



Peculiar Engagements (Starian Cycle)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Yves Cooper is the most sought-after courtesan in Staria.

With a meddling family urging him to settle down and the only man he'd ever wanted planning to leave the country, Yves is on the hunt for an advantageous, albeit loveless, marriage.

What better way to find a match than to engage Starian high society in a husband contest?

The last thing Charon wants is to watch a gaggle of nobles compete for the chance to marry the man he loves.

His plans to flee Staria—and the charming Yves—fall to the wayside as he's drawn deeper into Yves' plans.

However, unrest is brewing in the streets of Staria, and as Charon's harrowing past catches up with him, he wonders if even Yves would be willing to see him for who he truly is.

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One

Yves woke early the day the invitations went out.

For the capital city of Staria, Duciel was ugly in the morning.

Yves admired it from the window of his second floor room in the House of Onyx, one of the tall, ornate houses that lined the Pleasure District.

Smoke from kitchen fires choked the air, and a gray, washed-out light revealed water stains on the towering noble houses in the distance.

Above it all, the gold roof on the Starian palace gleamed like a cracked egg at the top of the hill.

The street cleaners were working the palace paths, and detritus skittered over the cobbles as people emerged from their houses and hunched their shoulders in the cold wind.

Most of the house was in bed by now. Courtesans worked late, and Yves had seen his last client only three hours before, but he was too restless to sleep. He watched sunlight creep over the city with his elbows on the windowsill, his blond hair tousled by the breeze.

“Hey!”

Yves tucked a curl behind his ear and sighed.

“Hey! Darr!”

Yves’ smile faded. Only a handful of people called him Darr—short for Darling, the name his all-too-sentimental parents had given him.

Yves had left that name behind in the country, but the country clearly had a difficult time letting go of him.

He peered into the side garden below his window, where his brother Peter—short for Patience— was hefting a rock in his left hand.

“If you throw that at the window, I’m shoving your head in a well and leaving you there,” Yves said. “Why are you here?”

“This card says you’re getting married.” Like their mother, the natural dominance in Peter’s voice came out like a charging bull, with no finesse or care.

Most dominants knew how to control their influence, but Yves’ mother was never very good at teaching, and so the ones in Yves’ family tended to run wild.

As a submissive, Yves had felt like he’d been living with a gaggle of honking geese for eighteen years.

A pair of shutters a few rooms down popped open, and Nanette, one of the other courtesans, leaned out of her window.

“Who’s getting what ?” she asked.

“I had those invitations sent last night,” Yves said to Peter. “How did you find one?”

“Find who?” Simone, another courtesan, squeezed into the window next to Nanette.

She was a dominant like Peter, but her voice only held a touch of command.

“Someone’s getting married,” Nanette said.

Peter went pink. Nanette and Simone were nude, and a flashy gold necklace dangled between Simone’s breasts.

Peter seemed determined not to look at them.

“Aunt Josie said Layla’s oldest spoke to Lord Fuller’s son, whose cousin knows a countess from Duciel who gave him this.

” Peter held a card up like a magician about to set a handkerchief on fire.

“Saying you’re getting married this summer. ”

Yves had to admit he was impressed. If the king’s spymaster employed the power of a country village rumor mill, he’d know everyone’s business in a fortnight.

“And you rode all the way here?” Yves asked.

“Wait,” Nanette said, “you’re actually getting married? To whom?”

A pair of shutters slammed above them, and Percy, Yves’ best friend, blurted out, “but I thought the invitations went out this morning!”

“He’s not marrying you ?” Nanette asked, twisting to look up at Percy.

“No,” Yves and Percy said at the same time.

“I’m happily married, thank you,” Percy said.

“Darr ain’t saying,” Peter said, shaking the card in his hand, “because no one’s written on the invitation!”

“Some of us are trying to sleep! ” Oleander, the newest courtesan from Katoikos, slapped open their shutters just so they could glare at the chaos unfolding below. Nearly all the courtesans in the House of Onyx were standing at a window now, looking from Yves to his younger brother.

Yves tried not to look at the closed pair of shutters to his right as he gestured to Peter. “I’ll let you in through the garden.”

“Guests aren’t allowed without permission,” Oleander said.

Percy chucked something at Oleander’s window, prompting a shriek of dismay. “Shut up, Oleander!”

Yves left them to bicker. He hurried down the stairs outside his room and opened the door to the garden, where Peter stood with his back hunched and his face red as a beet.

While Yves took after their mother with her curly hair and big eyes, Peter was the spitting image of their father.

He had a round, splotchy face and yellow hair that hung straight down like a curtain, and he was broad and ungainly in his secondhand traveling clothes.

The family farm wasn’t exactly failing—they were one of the biggest in Staria—but everyone had a chest of hand-me-downs.

“Well?” Yves asked. “Get in.”

“Never been in a whorehouse before,” Peter said. All his fire seemed to have fled as soon as Yves opened the door.

“You have former courtesans working on the farm, Peter.”

“Yeah, milking the goats.” He eyed the wallpaper behind Yves warily, as though a naked courtesan may be hiding behind it to leap out and ravish him.

“Well, we milk things here too. Come on, Peter, no one’s gonna—” He stopped himself before the familiar country accent could creep into his voice. “No one will proposition you. They’ll just ask for gossip.”

“Tony said there was screaming when he visited,” Peter said softly, slinking through the doorway, “in one of the other rooms.”

“Yeah, that was probably Nanette. She likes to show off.” Tony—which was short for Devotion—had visited a few weeks before, and he’d spent the whole time in the same state as Peter.

Peter goggled when Yves opened the door to his bedroom.

The walls glittered with jewelry, paintings, and fine tapestries, all gifts from Yves’ clients.

The open closet was swollen with silk and fine fabric, and Yves’ desk had so much jewelry dripping off stands and hooks that it seemed on the verge of collapse.

Yves flopped onto the bed, but Peter stood in the middle of the floor, clutching the invitation in his hands.

“Were you gonna tell us?” he asked.

Yves patted the bed. “Sit down, Peter.”

“Who is it?” Peter didn’t move. “One of your visitors?”

“Clients,” Yves said. “Maybe.”

Peter swallowed heavily. “This is because of Tony, ain’t it?”

Yves suppressed a groan. Tony had come to Duciel on the back of a milk cart with his best suit on and a cap over his curly blond hair, and he’d done a passable impression of their mother in the House of Onyx sitting room.

The family had collectively decided: Yves had spent enough time frittering his life away in Duciel as a high-end whore, and it was time to come home and make something of himself.

His parents had found a number of dominants willing to accept Yves’ hand in marriage—no one too upstanding, not with his reputation, but he’d have to take what he could get.

He should have expected it. Yves’ parents were painfully old-fashioned, and believed that a submissive was helpless without a dominant to sort out their lives.

There was no room for anything else—no fellow submissives, no chance of going without, and certainly no sleeping around for the fun of it.

His parents had been a love match, so how hard could it be for Yves to follow their example?

Yves didn’t know if he wanted what his parents had.

Their love was almost frightening in its intensity—his father had come home from the navy with a limp that never went away and waking nightmares that came without warning, but Yves' mother had taken it all in stride.

He could still remember watching his mother run across the farm as though they were so bound that she could sense her husband's fits before they struck.

Yves wasn't sure he could ever have that kind of connection with someone.

It seemed unfair to assume anyone else should try.

"Tony was just trying to help you," Peter said. "What do you think a stunt like this'll do?"

Something creaked in the room next door, and Yves grit his teeth. "I simply feel like it's time to find a nice, wealthy husband who can shower me in so many jewels that I can't breathe. Isn't that what everyone wants? Isn't that what you all want for me?"

"Then why do this?" Peter asked, shoving the invitation at Yves.

The card was made of thick stock, with gold paint on the edges and big, looping letters that shrank as the calligrapher realized they only had so much space to write. It read:

You Are Formally Invited to the Wedding

Of Yves, Favored Courtesan of Staria

And His Yet-to-be-Chosen Husband of High Esteem

On the First Day of Summer

White Rose Park, Duciel

(Potential Husbands Must Apply to the House of Onyx for Inquiries)

Yves handed Peter the slightly crumpled card. “I’ve turned it into a game. We like those here.”

“A game,” Peter repeated, incredulously.

“Yes. Anyone who makes inquiries gets a clue to the first test. The first person to pass all of them gets the prize.” Yves gestured at himself.

“They get a whore, you mean.”

“Try not to spit when you say it,” Yves said. “No one else in the Pleasure District has retired without a little fanfare. My retirement party is louder than most. Don’t worry, though. No one could actually pass all the tests.” He smiled bitterly. “It would be impossible.”

“So you’re not even serious about it.” Peter took a jerky step forward and lowered his voice. “How badly are you going to embarrass us before you’re satisfied?”

Yves’ smile didn’t falter, despite the pain lancing through him. Once, Yves had been responsible for raising his younger siblings. Now Peter looked at him like he was a stain on a nice cloth, and he was trying to figure out if it was better to scrub it out or toss it entirely.

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“Go home, Peter.” Yves got up and opened the door. The shuffling of footsteps alerted him to the end of the hall, where almost all the courtesans of the House of Onyx had gathered to watch, including an irritated Oleander.

“Darr.” Peter folded the card in both hands. “I didn’t mean...”

“Yes, you did.” Yves dug in a box next to the door and held out a few coins. “This should get you home.”

Peter slunk past Yves without taking the money. He kept his head down as Yves escorted him to the garden door, and Yves only just stopped himself from slamming it behind his back.

When he turned around, he found that his watchful crowd had followed him.

Nanette looked like she would burst if she didn’t say something.

Simone was whispering in Oleander’s ear.

Percy was grinning smugly—he was the first person Yves had told, because Yves knew Percy would love lording the knowledge over everyone.

Even Johan the apprentice had snuck in behind Nanette, looking like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to be there.

Only one courtesan from the house was absent.

Yves thought of the closed shutters next to his room and the movement he'd heard through the thin wall, and his brother's words rattled in his chest.

Then he pushed it aside, extended his arms to the rest of the house, and beamed.

“Guess who's getting married?”

Three duels had been held for Yves' hand by the time Charon left the House of Onyx for his morning walk.

The duelists in question were sitting on the ground next to a queue of hopeful older men at the door of the House of Onyx.

The suitors' valets gave each other aggrieved looks as they retrieved swords and bound minor injuries, and the other men huddled together to prevent the disgraced duelists from stealing their place in line.

“Here, now,” one said. Lord Eastwell was a regular client of Yves, a dominant with minor holdings in the country. He grabbed Charon's arm. “You're a whore, aren't you? The one who pretends he's an Arkoudai. Can you tell us what Yves' plans are?”

Charon met Lord Eastwell's gaze. He didn't flex his dominance like the nobles at court, who seemed to think that having a submissive king was a novelty at best, and that dominant nobles would prevail.

He knew his stature tended to intimidate people, and with his tattooed arms and the dark eyes of an Arkoudai, he didn't need to exert his dominance.

All he did was wait. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Lord Eastwell released his arm.

“Good morning, Charon!” Lord Fentworth reached out to take Charon’s hands.

He was a client of Yves’, but he always stopped to say hello when he passed Charon’s room.

He gave the impression of an excitable dog with his wide eyes and shaggy gold hair.

“Just like Yves to make it all a game, isn’t it?

I can’t convince you to put in a good word for me, can I? ”

“He’s not going to make us answer riddles, is he?” asked James Bailey. He wasn’t noble, but he owned most of the printing presses in Duciel. “I’m terrible at riddles.”

“What do you need a pet courtesan for?” Lord Fentworth asked. “Your wife might object.”

“She won’t object to extra decoration around the house,” James said with a grin. “Even if he is a brat.”

The men in line around them chuckled and smiled at each other.

Charon kept his expression carefully blank.

Most nobles enjoyed hiring a popular courtesan as a pretty distraction for a few years.

The fact that Yves had called for a husband in his invitations meant little—the men waiting eagerly in line would always consider it a temporary contract.

They’d parade Yves around for a year or two, then discard him as soon as they tired of the novelty.

Charon politely disengaged from the queue, but if he was hoping to escape talk of Yves' marriage hunt, he was mistaken.

The bakery across the street was full of people gossiping about the invitations, which had been sent to almost every house in Duciel.

The woman who owned his favorite bookstore had an invitation on her desk when he entered.

Even the flower sellers in the lower city were whispering about the glamorous courtesan who was searching for a husband.

Charon stopped in one of the public gardens and held back a sigh when he found nobles murmuring to each other on the benches. Perhaps it would be better if he expedited his departure from Staria, after all.

Change didn't always happen slowly for Charon.

The first time had been brutal, like a rockslide tumbling over the mountains to choke the sky in dust. Despite the violence of that first upheaval in his life, it was almost easier to bear than the slow, gradual changes that followed.

He could put distance between the man he was in Staria and the man he'd been before.

First he was Nikos, a boy hiding patiently in a gully as Arkoudai patrols walked past. Then he was Charon, emerging from the mountain range into the foothills of Staria, where smoke rose from fires ringing the marble quarries beyond.

Slow change was far more dangerous. It slipped in when Charon wasn't looking.

It happened in a thousand small ways—an extra stop in his morning routine to buy a box of chocolates he didn't care for, books on subjects he didn't read appearing on his bookshelf, and an extra cup of tea on the bedside table at the end of the evening.

He started leaving his door cracked open when his last client left the House of Onyx.

He had a warm robe too small to fit him hanging in his closet.

Every night, he looked up at the exact same time to watch Yves sweep in, wrap himself in the robe, collapse on the chaise near the lamp, and pull out a book.

Then, with the deceptive ease of night descending over the hill, Charon realized that he had fallen in love with Yves Cooper.

It had truly struck him a few weeks before.

Yves' brother Tony had come to the House of Onyx, and Yves had barged into Charon's room with tension straining every line of his body.

Charon had listened to Yves rant about his parents while he'd made tea for them both.

Yves' favorite cookies were out of the tin before he'd asked for them.

