them. The same stubborn distaste was in his voice. ‘Not with him here.’

‘He’s your Captain,’ said Laurent.

‘He knows well enough he should go.’

‘While we compare notes on spreading for the enemy?’ said Laurent.

This silence was worse. Damen felt the distance between himself and Laurent with his whole body, four endless steps across the battlements.

‘Well?’ said Laurent.

Jord’s eyes had turned to Damen, full of bloody-mindedness. But, *He is Damianos of Akielos*, Jord didn’t say, though he looked strained to his limits with repulsion at what he had just seen, and the silence stretched out, thick and tangible with what lay underneath.

Damen stepped forward. ‘Maybe—’

More sound on the stairs, the clatter of several urgent footsteps. Jord turned. Guymar and another of the soldiers were coming to the section he had ordered cleared. Damen passed a hand over his face. Everyone in the fort was coming to the section he had ordered cleared.

‘Captain. I apologise for the breach in your orders. But there is a situation developing downstairs.’

‘A situation?’

‘A group of the men have it into their minds to make sport with one of the prisoners.’

The world was not going away. The intrusive world was returning its concerns, the issues of discipline, the mechanisms of captaincy.

‘The prisoners are to be well treated,’ said Damen. ‘If some of the men are too full of drink, you know how to keep them at bay. My orders were clear.’

There was a hesitation. Guymar was one of Enguerran’s men, a career soldier, polished and professional. Damen had promoted him for exactly those qualities.

‘Captain, your orders were clear, but . . .’ said Guymar.

‘But?’

‘Some of the men seem to think that His Highness will support their actions.’

Damen gathered his mind. From the way Guymar said it, it was obvious

what type of sport he meant. They had been weeks on the road without camp followers. Yet he had believed that the men capable of actions such as this had been weeded out of the troop.

Guymar's face was impassive, but his faint disapproval was tangible: these were the actions of mercenaries, dressed up in the Prince's livery. The Prince's men were showing their inferior quality.

Like an archer fixing on his target, Laurent said precisely, deliberately, 'Aimeric.'

Damen turned. Laurent's eyes were on Jord, and Damen saw in a rush from Jord's expression that Laurent was right, and of course it was for Aimeric's sake that Jord had come here.

Under that dangerous, steady gaze, Jord went to his knees.

'Your Highness,' said Jord. He wasn't looking at anyone, but at the dark stones beneath him. 'I know I've done wrong. I'll accept any punishment for that. But Aimeric was loyal to his family. He was loyal to what he knew. He doesn't deserve to be handed around the men for that.' Jord's head was bowed, but his hands on his knees were fists. 'If my years of service to you are worth anything at all, let them be worth that.'

'Jord,' said Laurent, 'this is why he fucked you. This moment.'

'I know that,' said Jord.

'Orlant,' said Laurent, 'didn't deserve to die alone on the sword of a self-serving aristocrat he thought was a friend.'

'I *know that*,' said Jord. 'I'm not asking you to let Aimeric go free or to forgive him what he's done. It's just that I know him, and that night, he was . . .'

'I should make you watch,' said Laurent, 'while he's stripped down for every man in the troop to have him.'

Damen stepped forward. 'You don't mean this. You need him as a hostage.'

'I don't need him continent,' said Laurent.

Laurent's face was perfectly smooth, his blue eyes cool and untouchable. Damen felt himself recoil slightly from that callous look, the surprise of it. He realised that he had fallen out of step with Laurent at some crucial point. He wanted to send everyone away, so that he could find his way back.

And yet this must be dealt with. The situation here was spiralling into something unpleasant.

He said, 'If there's to be justice for Aimeric, then let it be justice, reasonably decided, publicly applied, not the men taking matters into their own hands.'

'Then by all means,' said Laurent, 'let us have justice. Since you're both so eager for it. Drag Aimeric away from his admirers. Bring him to me in the south tower. Let us have everything out in the open.'

'Yes, Your Highness.'

Damen found himself stepping forward as Guymar bowed briefly and left, and the others followed him, making for the south tower. He wanted to reach out, if not with a hand, then with his voice.

'What are you doing?' he said. 'When I said there should be justice for Aimeric, I meant later, not now, when you're . . .' He searched Laurent's face. 'When we . . .'

He hit a look like a wall, and the uncaring lift of golden brows.

Laurent said, 'If Jord wants to get down on his knees for Aimeric, he should know exactly who he's crawling for.'

* * *

The south tower was crowned by a platform and a parapet pierced through not with useful rectangular slits but with slim, pointed arches, because this was Vere and there must always be some flourish. Below the platform was the room where Damen, Laurent and Jord gathered, a small round space connected to the parapet by straight stone stairs. During a fight—during any attack on the fort—the room would be an assembling point for archers and swordsmen, but now it functioned as an informal guards' room, with a stout wooden table, and three chairs. The men who would usually be on watch, both here and above, had cleared out at Damen's orders.

Laurent, supremely puissant, ordered that not only Aimeric should be brought, but also refreshments. The food arrived first. Servants battled up to the tower laden with plates of meats, and bread, and pitchers of wine and of water. The goblets they brought were gold, and carved with an image of a deer, mid-hunt. Laurent sat in the high-backed wooden chair by the table and crossed his legs. Damen hardly supposed that Laurent was going to sit across from Aimeric with his legs crossed and make small talk. Or perhaps he was.

He knew that expression. His sense of danger, highly attuned to Laurent's moods, told him that Aimeric was better off downstairs with a half dozen men than he was up here with Laurent. Laurent's lids were smooth over a cool gaze, his posture straight-backed, his fingers poised on the rim of the goblet.

I kissed him, thought Damen, the idea unreal here in this small circular stone room. The warm, sweet kiss had been broken in a moment of promise: the first slight parting of lips, the hint that Laurent had been on the cusp of allowing the kiss to deepen, though his body had been singing with tension.

When he closed his eyes, he felt how it might have happened: slowly, Laurent's mouth opening, Laurent's hands lifting hesitantly to touch his body. He would have been careful, so careful.

Aimeric was dragged in by two guards. He resisted, his hands lashed behind his back, his arms gripped by his guards. He had been stripped of his armour; his undershirt was streaked with dirt and sweat and it hung partially open in a mess of laces. His curls looked more pulped than polished, and there was a cut across his left cheek.

His eyes retained their defiance. There was an intrinsic antagonism in Aimeric's nature, Damen knew. He liked a fight.

When he saw Jord, he turned white. And said, 'No.' His guard shoved him inside.

'The loving reunion,' said Laurent.

When Aimeric heard that, he gathered his defiance to himself. The guards took up their hold again, roughly. Though his face was still white, Aimeric lifted his chin.

'Have you brought me here to gloat? I'm glad I did what I did. I did it for my family, and for the south. I'd do it again.'

'That was pretty,' said Laurent. 'Now the truth.'

'That was the truth,' said Aimeric. 'I'm not afraid of you. My father's going to crush you.'

'Your father has ridden to Fortaine with his tail between his legs.'

'To regroup. My father would never turn his back on his family. Not like you. Spreading for your brother isn't the same thing as family loyalty.'

Aimeric's breathing was shallow.

'That reminds me,' said Laurent.

He stood, the goblet hanging casually from his fingertips. He regarded

Aimeric a moment. Then he changed his grip on the goblet, lifted it, and brought it with calm brutality in a backhanded blow across Aimeric's face.

Aimeric cried out. The blow snapped his head to one side, as the heavy gold impacted on his cheekbone with a sick, solid sound. It left him reeling in the arms of his guards. Jord made a violent move forward, and Damen felt his whole body come under strain as, instinctively, he pushed in to halt him.

'Keep your mouth off my brother,' said Laurent.

In the first burst of movement, Damen had flung Jord ungently back, then held him off in a restraining grip. Jord had gone still but the strain of muscle was still there, his breathing harsh. Laurent replaced the goblet, with exquisite precision, on the table.

Aimeric just blinked with glazed, stupefied eyes; the contents of the goblet had sprayed outward, wetting Aimeric's stunned, slack face. There was blood on his lips, where something was bitten or split, and a red brand on his cheekbone.

Damen heard Aimeric say, thickly, 'You can hit me as much as you like.'

'Can I? I think we're going to enjoy each other, you and I. Tell me what else I can do to you.'

'Stop this,' said Jord. 'He's just a boy. He's just a boy, he's not old enough for this, he's scared. He thinks you're going to wreck his family.'

Aimeric turned his bruised, bloody face to the words, in disbelief that Jord was defending him. Laurent turned to face Jord at the same time, his golden brows arching. There was disbelief in Laurent's expression too, but it was colder, more fundamental.

It took Damen a moment to understand why. Uneasiness swept over him as he looked from Laurent's face to Aimeric's, and realised suddenly and for the first time how close Laurent and Aimeric were in age. There was six months' difference between them, at most.

'I am going to wreck his family,' said Laurent. 'But it's not his family he's fighting for.'

'Of course it is,' said Jord. 'Why else would he betray his friends?'

'You can't think of a reason?'

Laurent's attention had returned to Aimeric, drawing close to him, so that they faced one another. Like a lover, Laurent smiled and touched a stray curl, tucking it behind Aimeric's ear. Aimeric flinched, violently, then repressed the flinch, though he wasn't able to control his breathing.

Tenderly, Laurent drew a fingertip through the blood that welled from Aimeric's split lip.

'Pretty face,' said Laurent. Then his fingers dropped back to brush Aimeric's jaw, tilting it up as though for a kiss. Aimeric made a choked sound in response to pain; the bruised flesh under Laurent's fingers was white. 'I bet you were a peach of a little boy. A pretty peach. How old were you when you fucked my uncle?'

Damen went still, everything in the tower went very still, as Laurent said, 'Were you old enough to come?'

'Shut up,' said Aimeric.

'Did he tell you you'd be together again, if you'd just do this one thing? Did he tell you how much he missed you?'

'*Shut up,*' said Aimeric.

'He was lying. He wouldn't take you back. You're too old.'

'You don't know,' said Aimeric.

'Thick-voiced and rough-cheeked, you'd make him sick.'

'You don't *know anything*—'

'With your ageing body, your overripe attentions, you're nothing but—'

'You're wrong about us! *He loves me!*'

Aimeric flung the words out defiantly, they came out over-loud. Damen felt the bottom fall out of his stomach, a feeling of total wrongness passing over him. He found he had let go his grip on Jord, who, beside him, had taken two steps back.

Laurent was looking at Aimeric with curling contempt.

'Loves you? You paltry little upstart. I doubt he even preferred you. How long did you hold his attention? A few fucks while he was bored in the country?'

'You don't know anything about us,' said Aimeric.

'I know he didn't bring you to court. He left you in Fortaine. You never asked yourself why?'

'He didn't want to leave me. He told me,' said Aimeric.

