

C.S. PACAT

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The Summer Palace

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‘When all this is over,
we could take horses
and stay a week in the
palace...’



a CAPTIVE PRINCE
SHORT STORY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.S. Pacat is the author of the best-selling *Captive Prince* trilogy. Born in Australia and educated at the University of Melbourne, she has since lived in a number of cities, including Tokyo and Perugia. She currently resides and writes in Melbourne.

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The Summer Palace is a *Captive Prince* short story set after the events of *Kings Rising*. It is an epilogue to the *Captive Prince* series.

THE SUMMER PALACE

Damen swung off his horse with ease. Newly won ease. The moment his sandals touched the dirt he felt it thrumming in him. The last time that he had been here—nineteen, a sapling—it had been a time of exuberant hunts, enthusiastic sports in the daytime, enthusiastic bedding at night, tumbling a slave or a young fighter, thrusting about with the eagerness of youth.

He found it just as he had remembered it, dismounting in the flower-bordered quadrangle. The scent of blossom, of high clear air, of sweet oils, and the delicate earth, all combined, here where shallow steps lead up to the first of the entrances, and the first of the arcs of branches that led to the gardens.

Now Damen felt the bright, heady set of new desires that had had him breaking from his royal entourage in the last miles spurring his horse to gallop ahead alone as he wished—as he so giddily wished.

He tossed his reins to a servant, was told, ‘By the east fountain,’ and pushed his way past the branches of myrtle hanging low over the paths to the marble flags, to a balconied garden where a figure stood, looking out. On the horizon, the sea was a sudden open view, huge and blue.

Damen looked too—at one thing only: the breeze playing with a strand of blond hair, at the cool, pale limbs in white cotton. He felt his own rising happiness, the speeding of his pulse. Some part of him, absurdly, wondered how he would be received: the fluttering, enjoyable anxiety of a new lover.

It was nice also to just look, to see him when he thought he wasn't being observed, even as the familiar voice spoke in a precise, assured fashion.

'Tell me as soon as the King approaches, I want to be informed right away.'

Damen felt a burgeoning delight. 'It's not a servant.'

Laurent turned.

He was standing before the view. The breeze that was playing with his hair was also playing with the hem of his chiton. Laurent wore it at mid thigh, which was the fashion for young men. In Ios, he had worn only Veretian clothing, perhaps a testament to his fussy skin that would not darken, only pink, then burn. This blowy version of him was new, and wonderful. He hadn't worn Akielon clothing since—

—the Kingsmeet, and the trial that followed, two days and two nights in the same tattered garment, sleeping in it, even after kneeling in it at Damen's side, until it was wet with Damen's blood.

'I was watching the road.'

'Hello,' said Damen.

Behind Laurent the glimpse of coastline, where the arrival of Damen's large retinue would have been seen, but his not own approach, a single rider, a speck on a quicker route. Laurent's cheeks were slightly flushed, though it was not clear whether it was from summer heat or his admission.

It was wildly impractical to be here. Laurent had not yet achieved his ascension, and Akielos had an unstable government, its kyroi and palace officials newly appointed after a purge of those who had involvement in Kastor's treachery. In the palace at Ios, they had snatched moments together like illicit lovers, at sunset, at dusk, in the gardens, in the bedroom, mornings with Laurent sweetly above him. It had felt at times surreal: the wonder of what was newly between them set against the seriousness of their days, the difficulty of those early decisions.

It felt that way now. 'Hello,' said Laurent, and Damen couldn't help the spill of feeling at how close they had come to not having this at all. 'It's been too long, I've forgotten how. Remind me.'

'We're here. We can take our time,' said Damen.

'Can you?' said Laurent.

'It suits you,' said Damen. He was running his finger helplessly along the hem of Laurent's chiton where it ran from the pin at his shoulder down

across his collarbone diagonally to his chest.

‘The mechanism’s simple.’

Damen thought of it: unpinning the gold clasp at Laurent’s shoulder. The white cotton would not slip off completely, but catch at his waist, where Damen would only have to untie one further string.

They weren’t alone, of course. A skeleton household had been sent ahead to open the palace for their arrival—to throw open doors, to place bedding, to put oil in lamps, to bring up wine from the cellars, to cut fresh flowers, to haul new-caught fish into the kitchens—and presumably Laurent had his own retinue. But here on the edge of the gardens, it was as if the birdsong and the hum of cicadas were their only adjunct.

‘I know how it works,’ Damen said softly, into Laurent’s ear. ‘I want to do things slowly. Oh, you do remember.’

‘They showed me to my rooms, they’re open like this, to the sea. I had them lay out these clothes for me, and I thought about you coming. I thought about what it would be like here, with you.’

‘Like this,’ said Damen. He kissed the top of Laurent’s bare shoulder, then his jaw.

‘No, I—thinking about you and being with you are different, you’re always more powerful, more—’

‘Go on.’ Damen felt a wellspring of pure pleasure, laughing against his neck.

‘Stop my mouth,’ said Laurent. ‘I don’t know what I’m saying.’