When Yves had finally quieted, sprawling on Charon's chaise like he belonged there, Charon had unthinkingly threaded his fingers through Yves' hair and felt the truth pierce him like a blade through the ribs.

Love had driven him from Arktos. Love, and the irrefutable knowledge that Charon had no right to it.

It brought Nikos rushing back into Charon's mind—Nikos with blood under his

fingernails and the last, shaky gasps of the man he'd loved scraping through him with every step through the desert.

Nikos, the youngest torturer of the old Strategos, a prodigy in his ancient art.

Nikos had only known how to hurt, and he'd clawed the last traces of love out of the hollow of his heart until only Charon remained.

Yves needed someone who could care for him without remembering all the ways he could hurt him.

The old habits lingered under the surface, analyzing every breath and movement, determining what he could use to bring the subject sobbing the truth onto the first attentive shoulder.

Now that Charon knew what it meant when he laid out Yves' slippers and woke early to join him for breakfast in the garden, Nikos was starting to return.

It would be all too easy to hurt Yves—a word, a touch, the right cutting statement at the right time—and Yves deserved better than what little Charon could provide.

So Charon had left Yves with his book and his tea, made his way downstairs, and told Lord Laurent that he intended to retire.

Laurent had been the proprietor of the House of Onyx for over a decade and had seen many courtesans come and go, but he'd accepted Charon's resignation with far too much concern in his eyes.

Charon had always wanted to travel, and he'd been in Staria too long.

His old Arkoudai accent had faded since he'd first come to Duciel, lost after years of

mirroring clients to set them at ease.

He could map Duciel with his eyes closed.

He could draw Yves from memory. Yes, it would be best to leave.

Yves would find someone kind, someone without shadows in his soul, who'd never watched men writhe under the knife and weep at the first comforting hand.

He deserved better than the men lined up outside the House of Onyx, but Charon couldn't do anything about that. Yves was clever. He probably set up the contest as a way to separate the wheat from the chaff, and he knew better than to fall for a few charming words from a wealthy man.

Still, if this was a sign of what was to come, perhaps it would be best for Charon to leave for Gerakia earlier than expected. Yves had been so absorbed in his plans that he hadn't even stopped by Charon's room for tea in almost two weeks. Surely he would forgive a swift farewell.

Charon abandoned the gardens and returned to the House of Onyx, where Laurent was handing folded papers to the last stragglers in line.

"But what does it mean?" a man asked. "It just says to deliver his favorite poem. Do we have to write one?"

Laurent's smile gave nothing away. "Perhaps."

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The house was in a frenzy when Charon entered.

They were setting up a room for the newest courtesan apprentice, which meant moving furniture up and down the narrow stairs.

Lord Laurent's sister, who'd occupied the room before, had long since moved to her own house in Duciel with her husband, and Margritte and Gwydion had left their posts over the past few years.

The House was starting to change as well, and as he navigated the chaos, Charon could feel it gently pushing him out the door.

Charon took one end of a wardrobe from Nanette without asking and guided it into the cluttered room, only to find Yves standing at the far window with a mirror in both hands.

The mirror smashed to the floor.

"Oh," Yves said. "Charon!" His expression shifted from dismay to the same cheerful, bright air he presented for his clients.

Charon supposed that was to be expected.

Yves had lived next door to him for years, and he'd doubtless heard the news of Charon's departure by now.

They were still friends, at least, even if Charon's feelings had tumbled out of his grip.

Perhaps that was why Yves had neglected to tell Charon of his impending marriage.

“Don’t move,” Charon said, and bent to pick up the shards of mirror that had fallen to the rug at Yves’ feet.

Yves was already half crouching, and he cursed as he bashed his head into Charon’s shoulder.

Charon drew back, alarmed by Yves’ clumsiness.

Was he ill? He touched Yves’ forehead with the back of his hand, but pulled away when Yves stiffened.

“I’m fine,” Yves said. “Sorry. The mirror just slipped.” He bolted upright, stepped over the glass, and walked halfway to the door before he hurried back again. This time, Charon was rising as Yves bent down, and Yves cracked his head on Charon’s elbow. Charon held his shoulders to steady him.

“Let me get something for that,” he said, and gently guided Yves to a chair. He picked up the mirror first, since there were only a few shards on the rug, but when he turned around, the chair where Yves had been sitting was empty.

Yves couldn’t seem to stay in one place after that.

Charon caught him moving in the corner of his eye throughout the day, heading down the stairs as Charon approached, sliding out of side doors, and scrambling into his room before the House of Onyx opened for the night.

Charon tried to put Yves out of his mind, but he couldn’t banish Yves’ sunny, meaningless smile from his memory.

Since Charon was slowly reducing his clients in preparation for his retirement, he had nothing to do that evening except listen to Yves chatter through the wall and mark which books he would have to give away.

He was setting aside the history section when Laurent knocked on his door.

It was strange to think of Laurent as one of his oldest friends, but somehow, just as Yves had ingratiated himself into Charon's life, Laurent had also slipped in.

Laurent had been new to his noble title when Charon first met him, and while he'd presented a sly arrogance to the world at large, Charon had recognized the signs of a young man still struggling to keep his head above the water.

Now, Laurent had secured his place in the world, and he'd replaced the restlessness of his youth with a self-assured confidence.

"I have a new client for you," Laurent said. "I know it isn't usually done this way, but I can vouch for him."

"Any particular requests?" Charon asked.

"None. He just wants to talk." The clients who preferred to talk were usually the most exhausting. They didn't speak to anyone about their troubles in the world outside the Pleasure District, so they found some unfortunate courtesan to hold their hand for an hour and nod sympathetically.

Still, it would be some small distraction. Charon agreed to the assignation, and Laurent left the door slightly ajar, a sign that the man was already waiting. Charon followed, heading down the narrow stairs and into the finely decorated entrance.

The man who stood there wasn't a nobleman. He had dark eyes that were a little too

big for his thin face and thick black hair, and his nose had been broken at least once and set wrong. When he saw Charon, he stepped forward and bowed with the downcast gaze of a submissive.

“I’m glad you could see me on such short notice.” He had thick glasses peeking out of his front jacket pocket, but they had a smoky tint that Charon hadn’t seen before. When Charon gestured to the stairs, the man immediately obeyed the unspoken order.

“My name’s Raul,” he said. “Raul Vitrier. Laurent said your name’s Charon.”

“That’s right.” Charon led him into his room.

Raul straightened when he stepped inside, and Charon watched him move to a spot next to the door so Charon could come in.

It was the same protocol they used to have in the House of Silver, where courtesans had to follow strict rules of etiquette as part of their training.

Charon took in the faint line of tension in Raul’s shoulders and the grim set of his mouth, then closed the door after him.

“I don’t need to be touched,” Raul said, before Charon could turn to face him again.

“You don’t need to, or you don’t want to?”

Charon suspected the answer, but it was better for it to be said aloud.

Raul was clearly struggling with his innate desire to please, and he pressed his lips together and shook his head tightly.

It was rare to see a submissive so consumed by their need to yield that it conflicted

with their own limits, but Charon had met a few like him before.

He drew out a cushion, and Raul sank to his knees with a grateful sigh.

“Thank you,” Raul said. “Did Lord de Rue say who I was?”

“Not exactly.” Charon pulled up a chair a few feet from Raul, caught his wary glance, and moved it further back before sitting down.

“It’s in the name. It was my aunt’s last name, but I took it when I took over. You’ve heard of the Vitriers, surely?” He waved his hands in an expressive gesture. “The king requested one of our windows for his coronation.”

A glimmer of recognition flickered in Charon’s mind.

When King Adrien had been crowned, he’d commissioned a rare stained glass window from an artisan in Kallistos.

Yves had taken Charon to see it because, “you like this kind of thing, right?” and even though Charon was only mildly interested in the process of glassmaking, he had to admit that the complex mural of colored glass made for a magnificent picture. “Was that your work?”

“Yes.” Raul blushed deeply. “We hold our processes secret. Only three of us know how to make the greenish and gold tints. My aunt would be horrified that I told someone, even an assistant, but it had to be done. Otherwise, it will all be lost with me when I go. But that’s beside the point.

The point is, I have quite a great deal of money, more than I know what to do with. ”

That likely meant that Raul was about to make an offer. Charon prepared himself for

the begging, cajoling, and the inevitable tantrum to follow.

“Do you know Yves?” Raul asked, and a black cloud fell over Charon’s heart.

He stood. He didn’t need a noble begging him for tips to win Yves’ game, or to put in a good word, or whatever it was this man wanted.

Charon strode for the door, and Raul lurched forward on his knees, his submissive panic so acute that Charon’s dominance instinctively brought him to a halt.

“I’ve no interest in helping anyone win his contest,” Charon said.

“I know! I’m sure you don’t!” Raul hadn’t risen from his knees. “But you have to understand. It’s going to ruin him. Those nobles don’t care what happens to him when they’re done, and they certainly aren’t willing to marry him, not for more than a season.”

Charon raised his brows. “But you will?”

Raul blinked, but it wasn’t the shifting, rapid blinking of a liar. “I know what it’s like. And I...I owe him.”

Charon stayed where he was, his shadow falling over the shaking submissive on the floor. In Arktos, when he was Nikos, his mentor had been a quiet, skinny submissive with a conciliatory air that ran at odds with his skill with the knife.

“It’s against the law of nearly every country in Iperios to use your dominance to intimidate the truth out of a prisoner,” his mentor had said when he’d first brought Charon into his office, only thirteen and already too big for the little chair in front of the desk.

“But there are some places where the laws don’t reach, and we must use the gifts we are given. ”

Charon looked down at Raul. All it would take would be a touch—on his wrists, most likely, since Raul kept covering them with his hands.

It was remarkable how easily a person could reveal the source of their own private horrors.

Raul would blurt out his true reason to pursue Yves, and Charon would deal with the fallout when he complained to Laurent later.

Instead, Charon went to the fireplace and pulled down his kettle. “Do you like tea?”

“What?” Raul shuffled on his knees behind him. “I suppose. Nothing sweet, but I can always—it’s my job?—”

“Not all submissives prefer service,” Charon said.

Yves liked it well enough, even if it wasn’t his specialty.

He dusted Charon’s shelves when he’d had a busy evening and needed to wind down, but he always let Charon handle the tea.

Some rituals meant more than dominance and submission.

Tea was transformative. It took time and required patience, and that patience reminded Charon that he was not just his dominance.

“You say you owe Yves,” Charon said. “Was this from your time in the House of Silver?”

“You knew that?” Raul choked out the words. “But I don’t think you were here then.”

“It’s in the way you kneel.”

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“Oh. Oh, damn. I thought I’d kicked the habit.

” When Charon returned to his seat, Raul had moved back to the cushion.

“I wasn’t the best at it, you know. I had to be apprenticed for almost a year before I started taking clients, and the other submissives...

weren’t kind about my mistakes. I suppose they needed someone to turn on when they were frustrated, and, well...

” He blushed deeper, likely embarrassed by his babbling.

“I’d left by the time Lord de Rue opened the House of Onyx.

There was a nobleman who said he’d buy my debt. ”

Charon nodded. It was a common practice.

Most courtesans took on a debt to the house when they signed on, agreeing that the house lord would put money and gifts aside to bolster their savings when their debt was repaid.

That didn’t always happen, and many lords would manufacture reasons to add to the debt—one even hired men to break her courtesans’ windows during a hard winter.

Some laws were changing, but with the nobility already throwing a fuss over tax laws in the country, it would be some time before King Adrien addressed the Pleasure

District.

In Raul's day, there hadn't been many options for courtesans.

They could hope for impossible popularity and a financial windfall, they could accept a noble's offer to buy their debt and take them as a pet courtesan, or the house lord could sell their contract to the quarries.

Most courtesans dreaded the sound of the quarry cart rattling down the street in the early hours, and would do anything to escape it.

"He said he'd marry me," Raul said. "I didn't love him, but I thought it was the best chance I had, and I didn't want to go home.

But it didn't last. He was betrothed, and his fiancé wasn't pleased to have a courtesan slinking around the house.

They claimed I'd stolen from them, and that meant hard labor. I...I ran."

The kettle whistled, and Charon stood to prepare the tea. "And Yves?"

"He was an apprentice here." Raul rubbed his wrists.

Had he been bound before? Perhaps it was something the noble had done, or the former proprietor of the House of Silver.

She'd been a cruel woman, prone to striking courtesans' palms with her cane.

"He found me hiding in a garden. I'm afraid I blubbered all over him.

He didn't have to, but when I told him that I was planning to run home, he took my

arm and walked me through the city gates.

I was too terrified to pass the guards, but Yves kept me talking, and I almost forgot about them until I was out of Duciel.

I don't know if I would have done it without him. ”

Yves would help a stranger evade the city guard without question.

He pretended to be self-serving, but he fed so many stray cats with his own money that a thriving colony lived in the back alley behind the House of Onyx.

He kept money in his purse for the beggars at the market and regularly paid for other courtesans' orders at the tailor.

He claimed it was to keep them on their toes, but Charon knew better.

“So you'd like to repay him by marrying him?” Charon asked.

“If that's what he wants,” Raul said. “But he needn't be bound to me. I'll give him what he needs to live comfortably, and he can go wherever he likes—be with whomever he wishes—and that would be enough. I can have a contract written up. We honor our contracts in Kallistos.”

“And if he's looking for love?”

Raul stared at Charon, clearly too startled to look down at his knees.

“Is he? With a contest like this?” Charon didn't answer.

“All I need is a chance. I know I'm not particularly charming.

I was a rotten courtesan. I can't say the right words when I'm speaking to another submissive, not after the House of Silver.

They just won't come. It's as though there's this wall, a glass wall I can't break...

But that's not your concern. If I could convince him to see that I mean him no harm, perhaps he won't be hurt by someone else. ”

It must have been a blow to see the invitation, Charon thought.

Raul would have been thrown back to the memory of his own terrible arrangement with a Starian noble, and come to the conclusion that Yves was on the brink of disaster.