'I bet you were easy. A few compliments, a little attention, and you gave him all the naive pleasures of a country virgin in his bed. He would have found it diverting. At first. What else is there to do in Fortaine? But the novelty wore off.'

'No,' said Aimeric.

‘You’re pretty enough, and you were obviously hot for it. But used goods are not appealing unless they are something worth using. And the cheap wine you drink in a backwater tavern is not the kind that you serve at your own table, given choice.’

‘No,’ said Aimeric.

‘My uncle is discriminating. Not like Jord,’ said Laurent, ‘who’ll take a middle-aged man’s sloppy seconds and treat it like it’s worth something.’

‘Stop it,’ said Aimeric.

‘Why do you think my uncle asked you to whore yourself out to a common armsman before he’d deign to touch you? That’s what he thought you were good for. Screwing my soldiers. And you couldn’t even do that right.’

Damen said, ‘That’s enough.’

Aimeric was crying. Ugly, wracking sobs that shook his whole body. Jord was ashen-faced. Before anyone else could act or speak, Damen said, ‘Get Aimeric out of here.’

‘You cold-blooded son of a bitch,’ Jord said to Laurent. His voice was shaky. Laurent rounded on him, deliberately.

‘And then of course,’ said Laurent, ‘there’s you.’

‘No,’ said Damen, stepping between them. His eyes were on Laurent. His voice was hard. ‘Get out,’ Damen said to Jord. It was a flat order. He didn’t turn around to look at Jord to see whether or not his order had been obeyed. To Laurent, in the same voice, he said, ‘Calm down.’

Laurent said, ‘I wasn’t finished.’

‘Finished what? Reducing every man in the room? Jord isn’t any kind of match for you in this mood, and you know it. Calm down.’

Laurent gave him the kind of look a swordsman gives as he decides whether or not to slice his unarmed enemy in half.

‘Are you going to try it with me? Or do you only take pleasure in attacking those who cannot defend themselves?’ Damen heard the hardness in his own voice. He held his ground. Around them, the tower room was empty. He had sent everyone else out. ‘I remember the last time you were like this. You blundered so badly you gave your uncle the excuse he needed to have you stripped of your lands.’

He was almost killed, for that. He knew it and stayed where he was. The atmosphere rose, hot, thick and deadly.

Abruptly, Laurent turned away. He put the heels of his palms on the table, gripping its edge, standing with his head down, his arms stiffly braced, tension across his back. Damen watched his ribcage expand and deflate, several times.

Laurent was still for a moment, then, sharply, he swept his forearm across the table, a sudden, single movement that sent gilt plates and their contents crashing to the floor. An orange rolled. Water from the pitcher dripped from the table's edge onto the floor. He could hear the sound of Laurent's unsteady breathing.

Damen allowed the silence in the room to stretch out. He didn't look at the wrecked table, with its spilled meats, its scattered plates and overturned, fat-bellied pitcher. He looked at the line of Laurent's back. As he had known to send the others out, he knew not to speak. He didn't know how much time passed. Not long enough for the tension in Laurent's back to unwind.

Laurent spoke without turning around. His voice was unpleasantly precise.

'What you are saying is that when I lose control, I make mistakes. My uncle knows that, of course. It would have been an amusing pleasure for him to send Aimeric to work against me, you're right. You, with your barbaric attitudes, your brutish, domineering arrogance, are always *right*.'

Laurent's hands on the table were white.

'I remember that trip to Fortaine. He left the capital for two weeks, then sent word he was extending it to three. He said it was his business with Guion that needed more time.'

Damen took a step forward, called by the tone in Laurent's voice.

Laurent said, 'If you want me to calm down, *get out*.'

CHAPTER 19

‘Captain.’

Damen was three steps out of the tower room when Guymar greeted him with a hail and the clear intention of making for the room himself.

‘Aimeric is back under guard and the men have settled. I can report to the Prince and—’

He found he had put himself bodily in Guymar’s way. ‘No. No one goes in.’

Anger, irrationally, blossomed. Behind him was the closed door to the tower rooms, a barrier to disaster. Guymar should know better than to barge in and make Laurent’s mood worse. Guymar should have known better than to cause Laurent’s mood in the first place.

‘Are there orders for what should be done with the prisoner?’

Throw Aimeric off the battlements. ‘Keep him confined in his rooms.’

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘I want this whole section kept clear. And Guymar?’

‘Yes, Captain?’

‘This time, I want it actually kept clear. I don’t care who is about to get molested. No one is to come here. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, Captain.’ Guymar bowed and retreated.

Damen found himself with his hands braced on the stone crenellation, in unconscious echoing of Laurent’s pose, the line of Laurent’s back the last thing he had seen before he had put the heel of his palm to the door.

His heart was pounding. He wanted to make a barrier that protected Laurent from anyone who would intrude on him. He’d keep that perimeter clear, if it meant stalking these battlements and patrolling it himself.

He knew this about Laurent. That once he gave himself time alone to think, the control returned, reason won out.

The part of him that didn't want to drop Aimeric with a punch recognised that both Jord and Aimeric had just been put through the wringer. It was a mess that needn't have happened. If they'd just—steered clear. *Friends*, Laurent had said, high on the battlements. *Is that what we are?* Damen's hands drew into fists. Aimeric was an inveterate troublemaker with terrible timing.

He found himself at the base of the stairs, giving the same order to the soldiers there that he had given to Guymar, emptying out the section.

It was long past midnight. A feeling of fatigue, of heaviness came over him, and Damen was suddenly aware of how few hours there were before morning. The soldiers were clearing out, the space emptying around him. The idea of stopping, allowing himself a moment to think, was terrible. Outside, there was nothing, just the last hours of darkness, and the long ride in the dawn.

He caught one of the soldiers by the arm before he realised it, holding him back from following the others.

The man stopped, held in place.

'Captain?'

'Watch over the Prince,' he heard himself say. 'Anything he needs, make certain he has it. Take care of him.' He was aware of the incongruity of the words, of his hard grip on the soldier's arm. When he tried to stop, his grip only tightened. 'He deserves your loyalty.'

'Yes, Captain.'

A nod, followed by acquiescence. He watched the man go upstairs in his place.

* * *

It took a long time to finish his preparations, after which he found a servant to show him to his rooms. He had to pick his way across the ends of the revelry: discarded wine cups, a snoring Rochert, a few overturned chairs, thanks to a fight or some overly vigorous dancing.

His rooms were excessive because Veretians were always excessive:

through doorway arches, he could see at least two other rooms, with tiled floors and low, lounging couches typical of Vere. He let his eyes pass over the vaulted windows, the table well supplied with wine and fruits, and the bed, overhung with rose-coloured silks that fell in folds so long they pooled out over the floor.

He dismissed the servant. The doors closed. He poured himself a cup of wine from a silver jug and drained it off. He placed the cup back on the table. He rested his hands on the table and his weight on his hands.

Then he lifted his hand to his shoulder, and unpinned his Captain's badge.

The windows were open. It was the kind of sweet, warm night that came often in the south. Veretian decoration was everywhere, from the intricate grilles covering the windows to the helicoidal braiding that looped the bed silks, but these border forts had some hints of the south, in the shapes of the arches, and the flow of space, open and without screens.

He looked down at the badge in his hand. His time as Laurent's Captain had been short-lived. An afternoon. An evening. In that time they'd won a battle and taken a fort. It seemed wild and improbable, a hard-edged golden piece of metal in his hand.

Guymar was a good choice, the right interim until Laurent gathered advisors to himself and found a new Captain. That would be the first order of business, to consolidate his power here in Ravenel. As a commander, Laurent was still green, but Laurent would grow into the role. Laurent would find his way, transforming himself from commander-prince to King.

He put the badge down on the table.

He moved away from it to the windows. He looked out. He could see the pinpricks of torchlight on the battlements, where the blue and gold had replaced the banners of Lord Touars.

Touars, who had wavered, but had been convinced into battle by Guion.

In his mind were images that would always be linked with tonight. Stars wheeling high over the battlements. Costumes, and Enguerran's armour. A helm with its one long red feather. Churned earth and violence and Touars, who had fought, until a single moment of recognition that had changed everything.

Damianos. Prince killer.

Behind him, the doors closed; he turned, and saw Laurent.

His stomach dropped, a moment of confused shock—he'd never expected

to see Laurent here. Then everything resolved, the size and the opulence of these chambers made sense: Laurent was not the interloper.

They faced each other. Laurent stood, four steps inside the room, vivid in the severe clothing, tight-laced, with only a single shoulder ornament to signify his rank. Damen felt his pulse beat with his surprise, his awareness of Laurent's presence.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Your servants brought me to the wrong rooms.'

'No, they didn't,' said Laurent.

There was a slight pause.

'Aimeric is back in his rooms under guard,' said Damen. He tried for a normal tone. 'He's not going to cause any more trouble.'

'I don't want to talk about Aimeric,' said Laurent. 'Or my uncle.'

Laurent began to come forward. Damen was aware of him as he was aware of the badge he had removed, like a piece of armour discarded too early.

Laurent said, 'I know you're planning to leave tomorrow. You're going to cross the border, and you're not going to come back. Say it.'

'I—'

'Say it.'

'I'm going to leave tomorrow,' said Damen, as steadily as he could. 'I'm not going to come back.' He drew in a breath that hurt his chest. 'Laurent—'

'No, I don't care. Tomorrow you leave. But you're mine now. You're still my slave tonight.'

Damen felt the words hit, but that was subsumed in the shock of Laurent's hand on him, a push backwards. His legs hit the bed. The world tilted, bed silks and roseate light. He felt Laurent's knee alongside his thigh, Laurent's hand on his chest.

'I—don't—'

'I think you do,' said Laurent.

His jacket began to divide under Laurent's fingers: Laurent was unerring, and a distant part of Damen's mind registered that: a prince with a servant's proficiency, better than Damen had been, as though taught.

'What are you doing?' Damen's breath was shaky.

'What am I doing? You are not very observant.'

'You're not yourself,' said Damen. 'And even if you were, you don't do anything without a dozen motives.'

Laurent went very still, the soft words half bitter. 'Don't I? I must want something.'

'Laurent,' he said.

'You take liberties,' said Laurent. 'I never gave you permission to call me by my name.'

'Your Highness,' said Damen, and the words twisted, wrong in his mouth. He needed to say, *Don't do this*. But he couldn't think past Laurent, improbably close. He felt each shifting inch that divided their bodies with a fluttering, illicit sensation at Laurent's proximity. He closed his eyes against it, felt his body's painful yearning. 'I don't think you want me. I think you just want me to feel this.'

'Then, feel it,' said Laurent.

And slid his hand inside Damen's open jacket, past his shirt, to his stomach.

It was not possible, in that moment, to do anything but experience Laurent's hand against his skin. His breath shuddered out of him, Laurent's touch hot across his navel and sliding lower. He was half aware of the silk bedding, rumpled and disturbed around him, Laurent's knees and other hand like pins in the silk, holding him down. His jacket was discarded, his shirt half off him. The laces between his legs parted, obedient to Laurent's fingers, and then he was all undone.