Damen lifted his head and kissed Laurent tenderly, found him flushed, warm like summer. He could feel Laurent’s hands sliding up over his body, an unconscious mapping that was new, or rather, recent; like the new look in Laurent’s eyes.

The weeks of bed rest had been a nuisance: the first hazy days that Damen couldn’t recall well, followed by the nuisance of physicians. A nuisance to lie around. A nuisance to limp. A nuisance to eat the broth.

He remembered only impressions from the baths: Nikandros arriving, alone, white-faced. Laurent up to the elbows in Damen’s blood. Kastor dead. Damen on the ground. Laurent adopting the tone of emotion-stripped authority that he would maintain throughout those first days: *Fetch a pallet to carry him on, and a physician. Now.*

Nikandros: *I’m not leaving you alone with him.*

Then he'll bleed to death.

The blood loss, at that point, was possibly quite severe, because Damen recalled little beyond the pallet arriving, and his own blurry surprise at finding himself in his father's rooms. The King's rooms, with their outflung balcony and pillared view of the sea. *My father died here.* He didn't say it.

He remembered Laurent, giving orders in that even voice wiped clean of emotion—secure the city, prepare for regional resistance, send news north to their forces in Karthas. In the same voice, Laurent directed the physicians. In the same voice, Laurent called Nikandros in to kneel and rise Kyros of Ios. In the same voice, Laurent ordered Kastor's body held under guard, for viewing. Laurent had a mind that took in problems, faced them, quantified them and then, steadily, solved them: keep Damianos alive; cement Damianos's rule; don't appear to be ruling in his stead.

When Damen had woken next, it had been deep night, and his room had been empty of the people who had thronged it. He had turned his head to see Laurent lying beside him, fully clothed on top of the covers, still wearing that tattered, bloodstained chiton, in a sleep of utter exhaustion.

Now Damen held Laurent's waist, liking how little stood between him and skin: just light cotton that moved with the movement of his hands. It was hard to think beyond the curve of Laurent's shoulder, the long line of his thigh, visible. 'You look Akielon,' said Damen, his voice warm and pleased.

'Take off your armour,' said Laurent.

He said it with the wide ocean at his back. He stepped back, leaning slightly on the marble behind him that balconied the view, a barrier where the cliffs looked out. Overhead branches of myrtle shaded them from the sun, shifting light and shadow over Laurent's body.

A diffuse excitement at the idea of having the view as their witness stirred in Damen. He felt a momentary connection to the Veretian monarchy's tradition of public consummation, a possessive desire to see and be seen. It was transgressive and outside the bounds of his own nature, even as the gardens felt private enough that it might be possible.

He unbuckled his breastplate. He pulled off his sword-belt, a slow, purposeful gesture.

'The rest can wait,' he said. His voice was low.

Laurent put a hand against the undercloth pressed warm against Damen's chest by his armour. Kissing felt much more intimate when sword and breastplate were discarded on the path and it was body against body. Laurent's mouth opened to him, and he tongued inside in the way he liked. Laurent encouraged it, fingers curling around his neck.

Dressed like that, it was like having him naked; there was so much skin, and nothing to unlace. Damen pressed Laurent back against the marble. The bare skin of Laurent's inner thigh slid along the inside of his own, the movement lifting his leather skirt slightly.

It could have happened then, pushing up Laurent's skirt, turning him and thrusting into his body. Instead, Damen thought, with indulgent slowness, about taking his time, about the pink nipple that was close to the asymmetrical line of Laurent's chiton. The restraint was part of it, the competing desires of wanting everything all at once, and wanting to savour each increment.

When he pulled back his skin felt flushed, his whole body much more hotly engaged than he realised. He managed to pull back further, to see Laurent's face, his lips parted, his cheeks heated, his hair slightly disordered by Damen's fingers.

'You're here early.' As if only now noticing this.

'Yes.' Laughing.

'I planned to greet you on the steps. Veretian protocol.'

'Come out and kiss me in front of everyone later.'

'How far behind did you leave them?'

'I don't know,' Damen said it, his smile widening. 'Come on. Let me show you the palace.'

Lentos was a sea crag, where the mountains were wild and the ocean was visible from the eastern side, between headlands of tumbled rocks. Water crashed into cliffs and stone and the tumble of land into the sea was jagged and inhospitable.

But the palace was beautiful, nestled in a series of gardens, with flower sprays and fountains, and meandering paths that offered startling views of the sea. Its marble colonnades were simple and led inside to atriums and further gardens, and cooler spaces where the heat of summer was distant, like the outdoor hum of cicadas.

Later he would show Laurent the stables and the library, and the path that wound through the gardens, through the trees of orange and almond. He wondered if he could coax Laurent into sea bathing or swimming. Had he done it before? There were marble steps down to the sea, and a beautiful spot for diving, where the water was calm, with no undertow. They could set up a silk awning in the Veretian style, cool shade for when the sun was at its height.