Still, if he was genuine, he was probably one of the few suitors who truly cared about Yves' welfare.

If he was genuine.

Charon poured the tea and handed a cup to Raul.

He let his dominance sink into his voice, just as he had a thousand times before—soothing his mentor's victims, comforting wealthy noble clients, sanding down the rough edges of a pleasure house full of ambitious courtesans.

“Why marry him at all? You could convince him to leave the House of Onyx quietly instead.”

“That's where I might be a little selfish,” Raul said.

“I mentioned our contracts in Kallistos. In order to name an heir to the family after I

retire, I have to secure myself as the head of the family. That requires a marriage. Most marry into the other guild families, but I have no interest in politics. I'd like to keep working, ensure that my cousin's daughter has the skills she needs to take over, and find a place in Thalassa when I'm done.

A marriage will give me the power of a guild leader.

I can oversee contracts, which means I can finally annul my cousin's marriage and bring her and her daughter to the main house. It's... it's complicated, you see."

Raul would have broken in seconds in the old Arkoudai interrogation rooms. He was spilling his soul out to Charon, revealing a nervous, gentle creature who hadn't known what he wanted to be in his youth, escaping the bonds of his family only to be wound tight in the trap of the House of Silver.

The way he clutched his cup spoke of a need for comfort; his wry smile when discussing Yves was real, and he was, at heart, not an unkind man.

Charon's old mentor had been certain that everyone was a criminal in private.

If they didn't actively oppose the former Strategos, they thought about it, and it wouldn't take much to push them to admit their seditious leanings.

He would have called Charon a naive idealist for believing otherwise, but Charon had seen too much of the world now.

He'd seen the brutality of life in the quarries, the charity of starving mountain villagers who accepted a fugitive Arkoudai at their table, and the camaraderie of the courtesans in the House of Onyx.

If he'd remained Nikos—if he'd never left those dark rooms where his mentor

worked—he would have seen Raul as nothing more than a coward, and that cowards were malleable.

Instead, he saw an awkward man who understood the danger of being a courtesan beholden to the wealthy, and a piece of Charon thought, bitterly, that Yves would probably see it, too.

“I can’t convince Yves to choose you,” Charon said at last, when he’d refilled the tea several times and Raul had relaxed enough to sit comfortably on the cushion. “You know that.”

“Yes, but I’d like to try,” Raul said.

“You could have hired him, like you hired me.”

“Maybe, but I expect most of the others have done that already. You work with him. Laurent said you were an honorable man. If you think that I’m unsuitable, you don’t have to do anything, but if I’m to court Yves, I’ll need help.”

Charon drew back on the couch, trying to look at Raul as Yves would.

Yves deserved more than a former torturer-turned-courtesan.

Was Raul what he needed? He didn’t offer love, but love could bloom if Yves had the inclination, and Raul understood the pitfalls of a courtesan at the mercy of the nobility. Yves could do worse, surely.

Charon could never give Yves the love he needed, but he could at least give him a better option.

“Don’t write him poetry,” Charon said, ignoring the pain in his chest as he turned to

pull a book down from the shelf. “And his favorite poem is in here.”

“A book?” Raul said, and he smiled. “Oh, it’s the Prince’s Play. It runs in Kallistos every spring. There’s a monologue by the woman who’s been turned into a peony that’s absolutely filthy, but it makes me laugh every time.”

“That’s the one,” Charon said. “It’s playing in the Sun Garden Theater right now.”

He’d taken Yves to see it three years before, and Yves had laughed so hard he wept.

Charon had given him the script a few weeks later, but Yves was always reading it in Charon’s room, so it had quietly moved there over the years.

It felt wrong to see someone else holding it, but Charon quietly forced his unease down.

“Thank you,” Raul said. He got up, hesitated, and reached forward to take Charon’s hand. “You won’t regret it.”

He already was, but Charon simply shook Raul’s hand and let go.

Raul beamed at him and turned to the door, leaving the book behind on the chaise.

Charon picked it up. He thought of Yves at the play, pressed up next to Charon in the cheap seats just beyond the pit, wiping tears from his eyes as he wheezed with laughter.

Then Charon put the book away, closed the door, and smothered the flames in the fireplace until there was nothing left but a heap of dying embers.

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Two

Poetry had been a mistake.

Yves loved poetry. He had a small library of dog-eared collections in Charon's room, and he kept some of his favorites on slips of paper in his dresser drawer.

Some came from love letters, including a truly inspired verse from a client who had gone on on to study language in Gerakia.

Yves appreciated poetry the way Charon liked the wood carvings in the museum on Haddler Street, where ancient Starians had carved images of people emerging from bits of oak and cedar.

Unfortunately, the nobles of Staria didn't share Yves' love for verse, because half of them had thoroughly butchered it.

"Oh, listen to this one." Percy sprawled on Yves' bed, wrapped in a fur jacket that cost more than most nobles' monthly income. " Oh, Yves, the eaves of the trees bend at the knees for the bees in the leaves. What does that mean? The trees are kneeling for bees? Are the bees a metaphor?"

"He's trying to rhyme." Yves collapsed on the rug. "At least he tried. Lord Gretter scratched Lady Helmand's name off her Spring Forgiveness ballad and removed three stanzas."

"I can't believe you like this stuff," Percy said, picking up another poem. He winced.

“You’re the least romantic man I’ve ever met, but then you sigh over things like The King’s Ruin .”

“That one has two murders in it, actually.”

“What, really?” Percy started digging through the letters again.

“And I’m not unromantic. I’m terribly romantic.” Yves lay a hand on his chest. “This heart beats for one thing and one thing alone.”

“Financial security,” Percy said, and grinned when Yves shot him a dirty look. “I’m sorry, should I open up your options to the lower city?”

“If they know how to write in a proper meter, then go ahead.” Yves fished out The King’s Ruin and handed it to Percy, then went back to opening envelopes. “No one’s picked the best yet, though.”

“I doubt they will. Even I can’t, and I know you better than anyone.” Percy paused, the paper flopping over his fingers. “Except Charon, I suppose. I wonder if he’ll make it to the wedding. He might be gone by then.”

Yves sliced his thumb with the letter opener. He hissed in pain and grabbed a handkerchief to press to the cut. “It’s fine,” he said, when Percy sat up. “Charon’s been wanting to travel for ages. I wouldn’t want him to put his plans on hold for this.”

“Yeah,” Percy drawled. “It’s only one the wedding of one of his closest friends.”

“We’re not that close.”

The look Percy gave him could have cracked stone. “Huh. You must be pretty mad

about him leaving. You haven't practiced flirting with him in weeks."

Yves went quiet, watching blood seep through the handkerchief. "He's allowed to leave if he wants to."

"Naturally," Percy said. He picked up another paper. "Whatever you say."

Yves looked at the wall connecting his room with Charon's.

Charon was the one crack in Yves' resolve.

People claimed he was from Katoikos, since they had been the same people once, before Arktos had closed their borders.

Yves hadn't particularly cared at first. All he saw was a tall, attractive dominant—someone to tease when he wasn't taking clients, and maybe tumble if he was lucky.

Except Charon wasn't the kind of dom who threw submissives over his lap to spank the brat out of them.

His dominance wasn't the braying bluntness Yves was used to at home, but a quiet thing, easing frayed nerves and smoothing over arguments before they started.

He was smart, careful, and kind, and after years of late-night visits and borrowed books, Yves couldn't see a future that didn't involve tea on the chaise in Charon's room.

A few days after Tony's visit, Yves had heard the door open through the wall. He'd waited for Charon to descend the steps, and then, when he was certain no one could hear, he had slipped out on his own.

Charon wasn't alone downstairs. Lord Laurent de Rue was sitting on one of the long couches by the door when Yves crept down the stairs.

Laurent was always lovely, a lithe, violet-haired man with a biting dominance and a taste for high fashion.

His evening robe that night was embroidered with golden swans, and he cut a handsome picture of noble repose as Charon sat next to him.

"I would like to resign from my place in the House of Onyx," Charon said.

Yves stiffened against the wall of the stairwell. It was as though all the air withdrew into a void inside himself with one horrendous, rattling suction of breath.

"Pardon?" Laurent sounded as winded as Yves felt.

"I've been here long enough." Charon's voice was devoid of emotion. "I paid off my debt to the house years ago, and I've always wanted to travel. It's time I took that step."

Hiding on the stair, Yves only saw a glimpse of Laurent as he leaned toward Charon. "You know I can't stop you. But I always thought...when I pass the House of Onyx on..."

"I'm sure you will find someone suitable to run it," Charon said.

Yves bit his knuckle to silence himself. He'd known that Charon longed to travel. Half the books in his room were full of histories of other countries in Iperios. He just hadn't thought it would happen so soon.

"And you'll be doing this alone?" Laurent's voice was careful, as though he were

trying to beckon a startled animal. “You and Yves have always been close. Attachments do form, here.”

Yves pressed his free hand over his heart. Why did his own heartbeat feel so loud?

“An attachment with Yves would be impossible,” Charon said, and for once, Yves felt Charon’s dominance strike him with all the bluntness of a hammer-blow.

Impossible. He couldn’t hear the rest of Charon and Laurent’s conversation over the ringing of that word in his mind.

Impossible. He staggered back to his bedroom in a daze.

He stared at his jewels and silks, and he thought of his mother and father holding hands under the dinner table, his mother’s disdainful look when Yves had announced his intention to travel to Duciel, and the first time a client had kissed him with no promise of enduring affection.

He thought of Charon, smiling warmly as Yves ate cookies on his chaise after a long night.

Charon’s voice, low and flat. Impossible .

Impossible bore him through the next few days, while Yves stared at the lavish decorations on his own walls.

Impossible brought him to the calligrapher’s office, then to Laurent, who heard his plan to retire in style with a small, tight expression that Yves couldn’t quite translate.

Impossible brought Yves here, with Percy sifting through poetry that didn’t matter while Yves’ thumb throbbed with pain like a beating heart.

“Here’s an odd one,” Percy said, holding up an envelope. “It’s tickets to the theater. The Prince’s Play ? What’s that about?”

Yves looked up, startled. “What? Let me see.”

He took the tickets from Percy. This couldn’t be right.

How could anyone know? Maybe it was a lucky guess.

The play was wildly clever, and despite the crude humor, Yves adored it.

He’d seen it four times—once with Charon, then with Nanette, then two times on his own.

“It says it’s from Raul Vitrier. I don’t think he’s one of my clients. ”

“No title?” Percy asked.

“None.” Yves flipped the card around. “The stamp is from Kallistos, though. Charon taught me—artisans paint their seals with different colors to show their guild...” He trailed off at Percy’s blank expression. “What? It’s interesting.”

“So he’s from Kallistos,” Percy said. “You’re sure you haven’t seen him before?”

“Not unless he’s using a different name. There’s an address. Do you think I should say yes?”

“That’s your favorite poem, a ticket?”

“The play,” Yves said. “Yes. I wonder how he guessed it.”

“No one else would. You could have set a less challenging task, Yves.”

Yves smiled. “I have high standards.” He got up to fetch a pen and paper. “I will accept. He won the first challenge fair and square, and if he’s a wretch, I can always throw him over and hope someone else wins the next one.”

“That’s the spirit,” Percy said, beaming at him. “You opportunistic little brat.”

Yves winked. “You bet I am.”

He let Percy run off with an armful of amateur poetry and paid for a messenger to deliver a response to Raul Vitrier’s house in the city.

Yves spent the next few days discussing plans for future contests with Laurent.

The more pageantry they employed, the more clients were drawn to the House of Onyx, and some of Laurent’s resulting suggestions were almost too dramatic.

After being consumed by thoughts of mazes, ballroom acquisitions, swans, and an inordinate number of hired musicians, Yves was grateful for a distracting night at the theater.

As he laid out his clothes for the play, Yves wondered what Raul was like.

Why had he chosen the play instead of a traditional poem?

It was written in iambic pentameter, so that could be part of it.

If he’d seen Yves attending the play, that might imply he was following him—not an ideal suitor, to be sure.

How old was he? He would probably expect Yves to sit on his lap during the play.

Most of Yves' clients were convinced that Yves had a notorious daddy kink, but Yves had figured when he'd signed up at the House of Onyx that it would be better to create a persona separate from his private kinks.

Pretending to be a brat at a play he enjoyed was bound to be tedious.

Raul's lodgings were on the street reserved for rented homes of visiting dignitaries, huddled next to the noble district like a flock of colorful birds.

His house was painted pale blue with white shutters, and a servant with dark red hair and a suit in the Kallistoi style greeted him at the door.

The servant openly stared when he took Yves' coat, and Yves felt the gaze on his back as he entered the drawing room.

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“Oh!” Raul was an older man, possibly in his fifties, with dark hair and a charmingly crooked nose, and he was possibly the most submissive man Yves had seen in his life. He smiled at Yves and waved him over, but when Yves moved to place a hand on his arm, Raul took a careful step back.

“Hello,” Raul said. “You look...you look well.”

And you look familiar, Yves thought, but he couldn’t quite place it.

Perhaps Raul was one of Yves’ clients, an early one Yves hadn’t seen in a while.

He bowed as a Kallistoi submissive would, and Raul gave him an alarmed look before bowing back.

“What guild are you in? I noticed the stamp,” he added.

He was an easily startled man, Yves noted.

“I’m...” Raul said. Yves hadn’t known that a man’s face could get quite so pink. “I make... I make glass.”

“In Kallistos?” Yves asked. The poor man looked terrified. “You have an accent, that’s all. Don’t worry, I won’t press if you don’t want me to.”

“Yes, I, um.” Raul looked down at his hands.

“Well, I think glassmaking is fascinating,” Yves said. “There’s a window in the

palace with little bees all over it. You have to see it sometime. Maybe I'll show you."

"Made it," Raul mumbled. Or Yves thought that was what he said. Raul seemed to be transforming into a timid mouse the more Yves spoke.

"Really?" Yves almost grabbed his hands in excitement, but stopped himself in time. "How did you do it?"