It was Laurent's face he looked at. He saw as if for the first time the look in Laurent's eyes, his slightly altered breathing. He was aware of the taut line of Laurent's back; of the conscious way he held his body. He recalled the line of Laurent's back in the tower, bent over the table. He heard the tone in Laurent's voice.

'I see you are everywhere in proportion.'

Damen said, 'You've seen me roused before.'

'And I remember what you like.'

Laurent closed a fist around the head, and slid his thumb over the slit, pushing down into it a little.

Damen's whole body curved. The grip felt more like ownership than a caress. Laurent leaned in, let his thumb delineate a small, wet circle.

'You liked this too, with Ancel.'

'That wasn't Ancel,' said Damen, the words coming out, raw and honest. 'That was all you, and you know it.'

He didn't want to think about Ancel. His body strained, like a strap pulled too tight. He did what was natural to him, but Laurent said, 'No,' and he couldn't touch.

'You know, Ancel used his mouth,' he said, almost nonsensically, desperately trying to distract Laurent, to distract himself, fighting to hold himself in place against the sheets.

'I don't think I need to,' said Laurent.

The rise and fall of Laurent's hand was like the slide of Laurent's words, like every frustrating argument that they'd ever had, stymied, tangled up in Laurent's voice. He could feel the tension in Laurent, sharp like the feel of his own heartbeats. Laurent held his former mood within him, constrained, and converted into something else.

He fought it, as it rose inside him, striking out for resistant purchase in the silks above his head. But Laurent's free hand curtailed his movement, pushing down on him in hot, insistent command. He was caught unexpectedly in Laurent's eyes, and it hit, in a tangled burst, Laurent fully clothed above him, a prince in full panoply, his shiny boots alongside Damen's thighs. Even as Damen felt the first tremor rolling up his body, the moment was transforming, too much communicated between them. He felt suddenly that he should look away, that he should stop or turn back. He couldn't. Laurent's eyes were dark, wide, and for a moment looked nowhere but at him.

He felt Laurent pulling back, pulling away, shuttering himself, trying but not quite able to manage a cool snap withdrawal.

Laurent said, 'Adequate.'

Breathing roughened, still trembling with climax, Damen was pushing up, chasing the look in Laurent's eyes to catch it before it was gone.

He caught Laurent's wrist, felt the fine bones, and the pulse, before Laurent could rise from the bed.

Damen said, 'Kiss me.'

His voice was husky with pleasure that he yearned to share. He felt the warm flush that suffused his own skin. He had pushed himself up, so that his body made a curve, the planes of his abdomen shifting. Laurent's gaze splayed out instinctively over him, then lifted to his own.

He'd caught Laurent's wrist before, to hold him back from a blow, a knife strike. He held him now. He could feel the desperate urge for retreat. He

could feel something else too, Laurent keeping himself apart, as though, this act being finished, he had no template for what to do.

‘Kiss me,’ he said again.

Dark-eyed, Laurent was holding himself in place as though pushing himself past a barrier, the tension in Laurent’s body still telegraphing flight, and Damen felt the shock with his whole body when Laurent’s gaze dropped to his mouth.

His own eyes fell closed as he realised that Laurent was going to do this, and he held himself very still. Laurent kissed with a slight parting of his lips, as though he was unconscious of what he was asking for, and Damen kissed him back carefully, dizzy with the idea that the kiss would deepen.

He drew back before it did, just far enough to watch Laurent’s eyes come open. His heart was pounding. For a moment, looking felt like kissing, an exchange in which the distinctions of intimacy blurred. He was leaning in slowly, tilting Laurent’s jaw with his fingers, and kissing him softly on the neck.

It was not what Laurent had expected. He felt the slight shock of Laurent’s surprise, and the way Laurent held himself, as though confused as to why Damen wished to do this, but he felt the moment when surprise turned to something else. Damen allowed himself the minor delight of nuzzling. Laurent’s pulse reached a little crescendo under his lips.

This time when he drew back, neither of them broke fully from the other. He lifted his other hand to brush Laurent’s cheek, slid fingers into his hair—shifting gold under his marvelling fingers. Then he took Laurent’s head gently in his hands and delivered the kiss he’d longed to deliver, long, slow and deep. Laurent’s mouth opened under his. He couldn’t stop the slow, spreading flush of heat he felt at the touch of Laurent’s tongue, the feel of his own, sliding into Laurent’s mouth.

They were kissing. He felt it in his body, like a tremor he couldn’t still. He was shaken by the force of all he wanted, and he closed his eyes against it. He drew his hand down Laurent’s body, felt the raised gathers of the jacket. He himself was naked, while Laurent was fully, untouchably clothed.

Laurent had been careful, since that first momentous disrobing in the palace baths, not to strip fully in front of him. But he remembered, from the baths, how Laurent had looked; the arrogant balance of his proportions, the fall of translucent water over white skin.

He hadn't appreciated it then. He hadn't known, in the palace, how rare it was for Laurent to appear in anything less than full, impeccable dress, in front of anyone.

He knew now. He thought of the servant he had seen attending Laurent earlier, how much he had disliked it.

He lifted his fingers to the tie that closed Laurent's collar. He had been trained to do this, he knew every intricate fastening. A sliver of opening widened, his fingers sliding up the fine line of Laurent's collarbone, revealing it. Laurent's skin was so pale that the veins in his neck were blue, stria in marble, and with silks and tents, shaded awnings and high-necked collars, its pristine fineness had been preserved even through a month on the march. Against it, his own skin, sun-darkened, seemed brown as a nut.

They were breathing in tandem. Laurent was holding himself very still. When Damen pushed the jacket open, Laurent's chest rose and fell under the thin white shirt. Damen's hands smoothed down the lines of the shirt, and then, parting, opened it.

Exposed, Laurent's nipples were hard and puckered, the first tangible evidence of desire, and Damen felt a wild surge of gratification. His eyes lifted to Laurent's.

Laurent said, 'Did you think I was made of stone?'

He couldn't stop the rush of pleasure he felt at that, said, 'Nothing you don't want.'

'You think I don't want it?'

Seeing the look in Laurent's eyes, Damen deliberately pushed him back onto the sheets.

They were gazing at one another. Laurent was sprawled on his back, slightly mussed, one leg drawn up and pushed out slightly to one side, still wearing its immaculate boot. He wanted to slide his hand up Laurent's ribcage to his chest, press his wrists down into the mattress, take his mouth. He closed his eyes and called on a heroic effort of restraint. Opened them.

Lifting a hand idly to the exact place above his head where Damen might have pressed it, Laurent gazed back at him through veiled lashes. 'Like being on top, do you?'

'Yes.' Never more so than at this moment. To have Laurent beneath him was heady. He couldn't help drawing his hand down over Laurent's taut stomach, over the controlled rise and fall of Laurent's breath. He reached the

faint line of hair, touched it with his fingertips. His fingers were now resting on the place where the line disappeared under symmetrical lacing. He looked back up.

And found himself pushed backwards, sudden, unexpected impetus, and he sat back between Laurent's legs, a little breathless. Laurent had placed his boot flat against the plane of Damen's chest, and pushed. And he didn't remove his boot from its position, he held Damen in place with it, the firm pressure of the ball of Laurent's foot a warning to stay back.

The flare of arousal he felt at that must have shown in his eyes.

Laurent said, 'Well?'

It was a directive, not a warning: what Laurent was waiting for suddenly made itself plain. Damen put his hand around Laurent's calf, the other on the heel of his boot, and pulled it off.

As the boot hit the floor on the side of the bed, Laurent drew back his foot and replaced it with the other. It came off as deliberately as the first.

He could see the rise and fall of Laurent's breath, near his hipbone. Despite the cool tone, he was aware of the extent to which Laurent was holding himself in place, allowing himself to be touched. Tension still glinted in Laurent's body, like the shine on a blade edge that would slice you open at the wrong touch.

He was suddenly shaky with everything he wanted. He felt dizzy with competing impulses. He wanted to be gentle. He wanted to tighten his grip. They were kissing again, and Damen couldn't stop touching him, couldn't stop the slow slide of his hands over Laurent's skin. There was an interval of touching, and Damen kissed him softer, sweeter. The edged seams and criss-crossings were distinct beneath his fingers. He pushed a finger between lacing and fabric, felt the slow draw of the lace, growing longer as he reached the vertex.

Needing it suddenly, Damen pushed away and down and Laurent half-followed, hazily pushing up on one arm—uncertain, perhaps, of the purpose of this detour—until the moment Damen curled his fingers and pulled the fabric down to mid-thigh, then further.

He tugged the pants down and off, smoothed his hand up Laurent's thigh, feeling it flex. Reaching the juncture between leg and hip, he thumbed it, feeling the pulse beat wildly under the very fine skin there. Damen let himself experience dizzily just how much he liked the idea of controlled Laurent

betraying himself in salt flavoured need into his mouth. He touched it with his hand and encountered a texture like hot silk.

Laurent had hitched up, his jacket and shirt pushed down to his elbows, holding his arms half-restrained behind him.

‘I am not going to reciprocate.’

Damen looked up. ‘What?’

Laurent said, ‘I am not going to do that to you.’

‘And so?’

‘Do you want me to suck your cock?’ said Laurent, precisely. ‘Because I don’t plan to. If you are proceeding on the expectation of reciprocity, then you had best be forewarned that—’

This was too convoluted for bed play. Damen listened, satisfied himself that in all of this talking there was no actual objection, then simply applied his mouth.

For all his seeming experience, Laurent reacted like an innocent to this pleasure. He let out a soft shocked sound, and his body re-formed around the place where Damen was giving his attention. Damen held Laurent in place, hands to hips, and allowed himself to enjoy Laurent’s slight, helpless shifts and pushes, the quality of his surprise, and the hard act of repression that followed, as Laurent tried to even out his breathing.

He wanted it. He wanted every stifled response. He was aware of his own arousal, half-forgotten, pushing against the sheets. He drew up to the head and furled his tongue there, so well pleased with the experience that he lingered, suckling, before sliding back down again.

Laurent was, by far, the most controlled lover Damen had ever taken to bed. The head tossing and cries, the easy, open sounds of past lovers were in Laurent a single tremor, or slight hitch of breath. And yet, Damen found himself primed to each reaction, the tension of his stomach, the faint trembling of his thighs. Damen could feel Laurent’s cycle of reaction and repression beneath him, as impetus gathered, building in the lines of Laurent’s body.

And felt it stymied. As rhythm built, Laurent’s body locked down, his responses repressed. Looking up, he saw that Laurent’s hands were fists in the sheets, his eyes closed, his head turned to one side. Laurent, out on the shattered edge of pleasure, was holding himself back from climax by sheer force of his impossible will.