For now it was the simple pleasure of Laurent beside him, their hands linked, with only sunlight and fresh air about them. Here and there, they stopped, and everything was a delight: the leisure to kiss, to linger under the orange tree, the bits of bark that clung to Laurent's chiton after he was pressed up against it. The gardens were full of small discoveries, from the shaded colonnades, to the cool waters of the fountain, to a series of balconied garden outlooks, where the sea stretched wide and blue.

They stopped at one of them. Laurent plucked a white flower from the low-hanging branches, and lifted his hand to tuck it into Damen's hair, as if Damen were a youth from the village.

'Are you courting me?' said Damen.

He felt foolish with happiness. He knew courtship was new to Laurent, didn't know why it felt so new to himself.

'I haven't done this before,' said Laurent.

Damen took a flower of his own. His pulse sped up, his fingers felt clumsy as he tucked it behind Laurent's ear. 'You had suitors in Arles.'

'That was side stepping.'

The view was wilder here, unlike in the capital, where on a clear day you could see Isthima. Here there was only the unbroken ocean.

'My mother planted these gardens,' said Damen. His heart was pounding. 'Do you like them? They're ours now.' Saying the word "ours" still felt daring. He could feel it mirrored in Laurent, the shy awkwardness of what was so dearly desired.

'I like them,' said Laurent. 'I think they're beautiful.'

Laurent's fingers found his again, a small intimacy that had him overbrimming.

'I don't think about her often. Only when I come here.'

'You don't take after her.'

'Oh?'

‘Her statue in Ios is three feet tall.’

The corner of Damen’s mouth twitched. He knew the statue, on a plinth in the north hall. ‘There’s a statue of her here. Come and meet her.’

It was part of the nonsense they were sharing, a whim, to show Laurent. He tugged; they came to an arched open garden.

‘I take it back, you’re just like her.’ Laurent said it looking up. The statue here was bigger.

Damen was smiling; there was delight in seeing Laurent explore himself, a young man who was sweet, teasing, at times unexpectedly earnest. Having made the decision to let Damen in, Laurent had not gone back on it. When the walls went up, it was with Damen inside them.

But when Laurent came to stand in front of the statue of his mother, the mood changed to something more serious, as if prince and statue were communicating with each other.

Unlike in Patras, it wasn’t the custom in Akielos to paint statues. His mother Egeria looked out towards the sea with a marble face and marble eyes, even though she’d had dark hair and eyes like himself and his father. He saw her through Laurent’s eyes, the old-fashioned dress of marble, the curled hair, her high, classical brow and outraised arm.

Damen realised that he didn’t know how tall his mother really was. He had never asked about it, and had never been told.

Laurent made a formal Akielon gesture that matched his chiton and the gardens, but was different to his habitual Veretian manners. Damen felt his skin prickle with strangeness. It was part of Akielon courtship to seek permission from a parent. If things had been different, Damen might have knelt in the great hall in front of King Aleron, asking for the right to court his youngest son.

It was not that way between them. All their family was dead.

‘I’ll take care of your son,’ said Laurent. ‘I’ll protect his kingdom as if it were my own. I’ll give my life for his people.’

Above them, the sun was high and bright, and encouraged a retreat to the shade line. The boughs of the trees around them were heavy with scent. Laurent said, ‘I won’t let him down. I promise you.’

‘Laurent,’ said Damen, as Laurent turned back from the statue to face him.

‘In Arles, there’s a place... The statue doesn’t look that much like him, but my brother is buried there. I used to go there sometimes and talk to him... talk to myself. If I was having trouble in practice. Or to tell him how I hard I was trying to win the respect of the Prince’s Guard. The sort of things he used to like hearing about. If you like, I’ll take you there when we visit.’

‘I’d like that.’ Because the loss of family was so close between them, Damen pushed the words out. ‘You’ve never asked about it.’

After a long moment: ‘You said it was quick.’

He had said that. Laurent had said, *Like gutting a pig?* Laurent sounded different now, as if he had held that one small piece of information close, all this time.

‘It was.’

Laurent moved away, to a place where the shifting shade once again opened out into a view of the sea. After a moment, Damen came to stand beside him. He could see the patterns of light and shadow on Laurent’s face.

‘He didn’t let anyone else intervene. He thought it was fair, between princes. Single combat.’

‘Yes.’

‘He was tired. He’d been fighting for hours. But the man he fought wasn’t. It was Kastor on the front at Marlas. Damianos had stayed back to protect the King. He rode from behind the lines.’

‘Yes.’

‘He was honourable, and when he drew first blood, he gave Damianos time to recover. He wouldn’t let anyone else intervene. He thought—’

‘—he thought it was right. He stepped back and let me pick up my sword. I didn’t know what to do. It had been two years since anyone had disarmed me. When we fought again, he drove me back. I don’t know why he cut too far to the left. It was the only mistake he made. I took the chance it wasn’t a feint, and when he couldn’t draw himself back into position, I killed him. I killed him.’

‘Why?’ said Laurent, quietly. It came out like a throb, a child’s question, that couldn’t be answered.

The sun above them felt too exposing. Damen found that couldn’t look away from Laurent. He thought of his father and mother, of Auguste, of

Kastor. It was Laurent who spoke.