"Trade secret," Raul said, and a bashful smile emerged, swift and lovely, before disappearing. "But I c-can tell you a few things in the carriage."

Yves doubted Raul would gather the courage to say more than a sentence or two, but he gamely played along. "You like the Prince's Play and you're an artist?" Yves smiled back. If only Charon were there. He'd love the chance to speak to an artist from Kallistos.

Yves' thoughts ground to a halt. What was he doing? This wasn't about Charon. Charon was leaving Staria soon, and he'd have all the time he wanted to see the glasswork of Kallistos in person.

If Yves wanted to ask Raul about the guilds, it wasn't because Charon had a book on guild politics in his library. It was because he was being thoughtful. He was being a fucking gem. He wasn't going to spend a lovely evening thinking about someone who wasn't going to be there by the end of spring.

If he laughed a little too brightly at the play and had one too many glasses of the fizzy wine they served to the balconies, that was his prerogative.

He was just getting to know one of his suitors—and posing for the others, some of whom were surely watching from the other box seats and balconies.

And if he wanted to sweep in late, never mind that Laurent gave him a dressing-down for causing two clients to reschedule, that was fine—it wasn't as though he needed to take care of his reputation anymore.

He breezed past a scowling Oleander, swung open the door to his room, grabbed his robe out of the closet, and flopped onto the chaise with a book from Charon's shelf...

From Charon's...

Yves looked up. Charon was sitting in his chair by the window, brows raised in a rare expression of true surprise.

He was in just an undershirt and sleep pants—he still dressed like an Arkoudai, without the robes and gowns favored by Starians.

Yves' favorite tattoo was visible over his collarbone.

It was a tattoo of one of the hawks that spread wildfires in the mountains to scare out prey, carrying a flaming branch in its talons.

Yves stared at it for a solid five seconds before he realized why Charon was there.

This wasn't Yves' room.

"Sorry," Yves said, sitting up on Charon's chaise. "I was, you know, uh." I forgot where I was and assumed we were still talking. "I've been away lately."

"You have a wedding to plan for," Charon said, in the still, level voice that meant he was hiding something.

He always spoke like that to his clients, and he hadn't spoken to Yves in that way

since Yves was new to the House of Onyx.

Yves scowled at him, and Charon's mask slipped enough for a hint of alarm to peek through.

"Yes," Yves said, "which we haven't talked about. Just like we haven't talked about you leaving."

"I've been planning to travel for a while," Charon said.

"Why now?"

"Why did you decide to have a marriage contest?" Charon asked. "We've both been at the House of Onyx long enough. It's natural to want something new."

"And it's not because of me?" Yves asked.

Because he was too clingy, too besotted, too involved in every moment of Charon's life.

Because he was starting to blur the lines between love and desire, thinking of Charon's rough hands making tea while Yves fucked clients who called him beloved.

Because Yves was, in the end, too much for even the most patient man in Iperios.

Charon stared at Yves, his expression open and startled for the first time in years.

"No," he said. "It's not you."

Yves stood. "That," he said, "was the worst lie you've ever told me."

That was the worst lie you've ever told me.

Nikos was sixteen when he'd met Aster.

He'd been having trouble eating again. It hadn't been an issue when he was a boy, but ever since he started his apprenticeship under Haris, his mentor in the Strategos' interrogation rooms, he could barely keep anything down.

It wasn't that he was squeamish. The others chosen for the apprenticeship were—two had to be carried out on the first day, and the third had only lasted four weeks before Haris had moved them back to the barracks.

Nikos was the only one who could look into the hollow pit that was once an eye and carefully clean it out while the man trembling beneath him opened bloody marks on his arms, reaching for any small comfort in the dark.

The trouble started when Nikos left for the day.

His old friends from the barracks had stopped eating with him after he'd been chosen for the interrogation rooms at thirteen, but he didn't blame them.

Most Arkoudai thought the interrogation rooms were unlucky.

They held their breath when they passed them, and few interrogators had friends outside the department, if any.

So Nikos ate alone, went back to the house set aside for interrogators, and spent the rest of the evening in the privy.

In the end, the only food he could manage came from a small tea shop on the other side of Axon.

It didn't look like much from the outside, but when Nikos first entered, he smelled honey—real honey, the kind they had in the south—and he sank into a seat by the window with a sigh of relief.

Something about the shop felt right, and when a young man Nikos' age set a cup of tea down on the table, he met Nikos' gaze and winked.

"Haven't seen you around," he said. "Where are you stationed?"

Nikos looked into the man's beautiful, dark eyes, and said, "Marriage certifications."

"Oh, that's fun." The man sat down in the other chair. "I bet you get a lot of stories there. I'm Aster. My parents own this place."

"Nikos." He hadn't met many Arkoudai who grew up with their parents.

It was culturally acceptable to give your children to the army once they were old enough to walk and talk.

Even the Strategos did it, though his boys were put in the same barracks.

Still, couples could apply to keep their children at home.

He wondered how it worked. How did they handle discipline?

Did their children apply for jobs through the barracks, or did they have to depend on their parents having a business to pass down?

"Is it all right if I sit with you for a while?" Aster asked. He blinked at Nikos slowly, and Nikos felt something tickle in his chest, his dominance stirring uncertainly. Was Aster a submissive? "It's so slow here that I might start screaming in the kitchen just

for something to do.”

“Oh. Oh, sure.”

Nikos wasn't sure if it was the meal itself or the fact that he finally had someone to talk through it, but he managed to keep his food down long enough to avoid running for the nearest exit.

Aster told him all about working in the tea shop—the fire dragons that slithered into the oven in the evening, the honey they bought from an apiary in the south, his parents' arguments and the amusing customers.

He was only a few months older than Nikos, but he seemed to have a century of experience, and Nikos hung on his words with the hunger of a starving fox at the door.

“You should order the cookies next time,” Aster said, when Nikos had finished his third cup of tea. “I'll put in extra honey for you.”

Nikos went back to his room that night with a strange, buzzing feeling in his fingers and chest, and he laid on his small bed above his mentor's bedroom and thought of the way Aster's fingers had traced circles over the table.

The next day, he helped Haris bury a man who'd died in the interrogation rooms overnight—that was how Haris put it, they died, they expired, they were found, never who or what killed them.

Everything they did was described in those terms, as though some mysterious ghost had done it all.

While Nikos wasn't allowed to do more than provide a comforting dominance and a

gentle hand after someone's visit with Haris, he started to see his own actions as distant and vague, guided by another's hand.

"What was his name?" Nikos asked, as they tossed the body into the pit they'd made.
"That man down there."

"It's only a body," Haris said. He leaned on his shovel and sighed.

"Bodies don't need names. They don't need mercy."

It is easy to confuse yourself when you do the work we're training you for, but when we are done with you, you will know the difference between a body and a man.

There's a trick to setting yourself aside when you do this work.

Look at me, Nikos. Do you see mercy in my eyes? "

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Nikos stared into the cold, blank gaze of his mentor and shook his head.

Haris nodded. "I see it in yours. That's all right, though. You'll learn one day. We all do."

Nikos looked down at the body in the pit, and he wondered what kind of tea he'd liked when he was alive.

He went back to Aster. He told him a lie about a couple who met over a broken archery post, and Aster actually laughed.

He told him stories from the barracks, and Aster told Nikos about his aunt and her beehives down south, the rituals they held in the apiary, the way honey could still be poisonous to the wrong people.

Nikos held a woman as she wept secrets into his ear and thought of beekeepers walking slowly through the grass in southern Arktos.

"I don't know why they put kids in the barracks like they do," Aster said a week later. "We're a military, but what war are we fighting?"

"It's how it's always been done," Nikos said.

Aster slid his fingers over Nikos' hand under the table. "No one says that's how it has to be."

A body fell into a pit. Nikos threw a body into a pit. Haris killed a man and Nikos

threw his body into an unmarked grave.

Aster kissed him softly at the back door of the tea shop, and Nikos went home and pressed his face into his pillow so no one could hear him cry.

“I don’t think I want to keep working in the marriage office,” Nikos said a few weeks later, leaning against the wall of the tea shop with Aster’s hands in his.

“Then don’t.” Aster’s voice was soft, gentle. “You can stop.”

“I didn’t have a choice. They picked me when I was thirteen.”

“Why?”

Nikos didn’t answer. His friend, Felix, had broken his leg so badly on an ill-timed jump off a wall that a bone had stuck out through the break.

Nikos was the only one who hadn’t blanched at the injury, and one of the interrogators had seen him there, carefully soothing Felix with his dominance, and they’d spoken to the Strategos.

That was all it took to set a new course for his life.

“Tell them you want to stop,” Aster said. “They have to understand.”

Nikos shook his head.

“We’ll be out of a job soon enough,” Haris said the next day. “Akti’s stepping down for his son in a few months, and Evander Akti’s too soft a touch to allow the interrogators to do our work.”

“He’ll close down the interrogation rooms?” Nikos looked up from the table he was scrubbing. Haris grimaced.

“It’s likely. His brother, now he was a proper Arkoudai. A shame he’s dead. He would have known what was right.”

“And that’s us,” Nikos said, slowly.

“Us, the interrogators up north, the spy network that keeps Arktos from civil war... it’s all going to the dogs soon, you’ll see. You’re young, and you can’t tell yet, but we’ll have more traitors than we know what to do with. Evander Akti and his soft heart will pay the price.”

Nikos looked down. He didn’t know Evander.

They hadn’t been in the same year in the barracks, and he’d only seen glimpses of him at official events.

He hadn’t looked particularly soft then, but maybe it was different for men like Haris.

Lately, Nikos was starting to feel like his head wasn’t right.

None of his thoughts in the right place, too many details cast in sharp relief that he’d never noticed before.

The tea shop was closed when Nikos came back to it that evening, and he threw up what he made to eat at home. He went to bed and dreamt of Aster lying in a field, his body surrounded by bees, their humming growing so loud that Nikos woke with a start.

He found Aster in the interrogation rooms the next afternoon.

“This one needs a cleanup,” Haris said, swinging the door open. “He was smuggling poison in from the south. His parents were the ones we found in the west interrogation rooms this morning.”

Nikos looked into Aster’s bruised, battered face and felt a strange coldness rush through him. He hadn’t recognized Aster’s parents. There hadn’t been enough of them to recognize.

“Probably won’t get much out of this one,” Haris said, and left Nikos alone with Aster, closing the heavy iron door after him.

For almost a full minute, Nikos couldn’t bring himself to approach Aster. When he did, his hands were shaking, and he gathered Aster in his arms with none of his usual grace or care.

“I’m sorry,” he said, keeping his voice low. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“I suspected you didn’t work...” Aster swallowed heavily, “in the marriage office. Wrong symbol on your uniform.”

“I’m sorry.” Nikos held Aster in his lap on the floor of the interrogation room. His hands wouldn’t stop shaking. “It isn’t really poison, though. It’s honey. Isn’t it? It was just honey you were bringing in. I can tell them...”

“Wasn’t just honey,” Aster said. His dark hair was matted with blood. What had Haris done to him?

His job , a small voice said in Nikos’ mind. He did his job. And you’re doing yours.

“But you weren’t involved.” Nikos touched Aster’s hand, and Aster hissed in pain. His fingers must have been broken. One, or was it more? Three. Three fingers on one

hand, one on the other. “I can convince them.”

“I was involved, Nikos. It’s wrong, what they do to us.

” Aster looked up at him, and Nikos felt Aster’s submissive need sweeping through him like a tide.

He had to take care of him, but he didn’t know how.

All his knowledge of care and comfort was gone.

He felt young, terrified, like the apprentices who couldn’t make it, or the friends who couldn’t look at Felix’s leg.

“They tell us what our job is and they break us until we fit. Like you. You aren’t a torturer. ”

“It’s called an interrogator.”

“You’re not that, either.” Aster leaned his head on Nikos’ arm.

“You’re Nikos. You’re nice, and funny, and clever.

You don’t want to hurt people. You’re not made for it.

But they’ll try to make you do it anyway, and that’s what’s wrong with it all.

We’re not an army, Nikos, we’re people. We should be allowed to be people. ”

Nikos just held him, unable to speak.

“My parents,” Aster said. “That man said they’re dead.”

Nikos nodded.

“When I go, I don’t want you to be the one to bury me,” Aster said. “Promise me, Nikos. I don’t want you to see it.”

“You won’t die,” Nikos said. “Evander Akti is going to be Strategos, soon. When he’s in charge—if you can hold out that long...” But no one ever held out that long. “I can do something. I’ll ask for a pardon. I’ll make it right, Aster. You’re going to be all right.”

Aster smiled wryly and looked down. “Oh, Nikos. That’s the worst lie you’ve ever told me.”

Nikos looked around the room. Haris was just outside.

If he tried to take Aster out that way, he’d need to kill Haris.

He wasn’t sure he could. He’d spent most of his early life practicing drills against dummies that were supposed to stand in for human beings, but he didn’t think he could pretend that a body was just a sack on a plank of wood.

Perhaps that was why he knew all the details of Haris’ art but was not allowed to hold his instruments.

“I’ll find someone who can pardon you,” Nikos said. He fetched his supplies—water, bandages, rags to clean sweat-streaked skin—and he laid Aster gently on the floor.

“You know I’m guilty,” Aster said, as Nikos started splinting his bent fingers. “I’ll face the firing squad if they don’t kill me here.”

“Maybe I can get you out of Arktos.” Nikos tried to go back into the quiet, calm place where his dominance issued forth, but it felt shallow and strained. “People must have done it before.”

“Not even one,” Aster said. “That’s what they tell us.” He watched Nikos work with a hazy, vague expression. “So this is what they use you for. I’m sorry.”

Nikos looked down at him in alarm. Aster’s family was dead, he was facing execution as a traitor, and he was apologizing to a man working in the interrogation rooms?

The worst part was, Nikos knew why he said it. His dominance had always been used to urge confessions out of broken people. It was a tool— Nikos was a tool, an expert on pain, too broken himself to see it.