Damen drew off, pushed himself up to search Laurent's face. His own body, fully primed, took up barely a quarter of his attention as Laurent's eyes came open.

After a long moment Laurent said, with painful honesty, 'I . . . find it difficult to let go of control.'

'No kidding,' said Damen.

There was a drawn-out pause. And then: 'You want to take me, as a man takes a boy.'

'As a man takes a man,' said Damen. 'I want to take pleasure in you, and to please your body with mine.'

He said it with soft honesty. 'I want to come inside you.' The words rose, like this feeling within him. 'I want you to come in my arms.'

'You make it sound simple.'

'It is simple.'

Laurent's jaw tightened, the shape of his mouth changed. 'Simpler to play the man than to roll over, I venture.'

'Then tell me your own pleasure. Do you think I'm just going to flip you over and mount?'

He felt Laurent react to the words, and the realisation opened up inside him, like something tangible transmitted through the air.

He said, 'Is that what you want?'

The words fell into a stillness between them. Laurent's breathing was shallow, and his cheeks were flushed as he closed his eyes, as though he wanted to block out the world.

'I want,' said Laurent, 'I want it to be simple.'

'Turn over,' said Damen.

The words rose up from within him, a low, soft command, full of surety. Laurent closed his eyes again, as if in decision. Then he acted.

In one smooth, practiced motion, Laurent turned onto his stomach, yielding to Damen's gaze the clean curve of back and buttocks, the latter canting slightly upwards as his thighs slid apart.

Damen wasn't prepared for it. To see him present that way, the scintillant unfolding of limbs, it was nothing he'd ever thought Laurent would . . . this was where he wished himself to be, where he hoped—he'd barely let himself hope—they both wished him to be, but the words he'd meant as a prelude had brought them here before he was ready. He felt nervous suddenly, green, as

he hadn't felt since he was thirteen—uncertain of what lay on the other side of this moment, and wanting to be worthy of it.

He drew his hand softly up Laurent's side, and Laurent's breathing went uneven. He could feel uneasiness pass over Laurent in waves.

'You're so tense. Are you sure you've done this before?'

'Yes,' said Laurent. The word came out sounding strange.

'This,' Damen persisted, placing his hand where it made his meaning explicit.

'Yes,' said Laurent.

'But—wasn't it—'

'Will you *stop talking about it.*'

The words were ground out. Damen was in the process of smoothing his hand up Laurent's back, gentling his nape, kissing it, his head bent over it. He lifted his head when he heard that. Gently but firmly, he pushed Laurent back over, and looked down at him.

Revealed beneath him, Laurent was flushed and his breathing was shallow, and in his glistening eyes was a desperate irritation that overlay something else. Yet Laurent's exposed arousal was as hot and hard as it had been in his mouth. For all his bizarre nervy tension, Laurent was indisputably eager, physically. Damen searched his blue eyes.

'Contrary, aren't you,' said Damen softly, thumbing over Laurent's cheek.

'Fuck me,' said Laurent.

'I want to,' said Damen. 'Can you let me?'

He said it quietly, and waited, as Laurent's eyes closed again, a muscle sliding in his jaw. The idea of being fucked very clearly had Laurent out of his mind, as desire competed with some sort of convoluted mental objection that really needed, Damen thought, to be dispensed with.

'I *am* letting you,' said Laurent, the terse words pushing out. 'Will you get on with it?'

Laurent's eyes opened, meeting Damen's gaze, and this time it was Laurent who waited, heat in his cheeks at the silence that opened up around his words. In Laurent's eyes, impatience and tension overlay something unexpectedly young and vulnerable. Damen's heart felt exposed, outside of his chest.

He slid his hand up the length of Laurent's arm where it lay outflung

above his head, and, catching hold of Laurent's hand, he pushed it down, pressed their palms into one other.

The kiss was slow and deliberate. He could feel the light trembling in Laurent's body, as Laurent's mouth opened under his. His own hands felt unsteady. When he drew back it was only far enough to find Laurent's gaze again, seeking assent. He found it, alongside a new flare of tension. Tension, he understood, was a part of it. Then he felt Laurent press a glass phial into his hand.

Breathing was difficult. He could look nowhere but at Laurent, both of them here with nothing between them, and Laurent, allowing it. A finger slid inside. It was so tight. He moved it back and forward, slowly. He watched Laurent's face, the slight flush, the fractional changes of his expression, his eyes wide and dark. It was intensely private. Damen's skin felt too hot, too tight. His ideas of what might happen in bed with Laurent had not moved beyond an aching tenderness, which was only now finding physical expression. The reality of it was different; Laurent was different. Damen had never thought that it could be like this, soft and quiet and acutely personal.

He felt the slide of oil, Laurent's small, helpless movements, and the impossible sensation of his body beginning to open. He thought Laurent must be able to feel the beating of his heart inside his chest. They were kissing now, slow, intimate kisses, their bodies in full alignment, Laurent's arms twining around his neck. Damen slid his free arm beneath Laurent, palm travelling over the flexing incurvations of his back. He felt Laurent draw up one of his legs, felt the slide of Laurent's warm inner thigh, the press of Laurent's heel into his back.

He thought he could do it like this, coax Laurent with mouth and hands, give him this. Damen felt tight, slick heat with his fingers. It was impossible that he could put his cock there, yet he was unable to stop imagining it. He closed his eyes, felt the place where they were meant to interlock, to fit.

'I need to be inside you,' he said, and it came out raw with desire and the effort of restraint.

The tension in Laurent crested, and he felt Laurent push it down as Laurent said, 'Yes.'

He felt a rush of that sensation that pushed at his chest. He was going to be allowed this. Every connection of skin against skin felt too hotly intimate, yet they were going to draw closer. Laurent was going to let him in. *Inside*

him. That thought came over him anew. Then it was happening, and he couldn't think of anything but the slow press forward into Laurent's body.

Laurent cried out and his world became a series of fractured impressions. The head of his cock pushing into oiled heat, and the simultaneous feedback of Laurent, shuddering; the slide of muscle in Laurent's bicep; his flushed face; the half fall of his yellow hair.

He felt some sense that he needed to hold onto this, to hold it tight and never let it out of his grip.

You're mine, he wanted to say, and couldn't. Laurent didn't belong to him; this was something he could have only once.

His chest hurt. He closed his eyes and forced himself to feel these slow, shallow thrusts, the slow push and drag that was all he could allow himself, his only defence against the instinct that wanted to push inside, deeper than he'd even been, to plant himself inside Laurent's body and hold onto this forever.

'Laurent,' he said, and he was breaking apart.

To get what you want, you have to know exactly how much you are willing to give up.

Never had he wanted something this badly, and held it in his hands knowing that tomorrow it would be gone, traded for the high cliffs of Ios, and the uncertain future across the border, the chance to stand before his brother, to ask him for all the answers that no longer seemed so important. A kingdom, or this.

Deeper, was the overwhelming drive, and he fought it. He fought to hold on, though his body was finding its own rhythm, his arms winding around Laurent's chest, his lips at his neck, some closed-eyed desire to have him as close as possible.

'Laurent,' he said, and he was all the way inside, each thrust driving him closer to an end that ached inside him, and still he wanted to be deeper.

The full weight of his body was on Laurent now, his full length moving inside, and it was wholly sensate: the tangled sound Laurent made, newly, sweetly inarticulate, the flush on his cheeks, the averted twist of his head, sight and sound melded with the hot push into Laurent's body, the pulse of him, the tremor in his own muscles.

He had a sudden splintering image of how it might be, if this was a world where they had time. There would be no urgency and no end point, just a

sweet string of days spent together, long, languorous love making where he could spend hours inside.

'I can't—I have to—' he heard himself say, and the words came out in his own language. Distantly he heard Laurent answer him in Veretian, even as he felt Laurent begin to spill, the pulsing jerk of his body, the first wet stripe of it, hot as blood. Laurent came beneath him, and he tried to experience all of it, tried to hold on, but his body was too close to its own release, and he did as he was bid in Laurent's fractured voice, and emptied himself inside.

CHAPTER 20

Every now and again, Laurent shifted against him without waking. Damen lay in the warmth beside him and felt the soft golden hair against his neck, the slight weight of Laurent in the places where their bodies touched.

Outside, the shift on the battlements was changing and servants were up, tending fires and stirring pots. Outside, the day was beginning, and all the things related to the day, sentries and hostlers and men rising and arming themselves to fight. He could hear the distant shout of a hail in some courtyard; closer to, the sound of a door slamming.

Just a little longer, he thought, and it might have been a mundane wish to drowse in bed except for the ache in his chest. He felt the passing of time like a growing pressure. He was aware of each moment because it was one fewer that he had left.

Sleeping beside Damen, there was a newly physical aspect revealed in Laurent: the taut waist, the upper body musculature of a swordsman, the exposed angle of his Adam's apple. Laurent looked like what he was: a young man. When laced into his clothing, Laurent's dangerous grace lent him an almost androgynous quality. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that it was rare to associate Laurent with a physical body at all: you were always dealing with a mind. Even when fighting in battle, driving his horse to some impossible feat, the body was under the control of the mind.

Damen knew his body now. He knew the surprise that gentle attention could draw from him. He knew his lazy, dangerous assurance, his hesitancies . . . his sweet, tender hesitancies. He knew the way that he made love, a combination of explicit knowledge and almost shy reticences.

Stirring drowsily, Laurent shifted a fraction closer and made a soft,

unthinking sound of pleasure that Damen was going to remember for the rest of his life.

And then Laurent was blinking sleepily, and Damen was watching Laurent grow aware of his surroundings and come awake in his arms.

He wasn't sure how it would be, but when Laurent saw who was beside him, he smiled, the expression a little shy but completely genuine. Damen, who hadn't been expecting it, felt the single painful beat of his heart. He'd never thought Laurent could look like that at anyone.

'It's morning,' said Laurent. 'We slept?'

'We slept,' said Damen.

They were gazing at one another. He held himself still as Laurent reached out and touched the plane of his chest. Despite the rising sun they were kissing, slow, fantastic kisses, the wonderful drift of hands. Their legs tangled together. He ignored the feeling inside him and closed his eyes.

'Your inclination appears to be much as it was last night.'

Damen found himself saying, 'You talk the same in bed,' and the words came out sounding like he felt: helplessly charmed.

'Can you think of a better way of putting it?'

'I want you,' said Damen.

'You've had me,' said Laurent. 'Twice. I can still feel the . . . sensation of it.'

Laurent shifted, just so. Damen buried his face in Laurent's neck and groaned, and there was laughter too, and something akin to happiness that hurt as it pushed at the inside of his chest.

'Stop it. You will not be able to walk,' said Damen.

'I'd welcome the chance to walk,' said Laurent. 'I have to ride a horse.'

'Is it . . . ? I tried to . . . I wouldn't—'

'I like the way it feels,' said Laurent. 'I liked the way it felt. You're a generous, giving lover, and I feel—' Laurent broke off, and gave a shaky laugh at his own words. 'I feel like the Vaskian tribe, in the body of one person. I suppose it is often like this?'