‘The night you told me about this place, it was the first time that I ever thought about the future. I thought about coming here. I thought about... being with you. It meant something to me that you suggested it. What we had on the ride to Ios, it was already more than I... At the trial, I thought it was enough. I thought I was ready. And then you came.’

‘In case you wanted me,’ said Damen.

‘I thought, I have lost everything and gained you, and I would almost make the trade, if I didn’t know it had happened that way for you, too.’

It was so close to his own thoughts—that everything he knew was gone, but that this was here, in its place, this one bright thing.

He had not understood that it was like this for Laurent until it was like this for him too. He wanted to talk about his own brother in some small way, because as children they had come here together—or rather, Damen had been a child and Kastor had been a young man. Kastor had carried him on his shoulders, had swum with him, wrestled with him. Kastor had brought him a conch shell, once, from the sea.

He said, ‘He would have killed us both.’

‘He was your brother,’ said Laurent.

He felt the words touch that place inside him. He had not spoken about Kastor, except on the night after he had recovered enough to leave his bed and attend the viewing. He had sat with his head in his hands for a long while, his mind a tangle of conflicting thoughts. Laurent had said, quietly, *Put him in the family crypt. Honour him as I know you want to.*

Laurent had known, when he hadn’t known himself. Damen felt the same bewildered acknowledgement now, even as he wondered what other parts of himself Laurent might touch and open, what other closed doors waited. His mother, his brother.

Laurent said, ‘Let me attend you.’

Bright and open, the baths of Lentos were in sunny atriums, and the water was of different temperatures, warm in some, cool in others. Each bath was a sunken rectangle, with steps carved into the marble leading down into the water. A few of the more private baths were under shaded colonnades, others were open to the sky, and parts of the bowered gardens.

It was a pretty summer spot, different to the maze-like descent into marble of the slave baths in Ios, or the over-steamed tile of the royal baths in Vere. Attendants had already opened and readied the baths in case royal whim desired to use them, elegant pitchers, soft cloths and towels, soaps and oils, and the baths filled with exquisitely clear water.

He was glad that these baths were not underground.

He remembered the sole occasion that he had been called to attend Laurent in the baths in Vere, Laurent's cool voice baiting him as his hands moved over Laurent's skin. Laurent had hated him then. Laurent had been inhabiting a private reality in which he had been allowing his brother's killer to put hands on his naked body.

Knowing that did nothing to lessen his own memories of that time, the claustrophobic overripe palace, the debaucheries, and his own fixed hatred of the Prince, his captor. Damen remembered the baths, and what had happened after, and he understood that there was one more closed door that he didn't want to open.

'You served me,' said Laurent. 'Let me serve you.'

In Akielos as in Vere it was customary to be washed by bath attendants before entering the soaking bath. He thought—surely they were not going to do that together? If they were, it would be in the traditional fashion: as King and Prince they would be undressed and washed by dedicated bath attendants, then descend to soak and talk. That was common enough among nobles in Akielos, where nudity was not taboo and bathing could be a social pastime.

There were no attendants waiting for them. They were alone.

Laurent stood in sandals and simple cotton, a white-petalled flower in his hair. If you ignored his manner, he looked like a slave of the old style, the face too beautiful to be anything but handpicked, the white chiton like a garment chosen for him by a follower of the classical ways, who preferred their household to embody simplicity and natural beauty.

If you did not ignore it, he looked like what he was: Veretian aristocracy, royalty in his every movement, in the tilt of his chin, in the sweep of his gaze. He might have been extending a signet ring to be kissed, or tapping his boot with a riding crop. His blue eyes gave little away, his full lips that Damen had recently kissed were most often seen in a hard line, or curled

in cruelty. He had strolled into the baths as though they belonged to him. They did.

‘How does a bath slave usually attend you?’ said Laurent.

‘They undress,’ said Damen.

Laurent lifted his hand to his shoulder and pulled out the pin. The white cotton fell to his waist. Then Laurent turned slightly to the side, and undid the single tie there.

It was a shock, to have him stand naked with the chiton pooled at his feet. He still wore the knee-high sandals. He had not taken the flower from his hair.

‘And then?’

‘And then they test the heat of the water.’

Laurent took up a pitcher and let the stream of water fill it, then lifted it and deliberately poured it over himself, so that water splashed down over him, and over his still-sandalled feet.

‘Laurent—’ said Damen.

‘And then?’ said Laurent.

He was wet, from his chest to his toes, though the slight steam from the closest of the pools was a sheen that seemed to wet his lashes and the petals of the flower behind his ear. The heat from the baths infused the air.

‘They undress me.’

Laurent came forward. ‘Like this?’

They stood under one of the colonnades, in light shade, close to the open, sunny place where steps led down to the largest of the outdoor baths.

Damen nodded once. Laurent was very close. His fingers at Damen’s shoulder were unpinning the golden lion, unfastening the catch and sliding the pin out through the fabric. He was bare, but for the sandals. Damen was fully clothed. More often between them, it had been the reverse.