“I’ll get you out,” he said. He touched Aster’s temple, the one place that didn’t seem bloody or bruised.

“Get yourself out.” Aster reached up as though to grab his hand. “Go to Katoikos, or Staria. Cross the mountains. See what they look like. You’d like it there, I bet. I bet they’re nicer. I bet you won’t even miss it here.”

I’ll miss you, Nikos wanted to say, but didn’t. Instead, he got Aster as comfortable as possible before slipping out of the door. He told Haris he needed a break for water—interrogators always got as much water as they wanted—and staggered into the bright sunlight to find someone to help.

He didn’t know who to trust. His friends were gone, no longer willing to speak to an interrogator’s apprentice. He barely remembered his parents. His instructors in the barracks had been kind, but they’d also signed his apprenticeship to the interrogators.

Evander Akti. Haris said he had a soft heart.

Maybe it would be soft enough for Aster.

Nikos stumbled through Axon until he found him standing by the dueling tents, as beautiful and stern as his father, surrounded by young men a little older than Nikos.

He turned to meet Nikos' gaze as he approached, narrowing his eyes.

"Soldier." He even spoke like his father. Nikos needed to get him alone, but he didn't know how. He opened his mouth to ask, but then Evander's expression shifted to disgust when he saw Nikos' work uniform. "Interrogator."

"I'm apprenticed," Nikos said.

One of the men with Evander, who Nikos recognized as Acacius Stavros, looked Nikos up and down. "If you have news, you know the proper channels. An interrogator never speaks to the Strategos directly."

"I'm not Strategos yet," Evander said.

"You can't break precedent," Stavros said. "The rules exist for a reason."

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“They don’t have to.” It took a few seconds for Nikos to realize the voice that spoke was his.

“Sir. I...” Evander couldn’t help. He was too close to his father—to these young men, who clearly believed in the laws of Arktos more than Nikos ever could.

He’d have to do it alone. “When you’re Strategos. Consider...”

Evander crossed his arms. “Consider what, interrogator?”

“Whether you need us anymore,” Nikos said. “Sir.”

One of Evander’s friends spoke up. “What’s your name?”

Nikos took a step back. Evander was looking at him oddly, his mouth pressed together, brows lowered. Haris would have said that he was on the verge of breaking—one more push would be enough. But he couldn’t manage it, not with Evander flanked by proper soldiers.

He fled before one of them could order him to stay.

He’d already spent too long on a pointless search.

Haris would be back to work soon, and he was, as the other interrogators put it, not a soft touch.

He had a tendency to hurry along an execution if he was irritated, especially at the

end of the day—no.

He didn't hurry it along. He killed them.

Haris liked killing. He didn't treat it clinically like some of the others did.

He always pushed people too hard, made their hearts burst, their bodies fail, the pain tipping over into just too much.

It was pleasurable for Haris, like putting a submissive on their knees, even if Haris wasn't a dominant.

It had tangled up in his sense of desire and come out as something bloody and terrible, signed off by the Strategos.

And Aster was probably in a room alone with him. For someone his instructors kept saying was so perceptive and bright, Nikos was a fool.

Perhaps he should have done something when he'd opened the door to Haris' interrogation room.

Perhaps, in another world, he'd found Evander sooner.

He'd run faster. He'd cared for Aster's wounds better.

He'd paid better attention. Perhaps another Nikos would have taken the knife that Haris liked to cut corpses open with and would have slit him nose to navel.

But he hadn't. He looked at the body on the slab. He heard Haris calling him to examine the poison the body had taken while Nikos was gone, the inherent judgment that Nikos hadn't found it when ministering to the body when it was alive. Then he

turned and shut the door.

Nikos left Axon without a plan. No food, no water. He simply walked out. It wasn't until pain started to throb through his feet that he realized what he was doing.

Find the mountains, Aster had said.

"Find the mountains." Nikos put as much dominance into his voice as possible, making his own head swim as he trudged through the sand. "Find the springs first. Then the white trees, they always grow near the water."

"You aren't hungry," he told himself as he used his uniform sash to cover his head from the sun. "You aren't tired. You can manage worse."

He kept going. When he faltered, or when his shoes fell apart and he had to string them together with strips of his uniform, he gave himself orders.

He was a dominant, but a body was a body, and even dominants could bend before someone with a stronger pull in their voice.

Nikos had never heard of someone domming themselves before, but he'd never heard of many things.

Not the birds that saw carrying flaming sticks over the mountains, or the way the wind sounded like someone wailing in the brush at the edge of Arktos.

Not the boom of thunder as he snuck past the last patrols and into the hills, the foreign touch of rain on his skin, or the lush greenery that pushed out of the red clay of the hillside.

"Your name is Charon," he told himself, as he approached a small Starian village at

the base of a mountain.

By then, his dominance was nearly overwhelming.

It had shaped him. Nikos belonged to Arktos.

Charon was here—a man who could walk for miles and never tire, who didn't need to weep, who was calm and confident in the strength of his hands and the emptiness of his heart.

He was Charon. He was free. He was going to be all right.

A lifetime later, Charon stared at his door as Yves strode out of it, slammed it shut, waited five seconds, and then slammed it open again. His face was pink with embarrassment, and he held up a finger like an orator on the losing end of a debate.

“When I called you a liar...” Yves' cheeks went pinker still.

“I meant you're...you have a habit of...You're sure I didn't push you into leaving?

I didn't come over too much, or talk too much, or...

Not that I talk too much,” he added, some of his usual charm slipping into his voice before cracking miserably.

“Most people would say they're blessed to have a minute of my conversation.

But if the second minute pushed you over the edge...”

Charon examined Yves' face. He'd learned so much since he left Arktos, but he was still a novice in love.

He rose, and he could sense Yves' submission, almost as strong as his own dominance.

It made Charon want to touch him, care for him—it made nobles fight duels for him, Raul upend his life for him.

But Yves' draw was more than carnal need.

Charon touched Yves' chin with his knuckle, urging him to look up.

Yves' eyes were a brilliant green, bright as the forest that had opened up before Charon when he crossed the mountains into Staria.

Yves' lips parted involuntarily, and his cheeks flushed pink.

"I'm leaving because of me," Charon said. It was as honest as he could be, standing there before the man who'd become such a fixture in his life. "Do you want me to stay?"

Yves lay a hand on Charon's arm, and Charon only just suppressed a shudder of desire. Yves was not the polished, glittering brat of a courtesan that his clients admired, but red-faced and vulnerable under his touch.

"I'd like you to stay." Yves' breath hitched, and Charon realized they'd both moved closer together. Charon's shadow fell over Yves' face. "Just for the wedding. I want you to be there."

Charon went quiet. He couldn't trust himself to speak.

"Because we're still friends, aren't we?"

” Yves looked up at him again, and Charon understood why most doms insisted on their submissives looking at the ground during a scene.

If Yves asked something of him now, Charon didn’t think he’d have the strength to refuse.

“I miss coming here. Reading with you. It won’t be the same when you’re gone. ”

“When you’re married,” Charon said. To someone good, if not a little hapless, like Raul. Or to someone who could amuse him for a time.

“Right.” Yves ran his thumb over a tattoo of a storm cloud on Charon’s bicep, over and over. “But us...we’re all right. Even if things are changing.”

If Charon had any sense, he’d send Yves out of his room now. It was the right thing to do, the unselfish thing. In time, Yves would have plenty to distract him from the loss of an old friendship.

“Yes,” Charon said. “We’re all right.”

Yves took a slow breath and stepped back. “Good. Because I know you’re going to take a diversion to Lukos, and if you die on an icy rock without sending me a letter, I will find you and drag you back myself.”

Charon looked at Yves’ skinny arms and nodded sagely. “Of course.”

Yves squinted at him. “I know that look. I’ll find some Lukoi to help me drag you, trust me.”

Knowing Yves, he probably would. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You’d better.” Yves ran both hands through his curls, seemed to realize what he was doing, and started smoothing them down again. “Just so you know. So, yes.” He cleared his throat. “Still friends.”

Charon nodded again.

Yves cast him one last look before hanging his robe back up on Charon’s closet and walking out the door. Charon touched the robe, feeling the warmth on his fingers, and cursed himself for a fool.

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The next morning, twenty-six cards were delivered to the suitors who'd provided, as Percy put it, "poetry that wasn't thoroughly atrocious," and nobles started tumbling frantically into their carriages.

Messengers ran across the city. Gossip papers shuffled between drawing rooms at a frenetic pace.

One or two wealthy suitors put on their sturdiest boots and went out on their own.

The second test for Yves' hand had begun, and no one wanted to miss what he had in store for the winners.

Lord Seven Lacks went to the blacksmith and ordered a rush job for a sleigh bell. He was the youngest of seven, as everyone in Staria knew, thanks to his mother's naming system, and had gained his wealth through no small amount of cunning.

The blacksmith raised her brows. "One bell? We usually do a strip at least."

"Just one," Seven said, "but it has to be perfect."

The blacksmith braced her hands on her knees. "You could go to a jeweler."

"No, no. You made the bells for Lady Metworth's wedding. It has to be like hers."

"Yeah, but I made those out of scraps." The blacksmith shook her head. "All right. I

guess I can manage it.”

“You must,” Seven said. He drew himself up with an air of tragic grace. “It’s a matter of love.”

The blacksmith looked him up and down. “Well,” she said at last, “it ain’t my business what you lords get up to, I’m sure.”

An hour later, Lord Yeltsey’s maid Pippa found him standing on the back of the couch with a knife in one hand. He was sawing fruitlessly at the bell-pull, and he turned to look at her with an edge of terror in his eyes.

“My lord!” Pippa cried. A number of other servants came stumbling behind her, carrying bowls of hot water, towels, and bandages. “Is that why the bell’s been going off? We thought you had a fall!”

Lord Yeltsey slumped his shoulders. “I’m dreadfully sorry, Pippa. It’s the bell.”

“Yes, my lord,” Pippa said, giving her fellow servants a worried glance. “I can see that.”

“It’s just that I need it,” Lord Yeltsey said, as yet another servant appeared to watch the show unfolding in the parlor, “for a man.”

“Yes, my lord,” Pippa said, in the conciliatory tone she used when her baby sister threw a tantrum over her favorite bowl. “For a man. Why don’t you step down off the couch, my lord, and we’ll get that bell for you?”

Lord Yeltsey looked down, wrapped a hand around the bellpull, and whispered, “I’m not entirely sure I can.”

“Not to worry, my lord,” Pippa said, and rolled up her sleeves. Really, the nobility were woefully helpless on their own. “I’ll get you down in no time.”

Lord Theobold Marteau, who liked to think of himself as fairly practical, knocked on the door to the House of Onyx that afternoon.

“I’d like a bell, please,” he said, when a young man opened the door.

“What?” The man twisted around to look over his shoulder. “Why?”

“It’s the contest,” Theobold said, and held out the card he’d received at breakfast. “It says, Present a bell from the most welcoming parlor in Staria. That’s here. This is the most welcoming parlor, because Yves is in it.”

“Oh!” a familiar voice cried from the depths of the house. “That’s clever! Percy, do you have a bell somewhere?”

A minute later, Theobold was pleased to find Yves himself at the door with a bell, looking impish and lovely in the morning light. “Have I won?” Theobold asked.

Yves looked down demurely, and Theobold felt a thrill of triumph. “You’ll see.”

In the garden of his rented house, Raul Vitrier was having a crisis.

“I couldn’t say a word about the marriage at the play.” He was sitting on a stone bench with his head in his hands. Charon stood a few steps away, arms crossed, trying not to resent the poor, dejected man slumping on the bench. “I meant to. The words simply wouldn’t come.”

“It probably wouldn’t be right to continue to give you an advantage,” Charon said.

“Oh, I know, especially since I can’t even say what I mean. Does he always do that?” He looked up at Charon—not into his eyes, but at a spot behind his shoulder. “He disarms you, and the next thing you know, you’re agreeing with whatever he says to have another minute of his company.”

Charon made a noncommittal noise. It was unsettling how quickly Raul had picked up on Yves’ easy charm. Most people were too besotted by him to notice the work it took to appease his dominant clients.

“I’ve never met anyone who made me feel so...

” Raul gestured helplessly, “warm. Surely you must know. He makes you feel like you’re the only person in the world.

I do wonder if his other suitors will be so accepting when he isn’t at work.

Because it is work. That’s why I stay in the workroom at home.

I don’t have to be anyone other than myself. ”

Charon thought of the Yves who lounged in his room when the night was done, clever and bright, with an acerbic tongue and a wit that his clients rarely saw.

How many dominant clients would have accepted Yves calling them a liar, as he had to Charon the night before?

Perhaps a submissive benefactor was still a viable option.

“He likes cats,” Charon said. Raul’s brows came together in apparent confusion.

“He feeds them in the garden, and he knows where most of the cat sanctuaries are in

the city. He even tried to rescue a possum once. If something has fur and a tail, he probably loves it. That's the only advice I'll give you. "

"But the test mentions a bell from a parlor," Raul said, pulling out a card from his breast pocket. "Surely they don't have parlors for cats? Well, thank you, anyway."

As Charon left Raul's garden, he spotted black hair disappearing behind a carriage with an owl on the crest. He paused, sighed, and walked around it. Oleander, who was crouched behind the carriage as though they wanted to steal the crest off the door, jumped up guiltily.

"What were you doing there?" Oleander asked. "At that noble's house?"

"Not a noble," Charon said, and started walking off. Oleander followed, as he suspected they would.

"If you're moonlighting, you know that's against the rules," Oleander said. "Is that what you were doing? Getting extra clients on the side?"

Charon gave Oleander a long look. He wasn't sure what to think of them.

Oleander was a Katoikos through and through—they believed that submissives were best in positions of power, as they were suited to serving the populace.

Katoikos typically expected dominants to do domestic and manual work to support their submissives.

Oleander barely tolerated Laurent because he was married to Sabre, a submissive who was powerful enough that his dominant husband could play at having a position as a house lord.

They were baffled at the Starian noble custom of favoring dominants as heirs, and still had to be goaded into doing chores.