'No,' said Damen. 'No, it's—' *It's never like this.* The idea that Laurent might find this with someone else hurt him.

'Does that betray my inexperience? You know my reputation. Once every ten years.'

'I can't,' said Damen. 'I can't have this for just one night.'

‘One night and one morning,’ said Laurent, and this time it was Damen who found himself pushed down onto the bed.

* * *

He dozed, after, drifting in the early sunlight, and woke to an empty bed.

Shock that he’d let himself fall asleep and anxiety about his deadline pushed him up. Servants were entering the room, throwing open the doors and disturbing the space with impersonal activity: clearing away the spent candles and the empty containers where scented oil had flamed.

He looked instinctively at the position of the sun through the window. It was late morning. He’d dozed for an hour. Longer. There was so little time left.

‘Where’s Laurent?’

An attendant was approaching the bed. ‘You are to be taken from Ravenel and escorted directly to the border.’

‘Escorted?’

‘You will rise and ready yourself. Your collar and cuffs will be removed. You will then leave the fort.’

‘Where’s Laurent?’ he said again.

‘The Prince is occupied with other matters. You are to leave before he returns.’

He felt unsteady. He understood that what he had missed in sleeping was not his deadline but the last moments with Laurent, the last kiss, the final parting. Laurent wasn’t here because he had chosen not to be here. And when he thought about goodbye, it was a welling silence full of all the things he couldn’t say.

He rose, then. Bathed and dressed. They laced him into a jacket, and by then the servants had cleared the room, had gathered, piece by piece, last night’s discarded clothing, the scattered boots, the crumpled shirt, the jacket, a mess of laces; had changed the bed.

* * *

To take off the collar required a blacksmith.

He was a man named Guerin, with dark straight hair that lay flat on his head like a thin cap. He came to Damen in an outbuilding, and it was done without onlookers and without ceremony.

It was a dusty building with a stone bench and a scattering of blacksmith's tools brought in from the forge. He looked around at the small room and told himself there was nothing lacking. If he'd left in secret as he had planned it would have been done just like this, unobserved, by a blacksmith across the border.

The collar came first, and when Guerin drew it from his neck he felt the collar's absence like a lightness, his spine unfurling, his shoulders settling.

Like a lie, cracking and dropping from him.

He looked at the gleam of the gold where Guerin placed it, halved, on the workbench. Veretian shackles. In the curve of its metal was every humiliation of his time in this country, every frustration at Veretian confinement, every indignity of an Akielon serving a Veretian master.

Except that it was Kastor who had put the collar on him, and Laurent who was freeing him.

It was made from Akielon gold. It drew him forward and he touched it. It was still warm from the skin of his neck, like it was part of him. He didn't know why that should unnerve him. His fingers, smoothing along the surface, encountered the notch, the deep furrow where Lord Touars had tried to drive his sword into his neck, and had instead bitten into the ring of gold.

He pulled himself away and gave up his right wrist to Guerin. The collar with its latch had been a simple matter to a blacksmith, but the cuffs needed to be struck off with a chisel and mallet.

He had come to this fort a slave. He would ride out of it Damianos of Akielos. It was like shedding a skin, discovering what lay beneath. The first cuff sprang apart under Guerin's rhythmic strikes and he faced his new self. He was not the headstrong prince he had been in Akielos. The man he had been in Akielos would never have served a Veretian master, or fought alongside Veretians for their cause.

He would never have known Laurent for what he was; never have given Laurent his loyalty or held Laurent's trust for a moment in his hands.

Guerin moved to strike the gold from his left wrist, and he pulled it back.

'No,' he heard himself say. 'Leave that one on.'

Guerin shrugged, turned and with impersonal motions tipped the collar

and the cuff segments into a cloth, and wrapped it, before passing it to Damen. Damen took the makeshift bag. The weight was surprising.

Guerin said, 'The gold's yours.'

'A gift?' he said, as he might have said to Laurent.

'The Prince doesn't need it,' said Guerin.

* * *

His escort arrived.

It was six men, and one of them, already mounted, was Jord, who looked him right in the eye and said, 'You kept your word.'

His horse was being led forward. Not only a riding horse but a pack horse, a sword, clothing, supplies. *Is there something you want?* Laurent had asked him once. He wondered what ornate Veretian parting gift might lurk in those packs and knew instinctively that there was none. He had maintained from the beginning that he had wanted only his freedom. And that was exactly what he had been given.

'I always meant to leave,' he said.

He swung up into the saddle. His eyes passed around the fort's large courtyard, from the great gates to the dais with its wide, shallow steps. He remembered their first arrival, the stony reception of Lord Touars, the feeling of standing inside a Veretian fort for the first time. He saw the gatesmen at their post, a soldier going about his duty. He felt Jord draw up beside him.

'He's gone for a ride,' said Jord. 'It was his habit in the palace, too, when he needed to clear his head. Not the type for goodbyes.'

'No,' said Damen.

He made to ride out, but Jord put a hand on his reins. 'Wait,' said Jord. 'I wanted to say—thank you. For standing up for Aimeric.'

'I didn't do it for Aimeric,' said Damen.

Jord nodded. And then he said, 'When the men heard you were leaving, they wanted—we wanted—to see you off.' He said, 'There's time.'

He gave a wave of his hand and men were coming into the fort's enormous courtyard, the Prince's men, and under the ever-rising sun they were forming up in front of the dais. Damen looked out over the immaculate lines and let out a breath that was something like surprise and something like

the feeling in his chest. Every strap was polished, every piece of armour gleamed. He let his eyes pass over each of their faces, and then looked out at the wider courtyard, where men and women of the fort were gathering curiously. Laurent wasn't here, and he let that fact sink into his bones.

Lazar stepped forward and said, 'Captain. It was an honour to serve with you.'

It was an honour to serve with you. Those words echoed in his mind.

'No,' he said. 'The honour was mine.'

And then there was a burst of activity from the lower gate, and a rider came into the courtyard: it was Laurent.

He was not here in a last-minute change of heart. Damen only had to look at Laurent to know that he had intended to stay away until Damen was gone, and was not pleased to have been forced to return early.

He was dressed in riding leathers. The leathers were winched as tight as the rising gate, not a single strap out of place even after a long ride. He sat straight-backed. His horse, neck curved under a taut rein, was still blowing air through its nostrils from the ride. He tossed Damen a single cool look from across the courtyard before driving his horse on.

And then Damen saw why he was here.

He heard the activity on the battlements first, the shouts that went up along the lines, and then from horseback he saw the banner waving its signal. These were his own alerts, and he knew what was coming even as Laurent lifted his hand and gave a signal of his own, acceding to the request for entry.

The enormous machinery of the gates started to turn, cogs grinding and dark screeching wood with interlocking teeth brought to life with winches and straining human muscle.

Accompanying it was the cry, '*Open the gates!*'

Laurent didn't dismount, but wheeled his horse at the base of the dais to face what was coming.

They swept into the courtyard in a surge of red. The banners were red, the livery was red, the pennants, the brightwork, the armour was gold and white and red. The blare of the horns was like the sounding of trumpets, and into Ravenel in full panoply came the emissaries of the Regency.

The gathered soldiers parted for them, and a space opened up between Laurent and his uncle's men, so that they faced one another along a widening corridor of empty flagstones, with onlookers either side.

A hush fell. Damen's own horse shifted, then was still. On the faces of Laurent's men was the hostility that the Regency had always engendered, now magnified. On the faces of the inhabitants of the fort the reactions were more varied: surprise, careful neutrality, devouring curiosity.

There were twenty-five Regent's men: a herald and two dozen soldiers. Laurent, opposing them on horseback, was alone.

He would have seen the arriving party outside. He had most likely outridden them in returning to the fort. And he had chosen to meet them like this, a young man on horseback, rather than standing at the top of those steps, an aristocrat in command of his fort. He was nothing like Lord Touars, who had greeted an entry with his entire retinue arrayed in disapproving formation on the dais. Against the pomp of the Regent's emissary Laurent was a single rider casually dressed. But then, he had never needed anything other than his hair to identify him.

'The King of Vere sends a message,' said the herald.

His voice, trained to carry, could be heard the full length of the courtyard, by each of the gathered men and women. He spoke:

'The pretender prince is in traitorous conspiracy with Akielos, wherefore he has given over Veretian villages to slaughter, and has killed Veretian border lords. He is therefore summarily expelled from the succession, and charged with the crime of treason against his own people. Any authority he has hitherto claimed over the lands of Vere or the protectorate of Acquitart is now void. The reward for his delivery to justice is generous, and will be administered as swiftly as the punishment against any man who shelters him. So says the King.'

There was silence in the courtyard. No one spoke.

'But there is no King,' said Laurent, 'in Vere.' His voice carried too. 'The King my father is dead.' He said, 'Speak the name of the man who profanes his title.'

'The King,' said the herald, 'your uncle.'

'My uncle insults his family. He uses a title that belonged to my father—that should have passed to my brother—and that runs now in my blood. Do you think I will let this insult stand?'

The herald spoke again by rote: 'The King is a man of honour. He offers you one chance for honest battle. If your brother's blood is truly in your veins, you will meet him on the field at Charcy three days hence. There you

may try to prevail with your Patran troops against good Veretian men.'

'Fight him I will, but not at the time and place of his choosing.'

'And is that your final answer?'

'It is.'

'In that case, there is a personal message from uncle to nephew.'

The herald nodded to the soldier at his left, who unhooked from his saddle a grimy, bloodstained cloth bag.

Damen felt a sickening lurch of his stomach as the soldier held the bloodstained bag aloft, and the herald said:

'This one pleaded for you. He tried to stand for the wrong side. He suffered the fate of any man who sides with the pretender prince against the King.'

The soldier pulled the bag away from the severed head.

It was a fortnight's hard ride, in hot weather. The skin had lost all the freshness that youth had once lent it. The blue eyes, always his best feature, were gone. But his tumbled brown hair was dressed with star-like pearls, and from the shape of his face, you could see that he had been beautiful.

Damen remembered him stabbing a fork into his thigh, remembered him insulting Laurent, blue eyes bright with invective. Remembered him standing alone and uncertain in a hallway dressed in bedclothes, a young boy poised on the edge of adolescence, fearing it, dreading it.

Don't tell him I came, he'd said.

They had always, from the beginning, had a strange affinity. *This one pleaded for you*. Spending, perhaps, the last of his fading currency with the Regent. Not realising how little currency he had left.

Whether his beauty would survive adolescence no one would ever know, for Nicaise would not see fifteen now.

In the glaring light of the courtyard, Damen saw Laurent react, and make himself not react. Laurent's response communicated itself to his horse, which moved in place, a sharp, jittery burst, before Laurent brought it, too, under hard control.