He remembered—the steam of those other baths, the moment he had caught Laurent’s wrist in his hand. This close, he could see the wet tops of Laurent’s shoulders. Above that, the tips of Laurent’s hair were wet too, from steam or from the splash from the pitcher.

He felt the release of weight as Laurent unwound the heavy fabric that had lain underneath his armour.

‘They’ve faded.’ Damen heard himself say it.

‘Have they?’

‘Your brother and my brother.’

Laurent said, ‘And me.’

He met Damen’s eyes. These were not the hot, oversteamed indoor baths in Ios, or the close, overpatterned baths of Vere, but the air felt heavy.

He remembered, and he saw that Laurent did too, the past thick between them.

‘I knelt for you,’ said Damen.

Kiss it. The remembered words when Laurent had forced Damen to his knees, and extended the toe of his boot. *Kneel then. Kiss my boot.* He thought, Laurent would never do that. Laurent had too much pride.

Deliberately, Laurent went to his knees.

All the breath left Damen. Laurent’s internal struggle was plain. The rise and fall of Laurent’s chest was shallow. His lips were parted, but he didn’t speak. His body was tense. He did not like to be on his knees.

Laurent had knelt for Damen once before, on the wooden floor of the inn at Mellos. Laurent had believed it was their last night together. It had been partly an offering; partly Laurent’s desire to prove something to himself.

The only other time Damen had seen Laurent kneel, it was for the Regent.

Words would have been easier. This opened a channel to the past between them, one that made Damen just as vulnerable. He had not faced this part of their history. He had barely acknowledged what Laurent had done to him, even as it had happened.

Damen extended his foot.

His heart was pounding. Laurent unwound the straps of Damen’s sandal and drew it off—first one, then the other. Beside him was the pitcher, oils, and a sponge that divers would have plucked from the sea.

Slowly, he began to wash Damen’s foot. It was the action of a body slave, something one prince would never do for another.

Damen could see the faint flush that heat and steam gave to Laurent’s cheeks. He could see the camber of his lashes. He could see each delicate petal of the white flower in his hair.

The water was hot. It streamed from the sponge as Laurent dipped it, then lifted it, and ran it down Damen’s legs, leaving them clean and wet. Heel, sole and ankle were lathered. Then back up his calf, his shin. Laurent

knelt up to soap behind Damen's knee, then the long muscles of his left thigh. He rubbed each surface to a lather, then rinsed it.

Another tilt of the pitcher: water splashed the marble, and splashed Laurent's thighs where he knelt, legs slightly apart. It wasn't finished. Laurent was rising.

Washing Damen's hands first, Laurent used only fingers, no sponge, massaging thumbs across Damen's knuckles, his thumb and fingers working a lather between Damen's. Damen's arms were lifted, soaped, the curve of his bicep, the crook of his elbow.

Laurent didn't look up into Damen's eyes as he soaped Damen's upper thighs and then between his legs, where his cock hung part-roused, feeling thick and heavy as it was pushed around by the sponge. Then Laurent raised the pitcher and poured water all the way down Damen's body.

A stream of heat. He knew what was coming. His whole body felt like it was changing, even before Laurent moved to his back.

Silence; he was too aware of his own breathing. Laurent was behind him. He couldn't see him but knew he was there. He felt exposed, vulnerable as if blindfolded: to be seen while unseeing. It was an effort, not to turn his head. Neither of them spoke.

He wondered what Laurent was seeing. He wondered what Laurent was remembering, if it had happened in Laurent's mind the same way it had happened in his own. Water hit the marble as Laurent squeezed the sponge. He experienced it physically, the sound loud, a crack.

He shuddered when it touched him, because it was so warm, and gentle, against the scars. He felt the heat of the water and the soft touch of the sponge, softer than he had imagined, so that a second shudder, a tremor, passed through him.

Nothing could wash away the past, but this took them both there, touching a painful truth, acknowledging it.

It was gentler between his shoulders than it had been against his chest. Flesh and self were linked. The cleansing was slow, attentive, drizzling water, then soaping his skin. It was healing something he hadn't known needed to be healed. Like breathing, it was necessary, even as the tenderness of it was too much, gentleness where he had never expected Laurent to be gentle.

He had been braced against the lash for so long. Where he had been flayed, he was now open.

‘Laurent, I—’

‘Bow your head.’

He closed his eyes. Water streamed over him. His hair and face were wet. This was usually done seated, on the long bench by the sluice with the slave standing behind—he didn’t say it, as Laurent reached up to push soap into his hair, standing in front. Long fingers kneaded a lather from his temples to the back of his head, and the massaging of his scalp felt like comfort.

Laurent was like the edge of a blade, but sometimes he was like this. A fresh scoop of the pitcher: rinsed, the warm water engulfing him, he looked up at Laurent through wet eyelashes, and knew that everything was in his eyes.

It was in Laurent’s too. Laurent, who looked as he had never looked, his body wet, where he’d been splashed, the blond tendrils of his hair wet too. He knew now why Laurent had not tried to use words to relieve the past. Words were easier than this.

Laurent said, ‘What happens next?’

‘Isander served you in the baths at Marlas, didn’t he? You know what’s next.’ That wasn’t what Laurent was asking.