They seemed to have a particular grudge against Yves, which made their pointed questions about Charon odd.

“You can tell me if Yves has you running errands for him, you know,” Oleander said. “I’m also from Katoikos. I know it’s easy to be swayed by a submissive who acts like he can’t walk without a dominant’s hand on his arm. I can help set him right.”

“I’m not here on Yves’ orders,” Charon said. It was no good trying to convince Oleander that they weren’t both from Katoikos. “I have my own business in town.”

“With him?” Oleander looked over his shoulder at Raul’s house. “What kind of business?”

Charon simply kept walking.

Oleander groaned. “Why is everyone so cryptic here? Yves has his little game, Simone won’t say a word to me about it, and people keep acting like Lord Laurent has some kind of magic aura.”

“He does have magic,” Charon said.

Oleander rolled their eyes. “Most magic is trickery, unless you’re Mislian. And he isn’t Mislian, is he?”

“You’ll figure it out.” Charon left Oleander frowning in confusion in the middle of the street.

“All right, then,” Oleander shouted. “Maybe I’ll see what that friend of yours is up to

myself!”

Charon sincerely doubted Oleander could learn anything from following Raul, but they were welcome to try.

Charon stopped at a bookseller to arrange a donation and made his way back to the House of Onyx.

Laurent was standing out front with a basket of bells, which jingled slightly as Laurent spoke to a messenger.

The messenger nodded and ran off with a packet of notes as Charon approached.

“And here I thought things were settling down,” Laurent said.

He smiled at Charon. He rarely relaxed his guard unless he was around Sabre or his sister, but managing Yves’ marriage contest seemed to be taking a toll.

Charon took the basket and followed him into his office, where Laurent collapsed into his chair.

“I should really read these letters,” Laurent said, gesturing to the cards towering over his desk. “I need to think of something other than last-minute ballroom acquisitions and the other House lords complaining about runaways.”

“Runaways?”

Laurent sighed heavily. “Apparently. There have been three so far. Every now and then, a courtesan thinks they can skip out on the debt they owe their house and find a new life somewhere else. It can work if you don’t have a family who’ll be saddled with the bill in your absence.

Three at once is excessive, but it's the House of Iron's fault for saddling them with extra housing debts in the first place. ”

“There's a rumor that King Adrien intends to elevate one of the House lords,” Charon said. “If one man were to have oversight over the others, the rules over debt prices could change.”

Laurent gave Charon a knowing look. “That man would have to be a masochist to take on the headache.”

“Or he'd have to be married to one.”

Laurent smiled. “This is why I'm going to miss you, Charon. How did you guess that I throw my hat in the ring?”

“Your ambition exceeds your common sense.”

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“You have to admit that it would make the rest of them seethe with jealousy, though.” Laurent’s smile broadened. “Blue-blooded nobles taking orders from a former whore? They’ll be beside themselves. Are you sure you don’t want to stay and see it?”

“I’m leaving for Gerakia on the last day of...” He almost said spring. “After Yves’ wedding.”

“If it happens.” Laurent picked one of the bells out of the basket. “Half his tasks seem designed to be impossible.” He gave Charon a considering look. “I thought you were leaving before that, though.”

“It would be impolite to miss it,” Charon said.

“Yves talked you into it, did he?”

Charon wished Laurent could, just this once, be a little less keen.

He’d been one of the top-earning courtesans in recent history, and that didn’t come without a sharp eye and a fondness for gossip.

While Oleander asked all the wrong questions and came to outlandish conclusions, Laurent only needed one to glean the truth.

“I’m glad you’re staying, in any case.” Laurent fished through the papers on his desk and handed one to Charon.

“You may be retiring a little less ambitiously than Yves, but you’re still in demand.

Lord Marteau invited you to his city home.

Not as a courtesan, mind. Some nobles in Duciel seem to be under the impression that your familiarity with Sabre and myself may mean that a title is in the cards for you. ”

Charon sighed. Sabre would probably find a way to offer him a noble title if Laurent wanted him to, and Laurent’s hints about Charon taking over the House of Onyx one day meant that was a distinct possibility.

“I could ask Sabre,” Laurent said.

“I would refuse if it was offered.”

“It could be nice to have a secure place to return to when you’re done traveling.” Laurent idly flipped through his other correspondence. “Yves might appreciate it. He’ll cause too much trouble without you to temper him.”

Charon didn’t dignify the obvious baiting with a response.

“You know he adores you.”

“He flirts with me,” Charon said, “typically for his clients’ benefit. That isn’t the same.”

“The same way you feel?”

Charon met Laurent’s steely gaze. “I don’t see how my feelings have any bearing on Yves’ flirtations.”

“Charon. There’s flirting, and then there’s what happens to Yves every time you’re in the room.”

Charon stood. “I should see to the door in the training room. It’s been sticking lately.”

“For gods’ sake, Charon,” Laurent said, “be sensible. Would it truly be so terrible if you admitted that you wanted something?”

Charon turned to look at Laurent. He didn’t know what Laurent saw in his eyes, but it seemed to have a sobering effect.

“I’ll have the door fixed before we open for the night,” Charon said. He turned to leave before Laurent could speak, closing the door firmly behind him.

Yves was sunning himself in the garden with Nanette when Oleander appeared at the gate.

They weren’t wearing their typical scowl, which was mildly alarming.

They were also holding a cat, which made Yves sit up and shove Nanette awake.

The cat was a cross-eyed, sickly creature with a thick black coat and the saddest expression Yves had ever seen, and it clung to Oleander like a lamprey.

“Um,” a voice said behind Oleander, and Yves craned around to find Raul standing there, holding a tiny bell in one hand. He wouldn’t look Yves in the eye, and he opened his mouth and shut it again in mortified silence.

“He found the bell at the cat parlor,” Oleander said, standing there like a grumpy translator with a bedraggled cat in their arms.

“You can’t be serious,” Yves said, sitting up. He hadn’t expected any of his suitors to think of the cat sanctuary. His favorite kept belled collars on their cats, which had given Yves the idea, but he’d assumed that most of his suitors wouldn’t care about a cat sanctuary in the lower city.

“I h-heard you liked...cats,” Raul said, but Oleander lurched forward, their eyes panicky and wide.

“The sanctuary said they were going to kill him because he’s sick,” they blurted. “They were going to kill him! Just because he has a problem with his eyes and his paws are burned because the ground was too hot or something, which—which isn’t his fault. They’re monsters. ”

“You didn’t steal him, did you?” Yves asked, looking at Nanette. This was a side of Oleander he’d never seen before.

“I paid for it,” Raul said, in the softest voice Yves had ever heard. “They were rather upset.”

“Rather upset?” Oleander asked. They looked like they were about to burst into tears. “Any sensible person would be more than rather upset !”

“Easy, Olly,” Yves said. Olly’s distress seemed to have an adverse affect on Raul, who was flinching back with every word. As he expected, their frustration at being called Olly was enough to snap them out of it.

Oleander glared at him. “Stop that. And if you tell Laurent that I have a cat, I’ll throw all your clothes in the mud for the rest of your life.” The cat wrapped his paws around Oleander’s neck.

“How did you both end up in a cat parlor in the first place?” Nanette asked. Yves

took the bell from Raul and slipped it in his pocket.

“I wasn’t following him, if that’s what you mean,” Oleander said. “It’s not important. This man says you know cats. Is he—is he going to die, or...”

Yves struggled not to smile. Underneath their haughty airs, Oleander really was a scrap of a thing. “We’ll help, Olly. Don’t panic.”

“Do I look like an Olly?” Oleander said, peevishness winning out once again.

“Right now?” Nanette looked them over. “You’re kind of an Olly.”

“I can’t believe I’m asking you all for help.” Oleander muttered, and readjusted the cat in their arms.

Yves, Raul, Nanette, and Oleander shuffled into the House of Onyx through the garden door, keeping the big cat hidden between them.

They’d almost made it to Yves’ room when Charon came up the stairs the other way, looking like a storm cloud.

He stopped, stared at the motley group frozen in the hallway, and raised his brows when he spotted the cat.

“Olly found him,” Nanette said. Charon’s brows rose higher. “He’s sick.”

“I still have the box from when Rose found the orange kittens,” Charon said. “We can keep him in the spare room upstairs.”

“You’ve done this before?” Oleander clutched the cat. The cat clutched them back.

“More times than you’d expect,” Yves said. “Charon, I’ll get another box and some sand. And chicken, do you think?”

“Make sure it’s soft,” Charon said. Yves nodded and peeled off to find the box, and Raul pattered down the steps after him.

“You really do like cats, then,” Raul said. He kept his gaze on his feet. “Some people are wary of them.”

“They only claw you when they’re scared.” Yves grabbed a box full of apples, tipped the apples onto the kitchen counter, and went out to get the sand they used to clean Nanette and Simone’s chainmail. “Help me fill this?”

Raul obeyed quickly. “Olly kept asking me questions about you. They might be a little insecure. I’ve seen it before.”

“Really?” Yves sifted the sand in the box. “Where?”

“The...” Raul cleared his throat. “The House?—”

Oleander slammed open the door. The cat was still clinging to their neck. “He won’t let go! He cries every time we try. Is he hurt? What if he can’t move his paws?”

Yves got up and carried the box to Oleander. “Have you ever had a cat before?”

Oleander shook their head. “Mother said they carried disease.”

Yves held his hand up for the cat to sniff. He looked a little wet and wheezy, but it probably wasn’t fatal. He was also purring erratically with every breath, and he squinted his crossed eyes up at Oleander, drooling lovingly.

“He likes you,” Yves said. “Congratulations, Olly. You made a friend.”

Yves met Charon in the hallway again. For now, Yves was too distracted by Oleander to remember the mess of emotions he’d felt in Charon’s room the other night, and he slipped all too easily into their old rhythm.

They set up the room while Oleander and Raul looked on, barely needing to speak.

Charon guessed what Yves needed before he could say it, and Yves was already there when Charon needed his help moving the bed and stripping the bedding.

They arranged a spot for the cat to sleep, and when the cat growled as Charon tried to take him from Oleander, Yves cut up chicken on a plate to tempt him out.

“I can try,” Raul said, and reached out for the cat.

He looked like he’d never even touched a cat before, but the cat looked at him, closed his eyes in a slow blink, and let Raul ease him out of Oleander’s arms. Raul’s hands brushed Oleander’s when he set the cat down, but he seemed too concerned with the animal to notice.

“They’re a little hapless, aren’t they?” Yves said, watching Oleander and Raul lean over the cat. He was blessed with a small, private smile from Charon. “Olly, huh? What do you bet they’ll stop thinking I’m their rival after this?”

Charon rubbed his chin. There was a bit of stubble growing in, and Yves had the sudden urge to run his hand up his jaw to feel it. He shoved his hands in his pockets instead. “You might need another cat.”

“Or three. Do you think Lord Laurent knows?” Yves backed out of the room, and Charon walked at his side, a warm presence filling the hallway.

“He might be convinced that it’ll rehabilitate our resident ambassador from Katoikos,” Charon said.

“Except Olly thinks you’re from there, too.

” Charon made a face at that. “What does Arktos really think of Katoikos?” When Charon shot him a sharp look, Yves put on his most appeasing, please-don’t-spank-me-daddy expression.

“Let’s pretend I’ve been in and out of your room long enough to pick up an open secret or two. ”

For a second, he thought he might have crossed a line, but then Charon spoke. “I don’t know what they think of Katoikos. I was young when I left.”

Yves had a hard time imagining Charon as anyone but the man he knew now.

He knew Charon had worked as a guard in the quarries before he’d grown frustrated with the practice of sending courtesans there.

He’d come to Duciel to speak to one of the House lords in person, but Yves had always thought he’d been past his thirties by then.

He looked up at Charon, noting the lack of prominent wrinkles he’d always attributed to phenomenal luck.

Yves suspected that whatever Charon left behind in Arktos wasn’t good, but the thought that he hadn’t yet been a man when he fled through the mountains made his chest ache uncomfortably.

“Well...” Yves blew out a long breath. “I’m glad you made it here.”

Something brushed his curls, and Yves turned in time to see Charon looking down at him. Had he touched him, or had Yves only imagined it? His voice was so low that Yves almost couldn't make out the words. "So am I."

Then why is an attachment impossible? Yves thought. If Staria is worth it, why aren't I?

Footsteps thumped on the stairs, and Laurent appeared in the stairwell with an aggrieved look on his beautiful face.

"You're all paying to keep it here," he said.

"Good," Yves said. "Olly's probably already named it."

"Olly?" Laurent narrowed his eyes. "You mean Oleander? "

"Go see for yourself," Yves said. Laurent opened the door to the spare room, and stared for a solid half a minute.

"Fine," he said at last, and stalked off toward his bedroom. "Why not?"

"I should check on him," Charon said.

"Let him go to Sabre first," Yves said. "Sabre will know what to do." He strode toward the open door, grinning at what he found there.

Raul and Oleander were both kneeling next to the cat, who was on his side with his bandaged paws tucked up and his stub nose running.

Oleander looked at Yves, and their awestruck expression shifted to sudden wariness.

“This doesn’t mean I have to like you,” they said, “even if it was...nice.” It sounded like it pained them to say it.

“But he’s so kind,” Raul said, and Oleander looked so flustered that Yves almost laughed. “I don’t know why you have to be so suspicious, Olly.”

Yves was impressed. Raul had managed to say an entire sentence without blushing. Oleander opened and shut their mouth a few times, then whipped back around to look at Yves. “Are you done staring?”

“Not really,” Yves said.

“Yes, we are.” Charon took Yves’ arm and pulled him away. Yves sighed heavily.

“Most doms would let me get a few more words in,” Yves said, as Charon towed him down the hall.

“Yes, but I’m not one of your noble admirers.”

A month ago, Yves would have lowered his lashes and asked, Do you want to be? Instead, he rolled his eyes. Charon wasn’t immune to a dominant’s dislike for backtalk, and he glanced at Yves sharply.