The herald still held his gruesome trophy. He didn't know to run when he saw the look in Laurent's eyes.

'My uncle has killed his catamite,' said Laurent. 'As a message to us. And what is the message?' His voice carried.

'That his favour cannot be trusted? That even the boys in his bed see how

false is his claim to the throne? Or that his hold on power is so flimsy that he fears the words of a bought child whore?

‘Let him come to Charcy, with his hithertos and his wherefores, and there he will find me, and with all the might of my kingdom I will scourge him from the field.

‘And if you want a personal message,’ said Laurent, ‘You can tell my uncle boykiller that he can cut the head off every child from here to the capital. It won’t make him into a king, it will simply mean he has no one left to fuck.’

Laurent wheeled his horse, and Damen was there, facing him, as the Regent’s emissaries, dismissed, moved out, and men and women in the courtyard milled, agog with the shock of what they had seen and heard.

For a moment they faced each other and the look Laurent gave him was ice cold, so that if he had been on foot he might have taken a step back. He saw Laurent’s hands hard on the reins, as though white-knuckled under the gloves. His chest felt tight.

‘You’ve overstayed your welcome,’ said Laurent.

‘Don’t do this. If you ride to meet your uncle unprepared you will lose everything you’ve fought for.’

‘But I won’t be unprepared. Pretty little Aimeric is going to give up everything he knows, and when I’ve wrung every last word out of him maybe I’ll send what’s left to my uncle.’

Damen opened his mouth to speak but Laurent cut him off in a whiplash order to Damen’s escort: ‘I told you to get him out of here.’ And he put his heels in his horse, and drove it past Damen’s, up the steps to the dais, where he dismounted in one fluid motion, and headed in the direction of Aimeric’s rooms.

Damen found himself facing Jord. He didn’t need to look up to see the position of the sun.

‘I’m going to stop him,’ said Damen. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘It’s noon,’ said Jord. The words sounded harsh, like they hurt his throat.

‘He needs me,’ said Damen. ‘I don’t care if you tell the world.’

And he rode his horse past Jord, onto the dais.

Dismounting as Laurent had done, he tossed his reins to a nearby soldier and followed Laurent into the fort, taking the stairs up to the second level two at a time. Aimeric’s guards stepped back for him without question, and the

door was already open.

He brought up short after a single step inside.

The rooms, of course, were beautiful. Aimeric wasn't a soldier, he was an aristocrat. He was the fourth son of one of the most powerful Veretian border lords, and his rooms matched his station. There was a bed, and a lounging couch, patterned tiles and a high arched window with a second seat cut into it, tumbled with cushions. There was a table on the far side of the room, and Aimeric had been given food, wine, paper and ink. He had even been given a change of clothing. It was a careful arrangement. Where he sat at the table, he no longer wore the dirt-streaked undershirt he'd worn under his armour. He was dressed like a courtier. He had bathed. His hair looked clean.

Laurent stood still two steps from him, all the lines of his body rigid.

Damen pushed himself forward until he stood alongside Laurent. His was the only movement in the silent room. With half his mind, he noticed little things: the broken pane of glass in the bottom left-hand corner of the window; last night's meat uneaten on the plate; the bed not slept in.

In the tower, Laurent had struck Aimeric across the right side of his face, but the right side of his face was hidden by his pose—his tousled head resting on his arm—so that all that Damen saw was intact. There was no swollen eye or grazed cheek or blurred mouth, just the unmarred line of Aimeric's profile, and a shard of glass from the broken window lying by his outflung hand.

Blood had soaked into his sleeve, had pooled out over the table and the tiled floor, but it was old. He had been like this for hours, long enough for the blood to darken, for his movements to cease, for a stillness to invade the room, until it was as still as Laurent, staring at him with sightless eyes.

He'd been writing; the paper was not far from the curl of his fingertips, and Damen could see the three words he'd written. That he had neat handwriting shouldn't have been a surprise. He had always striven to perform his duties well. On the march he had worn himself into the ground trying to keep up with stronger men.

A fourth son, thought Damen, waiting for someone to notice him. When he wasn't trying to please, he was baiting authority, as though negative attention could substitute for the approval that he sought—that he had been given, once, by Laurent's uncle.

I'm sorry, Jord.

They were the last words anyone would have from him. He had killed

himself.

CHAPTER 21

The room where Aimeric lay was quiet. He had been taken from his suite to a smaller cell and laid out on stone, his body covered by fine linen. Nineteen, thought Damen, and quiet.

Outside, Ravenel was preparing for war.

It was a fort-wide undertaking, from the armoury to the storehouses. It had begun when Laurent had turned from the ruined table and said, ‘Saddle the horses. We ride for Charcy.’ He had knocked Damen’s hand off his shoulder when Damen had tried to stop him.

Damen had attempted to follow, and had been prevented. Laurent had spent an hour giving brief orders, and Damen hadn’t been able to get near him. After that, Laurent had retired to his rooms, the doors firmly closed behind him.

When a servant had made to enter, Damen had bodily stopped him. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No one goes in.’

He had put a two-man guard on the door with those same orders, and cleared out the section—as he had done once before, at the tower. When he had been certain that Laurent had sufficient privacy, he had left to learn all he could about Charcy. What he had learned had made his stomach sink.

Lying between Fortaine and the northern trade routes, Charcy was perfectly positioned for two forces to trap a third. There was a reason the Regent was taunting Laurent out of his fort: Charcy was a death trap.

Damen had pushed the maps from himself in frustration. That had been two hours ago.

Now he stood in the quiet of this small, cell-like room of thick stone that housed Aimeric. He lifted his eyes to Jord, who had summoned him.

‘You’re his lover,’ said Jord.

‘I was.’ He owed Jord the truth. ‘We . . . it was the first time. Last night.’
‘So you told him.’

He didn’t answer, and his silence spoke for him. Jord let out a breath, and Damen spoke then.

‘I’m not Aimeric.’

‘You ever wonder what it would feel like to find out you’d spread for your brother’s killer?’ Jord looked around the small room. He looked at the place where Aimeric lay. ‘I think it would feel like this.’

Unbidden, remembered words rose up inside him. *I don’t care. You’re still my slave tonight.* Damen pressed his eyes closed. ‘I wasn’t Damianos last night. I was just—’

‘Just a man?’ said Jord. ‘You think Aimeric thought that? That there were two of him? Because there weren’t. There was only ever one, and look what happened to him.’

Damen was silent. Then, ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jord.

‘Are you going to leave his service?’

This time it was Jord who was silent.

‘Someone has to tell Laurent not to meet his uncle’s troops at Charcy.’

‘You think he’ll listen to me?’ said Jord bitterly.

‘No,’ said Damen. He thought of those closed doors, and he spoke with flat honesty. ‘I don’t think he’ll listen to anyone.’

* * *

He stood in front of the double doors and the two soldiers that flanked them, and looked at the heavy panelled wood, resolutely shut.

He had put those soldiers on the door to bar the way to those men seeking Laurent out for some trivial matter, or for any matter, because when Laurent wanted to be alone, no one should suffer the consequences of interrupting him.

The taller soldier addressed him. ‘Commander, no one has entered in your absence.’ Damen’s eyes passed over the doors again.

‘Good,’ he said. And he pushed the doors open.

Inside, the rooms were as he remembered them, remade and reordered,

and even the table was replenished, with platters of fruit and pitchers of water and of wine. When the doors closed behind Damen, the faint sounds of the preparations in the courtyard could still be heard. He stopped, halfway into the room.

Laurent had changed out of riding leathers and had returned to the severe formality of his prince's garments, hard-laced into his clothing from neck to toe-tip. He stood at the window, one hand on the stone of the wall, fingers curled as though he held something in his fist. His gaze was fixed on the activity in the courtyard, where the fort was preparing for war on his orders. He spoke without turning.

'Come to say goodbye?' said Laurent.

There was a pause, in which Laurent turned. Damen looked at him.

'I'm sorry. I know what Nicaise meant to you.'

'He was my uncle's whore,' said Laurent.

'He was more than that. You thought of him as—'

'A brother?' said Laurent. 'But I do not have terribly good luck with those. I hope you are not here for a mawkish display of sentiment. I will throw you out.'

There was a long silence. They faced each other.

'Sentiment? No. I wouldn't expect that,' said Damen. The sounds of outside were of orders and metal. 'Since you don't have a Captain left to advise you, I'm here to tell you that you can't go to Charcy.'

'I have a Captain. I've appointed Enguerran. Is that everything? I have reinforcements arriving tomorrow and I am taking my men to Charcy.' Laurent was moving to the table, the dismissal in his voice clear.

'Then you'll kill them like you killed Nicaise,' said Damen. 'By dragging them into this endless, childish bid of yours for your uncle's attention that you call a fight.'

'Get out,' said Laurent. He had gone white.

'Is the truth hard to hear?'

'I said get out.'

'Or do you claim you're marching to Charcy for some other reason?'

'I am fighting for my throne.'

'Is that what you think? You've fooled the men into believing it. You haven't fooled me. Because this thing between you and your uncle isn't a fight, is it.'

‘I can assure you,’ said Laurent, his right hand clenched unconsciously into a fist, ‘it’s a fight.’

‘In a fight, you try to beat your opponent. You don’t scurry to do what he wants. This is about more than Charcy. You’ve never made a single move of your own against your uncle. You let him set the field. You let him make the rules. You play his games like you want to show him you can. Like you’re trying to impress him. Is that it?’

Damen moved in further.

‘You need to beat him at his own game? You want him to see you do it? At the expense of your position and the lives of your men? Are you that desperate for his attention?’

He let his eyes rake up and down Laurent’s form.

‘Well, you have it. Congratulations. You must have loved it that he was obsessed enough with you that he killed his own boy to get at you. You win.’

Laurent took a step back, an almost-swaying motion of a man in the grip of nausea. He stared at Damen, his face hollowed.

‘You don’t know anything,’ Laurent said then, in a cold, terrible voice. ‘You don’t know anything about me. Or my uncle. You’re so blind. You can’t see what’s—right in front of you.’ Laurent’s sudden laugh was low and mocking. ‘You want me? You’re my slave?’

He felt himself flush. ‘That’s not going to work.’

‘You’re nothing,’ said Laurent, ‘but a crawling disappointment who let a King’s bastard throw him in chains because he couldn’t keep his mistress happy in bed.’

‘That’s not,’ he said, ‘going to work.’

‘You want to hear the truth about my uncle? I’ll tell you,’ said Laurent, a new light in his eyes. ‘I’ll tell you what you couldn’t stop. What you were too blind to see. You were in chains while Kastor was cutting down your royal family. Kastor and my uncle.’

He heard it, and he knew not to engage. He knew, and a part of him was aching at what Laurent was doing, even as he heard himself say, ‘What does your uncle have to do with—’

‘Where do you think Kastor got the military support to hold back his brother’s faction? Why do you think the Veretian Ambassador arrived with treaty in hand right after Kastor took the throne?’