‘I soaked in the baths. He knelt on the marble.’

‘I want to make love to you.’

‘You can soak,’ said Laurent, ‘while I wash.’

The water in the soaking bath was hot, made for unknotting muscles, and relaxation. It was unexpectedly hot, considering that the day was hot, and that this bath was open-air, with sunlight glinting across its surface. Damen descended the six steps, and waded, at waist height, to the opposite edge where he turned and sat on the submerged ledge, his shoulders out of the water, the edge of the bath at his back.

He had wanted to consummate this closeness, to bring their bodies together while they were both wide open. But the water felt good too. And Laurent was an education in the pleasure of delay, of suspension and recommencement. Damen watched him.

After a moment, Laurent picked up the pitcher and used the last of the water to wash himself. He didn’t wash demurely like a slave, or

seductively like a pet. He just cleaned himself, each motion useful; then rinsed, water sluicing briefly over his body. How little he looked like a slave, and how much he looked like himself, carrying out his ordinary routine, was its own form of enjoyment, an easy access to Laurent's private self.

Then Laurent came forward. The flower was still in his hair. He was still wearing the sandals. Damen had a brief vision that Laurent was going to descend into the soaking bath wearing them, but Laurent stopped at the shaded edge.

He didn't get in. He folded himself on the side, in a relaxed, elegant posture that Damen had come to learn over the last months habitual, one knee drawn up, his weight resting on one hand. He trailed the fingertips of the other in the water.

'It's hot,' he said.

He didn't clarify whether he meant the water, the sun, or the marble. He was slightly flushed even from the steam. If he came into the pool he'd be cooked. In all other ways, he looked cool, his long white thighs, his elegant recline, his male torso with its pink nipples, his cock, part-visible in that posture.

Damen wanted to push off the side; if this were a forest pool, he thought, he would swim three strong strokes to push himself out of the water alongside Laurent. He'd run a proprietary hand over Laurent's body, over his thighs, his flank and chest. He imagined himself coming up dripping out of the baths to take Laurent there on the marble.

'I thought the idea was to kneel.'

'That does sound pleasing.'

Laurent's voice wound lazily. He made absolutely no effort to get up. The words were at odds with the utter arrogance of his aristocratic pose, draped all over the marble.

Damen wondered if this was the way that pets behaved, or if it was just how Laurent behaved, fingers trailing in the water. He closed his eyes and let himself sink a little deeper into the water.

And because of where they were, and what had just passed between them, he found himself saying it.

'They took me to the baths, after I was captured. It was the first place they took me.'

‘The slave baths,’ said Laurent.

‘Kastor sent a lot of men, enough that I couldn’t beat them. They tied my arms and legs and put me in one of the cells under the palace... Don’t get any ideas.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘I thought there was some mistake. At first. I hoped there was some mistake for a long time after. The nights they held me outside the palace were the hardest. I knew what was happening, and I couldn’t protect my people.’

‘You always believed you’d get back to them.’

‘You didn’t?’

He remembered long evenings together, sharing a tent, with the sounds of a Veretian camp outside. Laurent had never seemed to feel self doubt, just as he had never complained about his circumstances.

‘Believe you’d make it back to Akielos? Yes. I did. You were a force of nature. It was infuriating to fight you. Frightening to have you on my side.’

‘Frightening?’

‘You didn’t know how afraid I was of you?’

‘Of me? Or of yourself?’

‘Of what was happening between us.’

The sunlight was brighter than he expected when he opened his eyes, sparkling across the water. Laurent was still sitting behind the shade line.

‘Sometimes I’m still afraid of it.’ Laurent’s voice was honest. ‘It makes me feel—’

‘I know,’ said Damen. ‘I feel it too.’

‘Come out,’ said Laurent.

He emerged hotter than steam, overheated like one boiled, his olive skin turned ruddy by the water. Laurent filled the pitcher from the secondary sluice, approached, and shifted his grip. Damen threw up his arms instinctively.

‘No, Laurent, that’s cold, it’s—’ Gasping.

Shock of the frozen water. Ice cold on superheated skin, like plunging into a river, a too-sudden revitalisation. Instinct propelled him to grab Laurent in revenge, to drag him forward, their bodies colliding.

Cool body plastering against hot. Laurent was unexpectedly laughing, his skin warm as sunlight. The struggle took them both to the slippery marble.

It was unthinking to get on top, to pin Laurent with a wrestler's move. Damen progressed through three simple positions in his enjoyment of that sport before he realised that Laurent was responding to his wrestling holds with counters.

‘What’s this?’ Pleased.

Laurent, moving: ‘How am I?’

‘Wrestling is like chess,’ said Damen. Laurent moved, he countered. Laurent moved, he countered. Beneath him, he felt Laurent try out all the variations that he knew, a beginner’s set, but well executed. The part of Damen’s mind that liked wrestling above all sports took note, appreciatively, of Laurent’s form. But he was a novice: Damen countered him again easily, wise enough to keep his own hold strong and ready, even when he had Laurent fully pinned.