“Oh, my admirers punish me all the time,” Yves said. “I can’t get away with anything around them.”

Charon stopped in front of Yves’ door, as though alarmed by the enormity of the lie. “I don’t think the threat of punishment can stop you.”

“Well, no. I’m experienced in carrying on regardless. It comes from being the family black sheep. If I can survive the punishment of mucking out the stables for months,

no amount of spankings can do anything. I'm immune."

"No one is immune," Charon said, and Yves felt a ripple of something dark and delicious roll through him.

"Really?" He stepped closer. "And how would you break me?"

Charon went still. It wasn't the stillness of a man considering his words, or even the easy silence he fell into when Yves joined him on his morning errands. It was cold and tense, like the pressure in the air turning before a storm, and Yves took a wary step back.

"I wouldn't," Charon said. Before Yves could open his mouth to speak, Charon turned on his heel and walked away.

Yves stared after him, wondering what he'd done wrong.

Charon had always smiled along with Yves' flirtations before, acting like a large dog playing with the small kitten jumping at their heels.

Now, he went hot and cold, following the moves of a complicated dance that Yves didn't know.

Yves followed him for a few paces, but when he reached the door to the spare room, he stopped.

Oleander was holding the cat and talking to Raul with a smile Yves hadn't seen before, and even though Raul turned to give Yves a look full of yearning, Yves couldn't help but feel distant and strange.

He watched the cat purr and tickle Oleander with his whiskers, and reached up to tug

on his curls, chasing a touch he'd barely felt.

Four

Charon left the House of Onyx, seeking the pale afternoon sunlight.

The dark wallpaper inside the house was too stifling, the walls too narrow.

He thought he could feel Yves' footsteps from the third floor alone.

Charon crossed the street to one of the public eating houses lining the Pleasure District, and he leaned against the bar while a group of courtesans from the House of Silver waited in line ahead of him.

"She just left," one of them said. "No warning. A note on her bed and everything. Debt half-paid. They'll have to send the bill to her family if she doesn't show up soon."

"I know it's hard," another courtesan said, "but you can't just give up."

"Well, we can't all be Yves."

The other courtesans groaned.

"Oh, let's find a husband!" the first courtesan said. "Don't worry, I'll just pick from the wealthiest fucking clients in Duciel!"

"He isn't even that interesting. What's his angle, being a brat? You can find brats anywhere."

“He’s shameless, honey, that’s what it is. Some of us have standards, and he doesn’t. People are drawn to that.”

“Well, I think...” The speaker trailed off as the group slowly realized Charon was standing behind them. Looks of panic shot through them, and Charon held their gazes, refusing to let them look away.

“I think Yves is clever and ambitious.” A tall man with dark brown hair and an expensive blue jacket stopped before them, a hand in one pocket.

He smiled pleasantly at Charon, but his eyes were sharp and discerning.

“They’re both good qualities to have in a husband, I’d say.

You must be Charon. Lord Theobald Marteau, at your service. ”

The courtesans from the House of Silver eyed Lord Marteau hungrily as Charon took his hand. “I received your card.”

“And didn’t reply. Not that I blame you.

You can never be too careful. People are descending on the House of Onyx like a pack of vultures these days.

” Lord Marteau looked around Charon at the kitchen behind him.

“This is hardly suitable for a man of your caliber. I have tea waiting at home, if you’re so inclined. ”

Charon was not inclined to go anywhere with a man who looked like his every movement was a careful pose for an audience’s benefit, but he was curious to know

what Lord Marteau wanted.

He was one of Yves' wealthier suitors, and his family holdings were near one of Staria's harbors bordering Diabolos.

Rumor had it that he'd tried his hand at piracy for a time—a trend among young nobles who lived by the sea—but he'd returned home as soon as it proved less profitable than renting land to farmers.

He still dressed like a would-be pirate, with bold, elaborate designs on his jacket and gold rings glittering on his fingers.

The jewels and frippery might lure Yves in for a time, but if Lord Marteau had no other appeal, he'd have no chance at claiming Yves' hand.

"I accept," Charon said. The courtesans watching him started whispering as soon as Charon stepped away, and Lord Marteau smiled back at them.

"Like hens, aren't they?" He gestured to a large black carriage waiting by the street—another deliberate choice. Most dominant nobles entered carriages first, but by waiting, Lord Marteau was signaling that he viewed Charon as an equal.

"Does the gossip in the pleasure houses cause trouble?" Lord Marteau asked as he entered the carriage. He tapped the door after he closed it, and the driver urged the horses forward. "You'd think it would sow resentment if courtesans are allowed to speak to those from other houses."

Allowed, Charon thought. For all that Marteau tried to seem friendly and easygoing, some noble biases were hard to overcome. "Restricting them would be worse."

"I'm sure. I wondered if that might be why Yves seems so eager to leave. I can't

imagine what it must be like to live in one house with all those people.” He flashed Charon a warm smile. “I was an only child, you see.”

The Marteau home in Duciel was only a block from Sabre de Valois’ estate, and it was as bright and gaudy as its lord.

The curtains were all red, gold, and silver, the garden was a riot of color, and the shutters and doors were all open as servants hung washing out to dry and pruned flowers.

Lord Marteau stepped out of the carriage and waved one of the servants over.

“Hello, Jaz. I’ll have a guest in the Emerald Parlor for tea today, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“No, it’s no trouble.” Jaz looked up and away, the sign of a liar. Tea in a noble house likely involved more than a few minutes with a kettle and a look into the larder. Charon nodded to her as she passed, but she already had her head down.

“I admit I have invited you here for selfish reasons,” Lord Marteau said, waltzing through the open front door as servants scampered around him. “You see, I plan on marrying Yves soon.”

“If Yves agrees,” Charon said.

“Oh, he will.” Lord Marteau opened the door to a truly hideous parlor.

The walls were lined with a sickly green wallpaper, and the couches had been dyed to match.

Lord Marteau arranged himself on a gold and green armchair and adjusted his jacket

as though he were sitting for a portrait.

“It’s your future that interests me. Yves says that you may also be retiring. ”

Charon didn’t bother to sit down. “I’ll be leaving Staria by the end of spring. It’s unlikely that I’ll return.”

“Oh, but that won’t do. Allow me to encourage you to reconsider.

” Lord Marteau paused as Jaz and another maid rushed in to arrange tea, heads bowed.

The second maid trembled as she set a tray next to Lord Marteau, and Lord Marteau leaned down and touched her by the collar.

She went still and tense as a frightened rabbit, and while Charon couldn’t hear what Lord Marteau said to her, he could feel the weight of his dominance.

It was familiar in a way Charon couldn’t place, and it was entirely at odds with the comforting smile on Lord Marteau’s face.

The maid scuttled away, and Lord Marteau turned back to Charon.

“As you may have noticed, a number of Yves’ suitors are a touch excitable.

More than one duel has been declared, and while I may have grown up in pirate country, I can’t wield a sword to save my life.

However, a little bird may have told me that Lord Laurent uses your services as a guard now and then.

I may have an opportunity for you to use those skills. ”

“I’ve already made plans for my departure,” Charon said.

While it was true that Charon had helped remove troublesome clients from the House of Onyx in the past, this sounded more like grunt work, and he wasn’t interested in intimidating Yves’ suitors for the sake of a man who thought he was entitled to Yves’ attention.

“Money is no object,” Lord Marteau said, “if that is your concern. And if you serve me well, I may have more work for you on my family lands. Yves would be happy to see an old friend when he returns with me.”

“I must refuse.”

“I can secure you boarding in my town house while you?—”

Charon turned to leave. A maid in the doorway gasped softly as the chair creaked behind him, and Charon heard the slam of a hand on leather.

“You will not refuse , ” Lord Marteau started to say, and Charon could feel his dominance pushing against his own, like a current from an inlet trying to move an ocean. “It is unwise to reject such a generous offer.”

“It is unwise to try to use your dominance on someone who lives next to the man you want to marry,” Charon said, and he strode out the door.

He heard Lord Marteau try to hurry after him, but he kept his gaze fixed.

He passed the bright, cheery garden and walked back to the House, barely registering the sounds of Duciel moving around him as people prepared for nightfall.

He didn't even pay notice to Oleander, who was outside tearfully begging Laurent to let them spare an extra room for the cat.

He went straight to the work shed behind the house, pulling out the leather strips he'd reserved to make a travel bag.

He put all his energy into shaping the leather, trying not to let his irritation boil over as he thought of the flippant way Lord Marteau had assumed he would win Yves.

Plenty of nobles saw courtesans as objects they could buy and discard, and while Charon had thought he'd come to terms with it by now, he could feel the anger simmering under his skin as he worked.

Sabre de Valois was the one to find him that night. Laurent's husband emerged in the dark garden while Charon stitched straps of his bag together. Sabre had a sturdier build than Laurent, though he was still slight compared to Charon, his long red-brown hair falling unbound over his shoulders.

"I saw you from the window," he said, and pulled up a chair. "You looked like you might need company."

Charon didn't answer.

"Laurent's been checking for gray hairs lately, thanks to Yves.

The next test is the hedge maze, but the one Laurent is worried about is a ball.

A masquerade. You'd be surprised how difficult it is to arrange a ball with most of the nobility back from their country estates.

I offered to let Laurent take it out on me, but he said it might hurt . "

“He must be tense,” Charon said. Sabre was a notorious masochist, and it was unclear if he had a limit for pain. That was dangerous for a dom, particularly a sadist. If a submissive couldn’t be trusted to say no when the pain turned to the point of harm, it was the dominant’s job to refuse them.

“He thinks it won’t really end in a wedding,” Sabre said, “just an expensive retirement party. Yves has weeded out most of his suitors by now, and I doubt they’ll pass the test at the ball. It’s odd, though. I always thought Yves hated that kind of thing.”

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“He loves dancing,” Charon said. Yves was always dragging Percy and Nanette to the public dance halls in the lower city.

It was an old habit from his early life in the country, where entire villages crowded into barns and fields to dance.

He knew more dances than the nobility, who had professional tutors to help them memorize the steps.

While Charon had only learned a few of the percussive, rhythmic Arkoudai dances, his memories of them were only half-formed, and he didn’t have Yves’ skill.

“Oh, sorry, it’s not that.” Sabre stretched like a cat, revealing the violet collar he wore under his shirt.

“I was thinking about the other part of the test. He’ll be wearing a mask.

He won’t be able to see a thing. I can’t imagine that will be very helpful for finishing a dance, let alone choosing a husband. I wonder if it might be too much.”

Charon thought of Yves hooded and helpless on a dance floor, hands extended, and a shameful part of him thrilled at the thought of pulling him across the ballroom and into a calm, dark place so he could remove his mask in private. So he could?—

Charon stopped himself. It seemed there really was no escaping Yves.

“He’ll have people to watch him,” Charon said. Laurent wouldn’t allow it otherwise.

Sabre nodded. “Will they be the right people, though?”

Charon looked at him, and Sabre cast his gaze downward, clearly affected by the dominance bleeding off Charon. “Laurent sent you here.”

“I saw you from the window,” Sabre said, too carefully.

“Tell Laurent he has work to do.” Charon set the leather aside, “and keep an eye on Lord Marteau.”

Sabre looked up. “What? Why?”

“He...” Tried to buy Charon? Had an ego? Lost his temper when Charon blatantly insulted him? Those weren’t good enough reasons to have him banned from the contest, and Charon knew it. “He isn’t right.”

“Maybe none of them are,” Sabre said.

“Then he wouldn’t be doing this.” Charon didn’t realize that his dominance had slipped into his voice until he saw Sabre’s glassy-eyed stare. As a masochist, Sabre responded to Charon’s dominance almost too easily. He would have been a difficult case for the interrogators of Arktos.

“Sorry.” Sabre looked down at his feet.

“Go to Laurent,” Charon said. He gathered his bag and went inside. He tried to block out the sound of courtesans with their clients as he ascended the stairs, but he opened his door in time to hear Yves crying out in apparent pleasure.

He shut the door a little too loudly, and Yves’ voice faltered.

Charon didn't light the lamp in his room.

He went to the wall between his room and Yves', pressing his forehead to the wood.

He could hear movement, rustling, a faint laugh.

Yves groaned faintly, and Charon, hating himself for it, reached down to palm his cock.

He thought of Yves sprawled beneath him, sweating and blissful, his makeup streaked so Charon could see the freckles on his cheeks and nose.

Yves let out a sharp noise through the wall, and Charon stroked himself as he imagined Yves gasping as he took him, Yves reaching for his shoulders, lips parted.

"Oh no." Yves' voice floated through the wall, clear enough that he must have been pressed into it face-first. "Are you going to punish me? But I've been so good!"

Charon suppressed a laugh. It was a blatant lie. Yves took a wicked glee in winding up his clients until they slung him over their knees, but that was the point. Yves was probably grinning into the wall when his client wasn't looking.

A slight thump reverberated on the wall. Had Yves heard Charon laugh? Charon paused, unsure, and then he quietly knocked.

Yves knocked back. A muffled voice spoke, and Yves answered with a wicked humor. "No, I wasn't tapping out, I was just bored. Weren't you going to paddle me? Oh, that was you trying? Oh, no, daddy, I'm so sorry!"

There was an audible smack, and Yves laughed. Charon wasn't sure that Yves liked being spanked, but he did seem to enjoy the power he held over his dominant clients,

who would fall over themselves to possess a piece of him.

Yet, Charon had seen him go weak every time he met a person over six feet tall.

Yves only showed his true desires when he was with someone strong enough to overpower him.

His eyes went hot and dark, a black pit surrounded by a ring of green, and he blushed past his neck and over his freckled chest. Charon imagined holding him down, his grip protective, secure.

The slightest touch of fear would flicker in Yves' face, preceding the flush of desire and a shuddering gasp as he'd give way to it.

"I'll be so good for you," Yves said, and there was a muffled sound to his voice now, as though he had his lips pressed to the wall.

The teasing lilt to his speech was gone.

Charon worked himself faster, head bowed, his free hand braced against the wall.