He tried to take a breath. He heard himself say, ‘No.’

‘Did you think Theomedes died from natural sickness? All those visits from physicians that only made him sicker?’

‘No,’ said Damen. There was a pounding in his head, and then he felt it in his body, it was impossible for flesh to contain the shaking force of it. And Laurent was still talking.

‘You didn’t guess it was Kastor? You poor dumb brute. Kastor killed the King, then took the city with my uncle’s troops. And all my uncle had to do was to sit back and watch it happen.’

He thought of his father, in a sick bed ringed with physicians, his eyes and cheeks hollowed out, and the room thick with the smell of tallow and of death. He remembered his sense of powerlessness, watching his father slip away, and Kastor, so solicitous, kneeling by his father’s side.

‘*Did you know about this?*’

‘Know?’ said Laurent. ‘Everyone knows. I was *glad*. I just wish I could have seen it happen. I wish I could have seen Damianos when Kastor’s hire-swords came for him. I would have laughed in his face. His father got exactly what he deserved, to die like the animal he was, and there was nothing any of them could do to stop it happening. Then again,’ said Laurent, ‘maybe if Theomedes had kept his cock in his wife instead of sticking it in his mistress —’

That was the last thing he said, because Damen hit him. He drove his fist into Laurent’s jaw with all the force of his weight behind it. Knuckles impacted on flesh and bone and Laurent’s head snapped sideways even as he hit the table behind him hard, sending its contents scattering. Metallic platters crashed against tile, a mess of spilt wine and strewn food. Laurent clutched the table with the arm that he’d flung out instinctively to stop his fall.

Damen was breathing hard, his hands clenched into fists. *How dare you talk that way about my father.* The words were on his lips. His mind pulsed and throbbed.

Laurent pushed himself up and gave Damen a look glittering with triumph, even as he dragged the back of his right hand across his mouth, where his lips were smeared with blood.

And then Damen saw what else lay among the overturned platters that littered the floor. It was bright against the tiles, like a scattering of stars. It was what Laurent had been holding in his right hand when Damen entered. The blue sapphires of Nicaise’s earring.

The doors behind him opened, and Damen knew without turning around that the sound had summoned the soldiers into the room. He didn't take his eyes off Laurent.

'Arrest me,' said Damen. 'I have raised hands to the Prince.'

The soldiers hesitated. It was the just response to his actions but he was—or had been—their Captain. He had to say again, 'Do it.'

The darker-haired soldier stepped forward and Damen felt the grip take him. Laurent set his jaw.

'No,' said Laurent. And then, 'It was provoked.'

Another hesitation. It was clear that the two soldiers did not know what to make of what they had walked into. The air of violence was heavy in the room, where their Prince stood in front of a ruined table, with blood welling from his lip.

'I said let him go.'

It was a direct order from their Prince, and this time it was obeyed. Damen felt the hands release him. Laurent's gaze followed the soldiers out as they bowed, then left, the doors closing behind them. Then Laurent transferred his gaze to Damen.

'Now get out,' Laurent said.

Damen pressed his eyes closed briefly. He felt raw with thoughts of his father. Laurent's words pushed at the inside of his eyelids.

'No,' he said. 'You can't go to Charcy. I need to convince you of that.'

Laurent's laugh was a strange, breathless sound. 'Didn't you hear anything that I just said to you?'

'Yes,' said Damen. 'You tried to hurt me, and you have. I wish you would see that what you have just done to me is what your uncle is doing to you.'

He saw Laurent receive that like a man at the very ends of his endurance being given another hit. 'Why,' said Laurent, 'do you—do you always—' He stopped himself. The rise and fall of his chest was shallow.

'I came with you to stop a war,' said Damen. 'I came because you were the only thing standing between Akielos and your uncle. It's you who've lost sight of that. You need to fight your uncle on your own terms, not on his.'

'I *can't*.' It was a raw admission. 'I can't *think*.' The words were torn out of him. Wide-eyed in the silence, Laurent said them again in a different voice, his blue eyes dark with the exposure of the truth. 'I can't think.'

‘I know,’ said Damen.

He said it softly. There was more than one admission in Laurent’s words. He knew that too.

He knelt, and scooped up the glimmer of Nicaise’s earring from the floor.

It had been a delicate thing, and well made, a handful of sapphires.

Rising, he set it down on the table.

After a time, he moved back from the place where Laurent leant, fingers curled around the table edge. He drew a breath, made to take another step back.

‘Don’t go,’ said Laurent, quietly.

‘I’m just clearing my head. I already told my escort I wouldn’t need them until morning,’ said Damen.

And there was another awful silence, as Damen realised what Laurent was asking him.

‘No. I don’t mean—forever—just—’ Laurent broke off. ‘Three days.’ Laurent said it as though producing from the depths the answer to a painstakingly weighed question. ‘I can do this alone. I know I can. It’s only that right now I can’t seem to . . . *think*, and I can’t . . . trust anyone else to stand up to me when I’m . . . like this. If you could give me three days, I—’ He forcibly cut himself off.

‘I’ll stay,’ said Damen. ‘You know I’ll stay for as long as you—’

‘Don’t,’ said Laurent. ‘Don’t lie to me. Not you.’

‘I’ll stay,’ said Damen. ‘Three days. After that, I ride south.’

Laurent nodded. After a moment, Damen came back to rest against the table beside Laurent. He watched Laurent find his way back to himself.

Eventually, Laurent began to talk, the words precise and quite steady.

‘You’re right. I killed Nicaise when I left it half done. I should have either stayed away from him, or broken his faith in my uncle. I didn’t plan it out, I left it to chance. I wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t thinking about him like that. I just . . . I just *liked* him.’ Underneath the cold, analytical words, there was also something bewildered.

It was awful. ‘I should never have—said that. Nicaise made a choice. He spoke up for you because you were his friend, and that is not something you should regret.’

‘He spoke up for me because he didn’t think my uncle would hurt him. None of them do. They think he loves them. It has the outward semblance of

love. At first. But it isn't love. It's . . . fetish. It doesn't outlast adolescence. The boys themselves are disposable.' Laurent's voice didn't change. 'He knew that much, deep down. He always was smarter than the others. He knew that when he got too old, he would be replaced.'

'Like Aimeric,' said Damen.

Into the long silence that stretched out between them, Laurent said: 'Like Aimeric.'

Damen recalled Nicaise's blistering verbal attacks. He looked at Laurent's clear profile and tried to understand the strange affinity between man and boy.

'You liked him.'

'My uncle cultivated the worst in him. He still had good instincts sometimes. When children are moulded that young, it takes time to undo. I thought . . .'

Softly, 'You thought you could help him.'

He watched Laurent's face, the flickering of some internal truth behind the careful lack of all expression.

'He was on my side,' said Laurent. 'But in the end, the only person on his side was him.'

Damen knew better than to reach out, or to try to touch him. The tiled floor around the table was scattered with detritus: overturned pewter, an apple rolled to a far tile, a pitcher of wine that had let fly its contents so that the floor was soaked in red. The silence stretched out.

It was with a shock that he felt the touch of Laurent's fingers against the back of his wrist. He thought it a gesture of comfort, a caress, and then he realised that Laurent was shifting the fabric of his sleeve, sliding it back slightly to reveal the gold underneath, until the wrist-cuff he had asked the blacksmith to leave on was exposed between them.

'Sentiment?' said Laurent.

'Something like that.'

Their eyes met and he could feel each beat of his heart. A few seconds of silence, a space that lengthened, until Laurent spoke.

'You should give me the other.'

Damen flushed slowly, heat spreading from his chest over his skin, his heartbeats intrusive. He tried to answer in a normal voice.

'I can't imagine you'd wear it.'

‘To keep. I wouldn’t *wear it*,’ said Laurent, ‘though I don’t believe your imagination is having any difficulty with the idea.’

Damen let out a soft, unsteady breath of laughter, because he was right. For a while they sat together in comfortable silence. Laurent had mostly returned to himself, his posture more casual, his weight leaned back on his arms, watching Damen as he sometimes did. But he was a new version of himself, stripped back, youthful, a little quieter, and Damen realised he was seeing Laurent with his defences lowered—one or two of them, anyway. There was an untried, fragile feeling to the experience.

‘I should not have told you in the manner I did about Kastor.’ The words were quiet.

Red wine was seeping into the tiles of the floor. He heard himself ask it.

‘Did you mean what you said? That you were glad.’

‘Yes,’ said Laurent. ‘They killed my family.’

His fingers dug into the wood of the table. The truth was so close in this room that it seemed for a moment that he would say it, say his own name to Laurent, and the closeness of it seemed to press down on him, because they had both lost family.

He thought, it was what had linked Laurent and the Regent together at Marlas: they had both lost an older brother.

But it was the Regent who had forged alliances across the border. It was the Regent who had given Kastor the support he needed to destabilise the Akielon throne. And so Theomedes was dead, and Damianos had been sent to . . .

The idea, when it came, seemed to spool the ground out from beneath his feet, changing the configuration of everything.

It had never made sense that Kastor had kept him alive. Kastor had been so careful to obliterate every piece of evidence of his treachery. He had ordered all of the witnesses killed, from slaves to men of high rank like Adrastus. Leaving Damen alive was mad, dangerous. There was always the possibility that Damen would escape and return to challenge Kastor for the throne.

But Kastor had made an alliance with the Regent. And in exchange for troops, he had given the Regent slaves.

One slave in particular. Damen felt hot, then cold. Could it be that he had been the Regent’s price? That in exchange for troops, the Regent had said, I

want Damianos sent as a bed slave to my nephew?

Because throw Laurent together with Damianos, and either one would kill the other, or, if Damen kept his identity concealed and they somehow managed to form an alliance . . . if he helped Laurent instead of hurting him, and Laurent, out of the deep-buried sense of fairness that existed within him, helped him in turn . . . if the foundation of trust was built between them so that they might become friends, or more than friends . . . if Laurent ever decided to make use of his bed slave . . .

He thought about the Regent's suggestions to him, sly, subtle. *Laurent could benefit from a steady influence, someone close to him with his best interests at heart. A man with sound judgement, who could help guide him without being swayed.* And the constant, pervasive insinuation: *Have you taken my nephew?*

My uncle knows that when I lose control, I make mistakes. It would have given him a perverse kind of pleasure to send Aimeric to work against me, Laurent had said.

How much greater the twisted pleasure to be gleaned from this?

'I've listened to everything that you said to me,' Laurent was saying. 'I'm not going to rush off to Charcy with an army. But I still want to fight. Not because my uncle threw down a challenge, but on my own terms, because this is my country. I know that together we can find a way to use Charcy to my advantage. Together we can do what we cannot do apart.'

It had never really had the stamp of Kastor. Kastor was capable of anger, of brutality, but his actions were straightforward. This kind of imaginative cruelty belonged to someone else.