And then he thought about it. ‘Who’s teaching you?’

‘Nikandros,’ said Laurent.

‘*Nikandros*,’ said Damen.

‘We use a Veretian variation. I don’t take my clothes off.’

Then you’ll never learn effectively. Instead, he found himself frowning, saying, ‘I’m better than Nikandros.’

He wasn’t sure why that returned him Laurent’s laughter, but it did, soft and breathless, saying, ‘I know. You have vanquished me. Let me up.’

Damen stood, held out his hand and hoisted. Laurent snagged up one of the soft towels and draped Damen’s head in it. Engulfed, Damen let his hair be rubbed about, then let Laurent dry the rest of him, the softness of the towel against his skin as unexpectedly tender as any touch Laurent had offered him. It wasn’t sensual, it was coddling, comforting, and so unlooked for that it made him feel strange, lucky, part of the summer scents, the sunlight and wonder of this place.

‘The truth is you’re very sweet, aren’t you,’ said Damen, taking Laurent’s fingers in a tangle of towel. He dumped a towel over Laurent’s head before he could answer, and enjoyed watching Laurent emerge from it with his hair mussed.

Laurent stepped back. To dry himself, he used the same unconcerned motions with which he’d washed himself: he swiped the towel over his

torso, under his arms, between his legs. Before he did any of this, he unhooked the flower from his hair and bent to unwind his sandals. *Leave them on*, Damen wanted to say. He liked the piquant way they drew attention to Laurent's nudity.

Laurent began to look around for a wrap to wear, but Damen took his hand instead. 'We don't need one. Come on.'

'But what about—'

'This is Akielos. We don't need them. Come with me.'

Walking naked along the outside paths was as transgressive to Laurent as it had been for Damen to contemplate intimacy in the gardens. They stepped into open sunlight and Laurent let out a breathless laugh, as if he couldn't believe what he was doing.

Damen tugged him towards the eastern entrance, hands linked. In a charming quirk of Veretian modesty, Laurent seemed to find it even more shocking to walk naked inside the palace than outside, hesitating on the threshold, then following Damen into the halls in amazement.

Here they weren't alone: the servants who had absented themselves from the baths were waiting for any sign they were needed, guards stood on ceremonial duty, and the skeleton household who had opened up the palace for their arrival were all at their stations.

Damen would have walked through without noticing them, but he could feel Laurent's over-awareness of each person they passed. And truthfully, Damen was too aware of Laurent's nakedness, all that skin that was not usually on display, still slightly pinked from the steam.

Entering the royal chambers, the view was of gauzy white, and of marble and sky, the wide, graceful interior opening out onto a balcony. Laurent walked right out onto it, leaning his naked body against the marble balustrade and closing his eyes with the sun full on his face. He let out a breath that was part laughter at what he had done, part disbelief.

Damen came out and fitted himself lazily alongside Laurent, enjoying the sunlight too, and the air from the sea, that winked in an expanse of blue. Laurent's eyes opened.

Laurent said, 'I like it here. I like it here so much.'

Damen felt breathless, as he trailed a touch down Laurent's arm. Laurent turned in towards the touch and they kissed just as he'd imagined, Laurent's arm hooked around his neck. The simple intimacy from the

baths changed to something else, at the feel of Laurent naked against him, skin to skin.

The kiss deepened, Laurent's hand in Damen's damp hair. Half hard since the baths, it didn't take long to rouse fully, but what made the blood beat against the inside of his skin was feeling Laurent rousing against him in turn, as his hands slid slowly over Laurent's body.

His own cock, hard and heavy, was rubbing deliciously between them and the feel of it was as good as the feel of the sunlight on his skin. He wanted to keep going, his body thrusting slowly to please himself, and to please Laurent, who liked it slow and lazy like this.

A push, a few deliberate steps, and they were back in the shade. He felt the brush of gauze hangings, the cool stone of the wall at his back. His hands slid down past the small of Laurent's back, palming the curves there. The features of the room became a series of stations on the way to their destination, the journey neither urgent nor hurried. A period of separation when Laurent poured a cup of water and drank from it, Damen watching with his shoulders against the opposite wall. A long interval where Damen braced a palm against stone and kissed Laurent's sensitive neck. Then he turned Laurent so that he was belly to the wall, and kissed his neck again, from behind.

Intentionally, he did not drive towards a conclusion, but simply let himself explore, the softest kisses to Laurent's neck, sliding his palms over Laurent's chest, slowly over the nipples, which were sensitive and which, later, he would take into his mouth. He liked the feel of Laurent's back against his torso, the dip of Laurent's head. Laurent leaned into the gentlest touch as though starved. He stroked along Laurent's flank, slow, slower. Again.

'Damen, I—'

'Really?' said Damen, rather pleased.

Caught up in the way that Laurent's skin responded to him, he had missed the quickening pulse, the subtle signs of a body's approach to its brink. With another lover, it was the moment to speed up in order to reach their peak. Damen slowed further.

Laurent made a soft sound, and Damen slid his hand up the inside of Laurent's thigh, stopping right at the juncture, thumbing the join between

thigh and torso as he kissed Laurent's neck again, slowly. Laurent groaned, his forehead touched the stone.