'My uncle plans everything,' said Laurent, as though reading Damen's thoughts. 'He plans for victory and he plans for defeat. It was you who never quite fit . . . You've always been outside of his schemes. For everything that my uncle and Kastor planned,' said Laurent, as Damen felt himself grow cold, 'they had no idea what they did when they gifted me with you.'

* * *

Outside, when he pushed outside, he heard the sound of men's voices, and the chink of bridles and spurs, the rattle of wheels on stone. He was breathing

unsteadily. He put a hand on the wall to take some of his weight.

In a fort full of activity, he knew himself a game piece, and was only beginning to be able to glimpse the scope of the board.

The Regent had done this, and yet he had done this too, he also was responsible. Jord was right. He had owed Laurent the truth, and he hadn't given it to him. And now he knew what the consequences of that choice might be. Yet he couldn't bring himself to regret what they had done: last night had been bright in a way that resisted tarnishing.

It had been right. His heart beat with the feeling that the other truth must somehow change to make it right, and he knew that it wouldn't.

He imagined himself nineteen again, knowing then what he knew now, and he wondered if he would have let that long-ago battle fall to the Veretians—let Auguste live. If he would have ignored his father's call to arms altogether, and instead found his way to the Veretian tents and sought out Auguste to find some common ground. Laurent would have been thirteen but in Damen's mind's eye he would have found him a little older, sixteen or seventeen, old enough that Damen's nineteen-year-old self could have begun, with all the exuberance of youth, to court him.

He could do none of that. But if there was something that Laurent wanted, he could give it to him. He could deal the Regent a blow from which he wouldn't recover.

If the Regent wanted Damianos of Akielos standing alongside his nephew, he would get him. And if he couldn't give Laurent the truth, he could use everything else he had to give Laurent a definitive victory in the south.

He was going to make these three days count.

* * *

The blue-eyed self-control was firmly back in place when Laurent came out onto the courtyard dais, armed and armoured and ready to ride.

In the courtyard, Laurent's men were mounted and waiting for him. Damen looked at the hundred and twenty riders, the men he'd ridden with from the palace to the border, the men he'd worked alongside and shared bread and wine with in the evenings by the campfires. There were some

notable absences. Orlant. Aimeric. Jord.

The plan had taken shape over a map. He'd put it to Laurent simply. 'Look at Charcy's location. Fortaine will be the launching point for troops. Charcy will be Guion's fight.'

'Guion and all his other sons,' Laurent had said.

'The strongest move you can make right now is to take Fortaine. It will give you full control of the south. With Ravenel, Fortaine and Acquitart you'll hold Vere's southern trade routes to Akielos as well as to Patras. You already hold the southern routes to Vask, and Fortaine gives you access to a port. You'll have everything you need to launch a northern campaign.'

There had been a silence, until Laurent had said, 'You were right. I haven't been thinking about it like this.'

'Like what?' said Damen.

'Like war,' said Laurent.

Now they faced one another on the dais and words rose to Damen's lips, personal words.

But what he said was, 'Are you sure you want to leave your enemy in charge of your fort?'

'Yes,' said Laurent.

They gazed at one another. It was a public goodbye, in full view of the men. Laurent extended his hand. He did it not, as a prince might, for Damen to kneel and kiss, but as a friend. There was acknowledgement in the gesture, and as Damen took his hand, in front of the men, Laurent held his gaze.

Laurent said, 'Take care of my fort, Commander.'

In public, there was nothing he could say. He felt his grip tighten slightly. He thought of stepping forward, of taking Laurent's head in his hands. And then he thought of what he was, and all he now knew. And he forced himself to release his grip.

Laurent was nodding to his attendant, mounting his horse. Damen said, 'A lot depends on timing. We have a rendezvous in two days. I—Don't be late.'

'Trust me,' said Laurent with a single bright glance, straightening his horse out with the tug of a rein in the moment before the order was called, and he and his men moved out.

* * *

The fort without Laurent felt hollowed out. But, manned by a skeleton force, it still had enough men to repel any serious threat from outside. The walls of Ravenel had stood strong for two hundred years. Besides which, their plan relied on splitting their forces, with Laurent leaving first, while Damen remained, waiting for Laurent's reinforcements and then launching from Ravenel a day later.

Because it was not possible, no matter what was said, to completely trust Laurent, the morning was a thin skein of tension, drawn tight. The men prepared in true southern weather. The blue sky, high-flung, was uninterrupted except where it was cut by a crenellation.

Damen rose to the battlements. The view stretched over hills to the horizon. Set wide in broad daylight, the landscape was empty of troops, and he marvelled again that they had been able to take this fort without the spilt blood and churned earth of a siege.

It felt good to look out over what they had accomplished and to know it was only the beginning. The Regent had held ascendancy for too long. Fortaine was going to fall, and Laurent was going to hold the south.

And then he saw the haze on the horizon.

Red. Darkening red. And then, streaming across the landscape, six riders, drawing ahead of the oncoming red at a gallop—their own scouts, pounding back to the fort.

It played out in miniature below him, the army still far enough away that their approach was silent, the scouts just points at the ends of six lines converging on the fort.

Red had always been the colour of the Regency, but that was not what changed the beating of Damen's heart, even before the far-off sound of the horn—ivory that struck the air, splitting it open.

They marched, a line of red cloaks in perfect formation, and Damen's heart was pounding. He knew them. He remembered the last time he had seen them, his body pressed out of sight behind outcrops of granite. He had ridden for hours along a river to avoid them, Laurent dripping in the saddle behind him. *The nearest Akielon troop is nearer than I expected*, Laurent had said.

These were not the Regent's troops.

This was the army of Nikandros, the Kyros of Delpha, and his

Commander, Makedon.

A burst of activity in the courtyard, the clatter of hooves, voices raised in alarm—

Damen was aware of it as if from a distance, he turned almost blindly as a runner came bursting up the stairs, taking them two at a time, throwing himself down onto one knee in front of Damen and gasping out his message.

‘Akielons are marching on us,’ he expected the runner to say, and he did, but then he said, *‘I’m to give this to the fort Commander,’* and he was urgently pressing something into Damen’s hand.

Damen stared at it. Behind him, the Akielon army was approaching. In his hand was a hard loop of metal set with a carved gemstone, the etching a starburst.

He was looking at Laurent’s signet ring.

He felt the hair rise all over his body. The last time he had seen this ring, he’d been at an inn at Nesson, and Laurent had given it over to a messenger. *Give him this, and tell him that I will wait for him at Ravenel,* he’d said.

Distantly he was aware that Guymar was on the battlement with a contingent of men, that Guymar was addressing him, telling him, *‘Commander, Akielons are marching on the fort.’*

He turned to face Guymar, his fist closing over the signet ring. Guymar seemed to stop and realise who it was he was talking to. Damen saw it written on Guymar’s face: an Akielon force massing outside, and an Akielon in command of the fort.

Guymar pushed past his hesitation, said, *‘Our walls can withstand anything, but they’ll block the arrival of our reinforcements.’*

He remembered the night Laurent had addressed him in Akielon for the first time, remembered long nights speaking in Akielon, Laurent shoring up his vocabulary, improving his fluency, and his choice of subject matter—border geography, treaties, troop movements.

He said it as it opened up inside him, *‘They are our reinforcements.’*

The truth was marching towards him. His past was coming to Ravenel, a steady, unstoppable approach. Damen and Damianos. And Jord was right. There had only ever been one of him.

He said, *‘Open the gates.’*

* * *

The Akielon march into the fort was the flow of a single red stream, except that whereas water swirled and swelled, it was straight and unyielding.

Their arms and legs were crudely bare, as if war was an act of flesh impacting on flesh. Their weapons were unadorned, as if they had brought only the essentials required for killing. Rows and rows of them, laid out with mathematical precision. The discipline of feet marching in unison was a display of power, and violence, and strength.

Damen stood on the dais and watched the full sweep of it. Had they always been like this? So stripped of everything but the utilitarian? So hungry for war?

The men and women of Ravenel were crammed in at the edges of the courtyard, and Damen's men were deployed to keep them back. The crowd pressed and swelled at them. Word of the Akielon entry had spread. The crowd was murmuring, the soldiers were displeased with their duty. The Regent had been right, people were saying: Laurent had been in league with Akielos all along. It was a strange kind of madness to realise that this, in fact, was true.

Damen saw the faces of the Veretian men and women, saw arrows trained down from the battlements, and in one of the corners of the vast courtyard, a woman held her son where he clutched at her leg, her hand encircling his head.

He knew what was in their eyes, visible now beneath the hostility. It was terror.

He could feel the tension of the Akielon forces too, knew they were expecting treachery. The first sword drawn, the first arrow loosed, would unleash a killing force.

A strident horn blast hit the ears, too loud in the courtyard. Echoing from every stone surface, it was the signal to cease march. The halt was sudden. It left a silence in the space where the sounds of metal had been, the tramp of feet. The horn blast was fading, until you could almost hear the sound of a bowstring being drawn tight.

'This is wrong,' said Guymar, his hand tight on his sword hilt. 'We should—'

Damen held out his hand in a repressive gesture.

Because an Akielon man was dismounting from his horse, beneath the main standard, and Damen's heart was pounding. He felt himself move forward, he was coming down the shallow steps of the dais, leaving Guymar and the others behind him.

He felt every pair of eyes in the silent courtyard watching him as he made his descent, step after step. It wasn't the way things were done. Veretians stood atop their daises and made guests come to them. None of that mattered to him. He kept his own eyes on the man, who was watching him approach in turn.

Damen was wearing Veretian clothes. He felt them on himself, the high collar, the fabric tight-laced to follow the lines of his body, the long sleeves, the shine of his long boots. Even his hair had been cut in Veretian style.

He saw the man see all of that first, and then he saw the man see him.

'The last time we spoke, the apricots were in season,' said Damen, in Akielon. 'We walked in the night garden, and you took my arm and gave me counsel, and I did not listen.'

And Nikandros of Delpha stared back at him, and in a shocked voice, speaking the words half to himself, said, 'It's not possible.'

'Old friend, you have come to a place where nothing is as any of us thought.'

Nikandros didn't speak again. He just stared in silence, white as one who had been struck a blow. Then, as though one leg gave out, and then the other, he dropped slowly to his knees, an Akielon commander kneeling on the rough trampled stones of a Veretian fort.

He said, '*Damianos.*'

Before Damen could tell him to rise, he heard it again, echoed in another voice, and then another. It was passing over the gathered men in the courtyard, his name in tones of shock and of awe. The steward beside Nikandros was kneeling. And then four of the men in the front ranks. And then more, dozens of men, rank after rank of soldiers.

And as Damen looked out, the army was dropping to its knees, until the courtyard was a sea of bowed heads, and silence replaced the murmur of voices, the words spoken over and over again.

'*He lives. The King's son lives. Damianos.*'

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