His desire to explore Laurent and to enjoy this pleasure was transforming into a desire to mount, to be inside him, and to fuck him this way, slow, their breaths flickering into one another's mouths as they kissed. Laurent was pushing back against him rhythmically now. Damen's cock was sliding continually over the place where he wanted it.

Damen turned Laurent and kissed him, Laurent's back against the wall, the kiss like consummation, hard and deep. Laurent made that slight sound again, right into Damen's mouth.

When they broke apart again it was to look at each other with uneven breaths, and it already felt like he was inside.

'I want you,' said Damen.

He watched the flush rise up over Laurent's skin.

'So, on the balcony, but not in the gardens,' said Laurent.

He was leaned against the wall. Damen had taken a step back. 'We're not quite on the balcony.'

'I can't keep track. You had us walk here naked.'

'This is Akielos. We can do things your way in Vere.' He thought about it. 'It's cold there.'

'And in our new palace,' said Laurent, 'on the border?'

Damen felt warmth pool in his stomach. 'Our new palace.' Softly, into Laurent's ear. He had returned into Laurent's physical space, irresistibly.

'I'm just—'

'Talking,' said Damen.

'Yes.'

'I want do it slowly, the way you like,' said Damen, and Laurent closed his eyes.

'Yes.'

The number of times that they had made love were still finite enough that Damen could remember each one of them: at Ravenel, the unspoken full of painful secrets; in Karthas, losing themselves in each other; aching sweetness by firelight at a roadside inn at Mellos; the desperation of their first lovemaking after Damen's recovery.

None of them had been like this, half sprawled on the bed looking up at Laurent. Laurent's hands smoothed over his chest, up to his neck, then

down over the planes of his torso, his abdomen. In the streaked sunlight, they were kissing. He loved the way that Laurent kissed, as if Damen was the only person that he had ever kissed, or would ever want to.

The openness from the baths lingered. Laurent, whose tangle of overthinking usually only disappeared at the moment of climax, had his defences down in the quiet. Damen could hear his soft exhalations of breath; once or twice, a sound passed his lips that he didn't seem to be aware of. Time unslid the knot of any last ribbon of tension, letting it slip, letting him go further and further into his own pleasure.

Their bodies tangled together, touches blending and blurring. Damen gave himself over to the feeling of Laurent in his arms. It was an age before he put his hand between Laurent's legs, and felt his legs part.

When he finally slid inside, it felt like time had stopped in the small, intimate space between them, after a sweet forever of deep kisses, of opening Laurent up with oiled fingers. He didn't move but stayed where he was, in breathless silence. Everything felt connected, open. Their movements were more like nudges than thrusts, their bodies pushing together without the long, sliding separation of withdrawal.

He could feel Laurent drawing closer and closer to his climax, not, as it was sometimes, like he was pushing past the gnarl of his own barriers, but hotly, inevitably. The thrust were longer now, Damen's body moving to seek out its own gratification.

He heard a choked off sound as Laurent dissolved under him, and Damen was lost to the feel of it, the hot, liquid pleasure of fucking, the closeness, near as a heartbeat. His own body pulsed and flared, an interval of flooding pleasure, and it almost didn't seem to end but to transform into the sweet, heavy feel of his limbs entangled with Laurent's, pleasure still between them, the throbs of it ebbing.

For once, Laurent didn't immediately leap up to clean himself off, but stayed, their bodies collapsed onto one another, the sounds of summer and the ocean coming in from outside.

He reached out and moved a curl of hair from Laurent's face.

'Tomorrow, let's go riding,' said Damen, thinking of the gift he had already waiting in the stables, a proud five-year-old with a curved neck and a waterfall of mane. He'd lead her out and give her to Laurent, and they'd ride out through fields of wildflowers, the air sweet with summer.

When they reached a clearing, Damen would draw their horses together, lean over and kiss him.

Before Laurent could answer, there was an unmistakable knock on the door.

The sound made Damen groan, because he knew what Laurent was going to do. ‘What?’ called Laurent, pushing himself up on an elbow.

The Veretian soldier who entered was no one Damen knew, and showed a remarkable lack of reaction to Laurent with the marks of lovemaking still on him. ‘Your Highness, you asked to be notified when the King’s retinue reached the palace. I’m here to inform you that the King of Akielos has arrived.’

‘Thank you, I can be said to be faintly aware of that.’

Damen started laughing. He lifted his head and said, ‘Bring refreshments, something cool to drink. And if the King’s retinue really has arrived, tell his squires that the King’s armour is in the east garden.’

‘Yes, Exalted.’

The Veretian soldier used the Akielon word *Exalted*, a choice made weeks earlier. In small ways, the cultures were mixing.

‘We can go riding if I can move tomorrow.’ The words, lazily, long minutes later.

‘All right,’ said Damen, smiling as he thought about his squires rooting around in the east garden for his armour. And then of other things. His smile widened.

Laurent said, ‘What?’

‘You were watching the road,’ said Damen.

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