When he came, he bit his lower lip to silence himself, and he tasted blood on his tongue as he softly struggled to breathe.

Yves' voice was so loud, he might have been a ghost standing in Charon's bedroom. "So why don't you want to keep me?"

Charon looked up, alarmed. Yves didn't usually speak that way to a client. Who was he with? Not Raul, certainly. One of the lords who'd salivated at the door to the House of Onyx that first day? One of the men dropping off bells in a basket?

“What’s that?” Yves’ client had the accent of a local noble.

There was a slight shuffling sound. “Oh. Just thinking about sending you an invitation to the next contest, that’s all.”

Charon pushed away from the wall. This was ridiculous.

Yves had his priorities, and Charon needed to focus on his own, instead of acting like a besotted fool over something that could never happen.

For someone who prided himself on his meticulous manner, Charon still hadn’t mapped his journey through Gerakia, and he didn’t have long before his departure from Duciel.

He briskly cleaned up, opened his maps, and spread them out over the floor.

He forced himself to chart a path, smudged out the markings, and tried again.

He rewrote his journey a dozen times in his dimly lit room, from Staria to Gerakia, from Staria to Thalassa, to Katoikos, to Kallistos, to Lukos, but none of them felt right.

He removed the journey markers, marching them back across Iperios to the capital of Staria, up the winding streets, and to the door of the House of Onyx yet again.

Yves woke at a truly deplorable hour to Oleander standing in his doorway with the cat in a sling around their chest. The cat—now named Melite, after a Katoikos imperator—looked thoroughly pleased with himself, and Yves suspected that Oleander was one of those cat owners who never let their cats’ paws touch the ground.

They certainly weren't letting him now, with the cat bundled up like an enormous furry baby and purring like a barrel of gravel tumbling down a hillside.

"He looks fine," Yves said, and rolled over.

"It's not the cat." Oleander held out a letter. "A messenger came to drop this off. He said his name was...Sunny?"

Yves sat up. "Sunny?" His youngest brother went by Sunny. He'd only been a toddler when Yves had left home, but he wrote letters like clockwork. "How old was he?"

"I don't know. Twelve? Fifteen?" Oleander shrugged and dropped the letter on the desk. "And I'm only passing it on because you helped with Melite."

Melite blinked up at Oleander with the slow, patient look of a cat in love. Oh, well, Yves thought. There was no accounting for taste.

He ripped open the letter as soon as Oleander left.

Two minutes later, Charon swung Yves' door open. Yves, who was about to tie the letter to a paperweight and sling it out the window, stopped to stare.

"Just a letter," he said. Charon looked down at the chair Yves had kicked over. "It's from my mother. She's in town, and she wants to introduce me to a dominant. Someone respectable, she says."

That was the kindest way he could have summed up his mother's message.

It wasn't a letter so much as it was a summons, written in the blunt, stern tone of a general giving orders to an unruly subordinate.

His mother didn't outright say that she was mortified by Yves throwing the city into a frenzy, but she didn't have to, and the fact that she'd brought Yves' favorite brother meant she was prepared to play dirty if she had to.

She knew Yves couldn't make a scene in front of Sunny.

It was underhanded and calculating, and exactly what Yves would have done in her position.

Charon righted the chair. "I take it he lives close to home."

"He probably does." Charon was the only one in the House of Onyx who didn't seem entirely charmed by Yves' family.

Even at their most judgmental, they were still determined to appear as nice as possible in public, which meant they sent little gifts to the other courtesans on holidays and made a point of gushing over their "Darling" where others could see.

Peter's confrontation over the invitation had been their discontent boiling over.

Most of them would rather eat sand than make a scene.

"Did she give you a meeting place?" Charon asked.

His dominance was evident in his voice, but it was more subdued than usual, smoothing Yves' ruffled edges.

Charon lay a hand on Yves' shoulder, and Yves gave him the letter and the paperweight.

"You can offer another location instead. If you control the time and place, it may

disarm her.”

“Mother is never disarmed,” Yves said. He flopped onto his bed. “Trust me, I’ve tried. The closest I came to disarming her was when I told her I was coming here.”

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They'd had an almighty row about it, of course, but he'd expected that.

Yves' mother had told him that if he wanted to run off and become a whore, he might as well not spend another night in the house, and Yves had shouted, fine, maybe I don't want to stay here!

He'd stormed off into the barn and sat there with his sister's favorite cat, hating the smell, the sounds, and the way the farm seemed to constrict him on all sides.

If he stayed there, he knew that he'd end up just like everyone else, living in the same old house with the same old people for the rest of his life.

His mother had shown up an hour later, with none of the dominance that usually poured off her like water. She'd stared down at Yves with a small, soft look of confusion that had hurt Yves more than any harsh word ever could.

"Come back inside," she'd said. It was the closest Yves would ever get to an apology.

Now, what felt like a world away from that small barn, Yves still turned into an awkward teenager the moment his mother entered his life.

"She's leaving most of her thoughts out of this," Charon said, going over the letter. "Is this usual for her?"

"Not really. Most of her letters are five pages long at least." Yves hadn't even considered that. "Why? Do you think something's wrong? She'd mention it if it was."

Charon frowned at the letter. “She might be worried. If she reveals too much, it will give you an advantage.”

“You’re making it sound like I’m the one who’s constantly putting her on the defensive,” Yves said.

Charon gave him a blank, level look, and Yves pointed at him.

“Stop that. You only do that stare-down when you’re trying to wait someone out.

I know I’m a brat, but she’s stubborn as a mule.

” Charon raised a brow. “Don’t say that I’m stubborn! ”

Charon didn’t have to say anything to make his opinion clear. Just the way he folded the letter told Yves, you’re so stubborn that it’s not even worth saying it aloud.

“Maybe families like mine are why the Arkoudai put their kids in the barracks,” Yves said. “We’re always talking over each other, getting in each other’s lives, causing trouble...”

“The barracks aren’t better,” Charon said.

He hesitated before continuing. “I grew up there, before I was apprenticed.” He didn’t say where he’d been apprenticed, but Yves had a few educated guesses.

Charon knew too much about people to have been an ordinary soldier, and the books Yves read about Arktos hinted at a robust spy network.

Anyone with sense would have put Charon in charge of making secret codes or reading people’s lips from afar.

“What was it like?” he asked.

Charon’s brows pinched together. “It was regulated. You woke up at the same time every day, went to lessons, trained with weapons. People would watch you in class when you were older, to recruit you. Your friends were usually the people who slept in the bunks nearby.”

Yves wondered if it was easier for Charon to say you instead of I.

“My friends were my neighbors,” Yves said. “I don’t know if my siblings counted. I basically raised half of them.”

Charon looked down at the letter folded in his hands. “You helped raise them, yet your mother still treats you like a child. Is that because she put the most effort into raising you, first?”

“That’s an unsettling thought,” Yves said.

“I guess there wasn’t anyone to get between us when I was growing up.

I usually took the blame if the others made a mistake, because I should have been there to look after them.

Then I took the blame for my own mistakes because I was the first one making them, and everyone else learned from my example.

I guess that isn’t how it works in Arktos. ”

“Not unless you’re an officer,” Charon said. “But there were schools for that.”

“Officer Yves.” Yves grinned at him. “I bet I could manage it.”

“You’d upend the military in a month.”

“I don’t know, give me a week and see what I can do.

” Yves tossed his hair, and Charon gave him the subtle little eyebrow quirk that meant, all right, you’re pretty, I know.

Yves batted his eyelashes for good measure.

Even if anything more was impossible, it was too easy to slip back into the warm, pleasant feeling that filled him in Charon’s company.

“My mother still thinks I’m about to cause an incident, like the whole spring festival debacle when I was sixteen.

The problem is, I still feel like I’m sixteen when I’m around her.

I think I always will, no matter how old I get.

I think there’s a tiny piece of our clueless, chaotic teen years stuck inside all of us, waiting to come out and wreak havoc. ”

Charon’s smile faded slightly. He looked quite pretty when he smiled.

Yves could see how people would mistake him for someone from Katoikos, which favored beauty more than strength.

Even though Charon was a broad, powerful man, he had a hidden elegance that slipped free when he was alone with Yves.

It probably came out with Laurent, too—Yves didn’t think he was special for seeing

it—but a part of him wanted it for himself.

“I didn’t know what I wanted when I was young,” Charon said. “I only did what I was told.”

Yves hummed. “I’m not sure about that. You made it here, didn’t you? The Arkoudai weren’t allowed to leave then, I know that much. So you had to want something.”

A shadow flickered over Charon’s face. “I did want something,” he said, after a long silence. “But I lost it in Arktos.”

“Wait, you did?” Yves leaned forward. “Maybe we can find it, or I can get the soldiers at the border to give it back. You know I can be pretty convincing.”

“Pretty stubborn, you mean.”

Yves winked. For a second there, Charon had looked like he was about to slip into a gloom.

Yves knew that whatever Charon had lost probably wasn’t a real, tangible thing.

It must have been a part of him, maybe even the messy childhood he’d never been allowed to have.

Yves pretending otherwise softened the hard set of Charon’s mouth and chased the shadows out of his eyes.

He could wait to find out the rest. Pushing it now could close Charon off again, and Yves was too selfish to lose the friendship they had left.

“That’s what we’ll do,” he said. “The next time you’re in Staria—and you’ll be back,

Charon, Laurent won't let you disappear—we can go to the border and I can work a little magic.”

“You'll be married by then,” Charon said.

Yves couldn't imagine meeting Charon again as a married man.

In all honesty, he was more likely to be gloriously divorced by then, but it was probably gauche to admit it.

Traveling through Staria with Charon, though; he could imagine that.

Charon would probably prefer to camp, but Yves was sure he could convince him to stay at enough inns to get a decent bath or three on the way.

If they did happen to pass the Cooper farm, Yves wouldn't mind introducing him to Sunny or his cousin Harriet before running off.

“It doesn't matter if I'm married or not,” Yves said at last, and leaned over to pat Charon's arm. “I'll always have time for you.”

Charon shifted closer, and Yves' cheeks went hot as his shadow crossed over the flickering light at the window.

“I should tell you,” Charon said. “Some of your suitors have approached me.”

“Oh.” Yves was so close that he could lean forward and bury his face in Charon's chest—which he was gamely trying not to imagine. “For hints? I hope they offered to pay you.”

“You shouldn't hope that,” Charon said. “Anyone who would buy you isn't

trustworthy.”

“Charon.” Yves smiled. The orange light at the window made Charon look as though he were ringed with fire. “I’m a whore. That’s the point.”

Charon raised a hand as though to stroke his cheek, but stopped just before they could touch. Yves felt like he would break apart with the effort of not leaning into his hand. “Not if you want them to love you.”

What if I want you to love me? Yves thought. He raised himself up on his toes, still too short to reach Charon’s lips but determined to try his damndest anyhow, and he was just about to reach up to grab Charon by the shoulders when the light in the window flickered again.

“Wait,” Yves said. “It’s nighttime.” Charon looked at him with concern, and Yves pointed over his shoulder. Light rippled against the wall of the House of Onyx like a shadow. Bells rang in the street outside, and he heard the bang of a window slamming open above them. “What is that?”

Charon strode to the window. His face glowed in the light from outside, which cast over his skin like waves on the shore.

“It’s the House of Silver,” Charon said. “It’s burning.”

Five

Fire lapped against the night sky as Charon ran from the House of Onyx into the street.

Courtesans from the House of Silver huddled on the other side of the road, staring numbly up at the three-story building engulfed with flame.

The garden in the House of Copper was also starting to burn, and courtesans stood on the balcony of the House of Gold, throwing buckets of water on the roof.

The fire was too far from the House of Onyx to be a danger yet, but all they needed was a change in the wind and the whole Pleasure District would be up in flames.

“Are there people in there?” Yves grabbed Charon by the arm.

His nails dug into Charon’s skin, but Charon didn’t notice the pain.

He scanned the windows and the open front door.

The fire looked like it had come from the garden, which meant that the house might still be safe enough for a search, but no one moved to go inside to check.

“Laurent!” Rose, Laurent’s younger sister, ran past Charon and Yves. Like the rest of them, Laurent was staring in shock at the burning House of Silver, and he nearly staggered back a pace when Rose threw herself into his arms. “We heard the bells. What happened? What do we do?”

“Sand,” Laurent said, in a dazed voice. “Sand and water. Percy! Sabre!” He turned aside, his dominance cracking as it fell over the stunned crowd.

“I’m going to see if anyone is inside,” Charon said.

Yves’ grip on his arm tightened. “No. It’s too dangerous. I’ve seen fires in the country—if the upper floors fall?—”

“Then they’ll crush whoever might still be in there,” Charon said. He pulled Yves’ hand off his arm and started stripping off his shirt. Yves took a few steps after him, but Charon turned, putting all the dominance he had into his voice. “Stay where you are, Yves.”

Yves shakily got to his knees. A number of other submissives knelt as well, overwhelmed by the command in Charon’s voice. Charon intercepted a man running by with a bucket of water and dipped his shirt in it. It would be scant protection against the heat, but he’d take what he could get.

He’d just kicked open the garden gate when a figure approached behind him. Sabre appeared, a sodden cloth wrapped around his lower face like a mask. He handed a second cloth to Charon. Charon took it without a word.

“I’ll search the second floor,” Sabre said. Charon briefly clasped his shoulder, then ran into the burning House of Silver.

The first floor was empty. The House of Silver was laid out differently than the House of Onyx, with an open first floor parlor and the kitchen and work shed in the back, where no clients could see.

Charon scanned the first floor as he made for the stairs.

Fire was starting to lap at the wallpaper, curling as Charon ascended the stairs, and the house groaned as it struggled to hold its own weight.

They didn't have much time. His wet clothes were already steaming, and the smoke was thick and oppressive.

He found only one courtesan on the third floor—a young woman curled up in the closet, paralyzed with fear. She didn't even look up when Charon grabbed her, and Charon covered her hair with his damp shirt and heaved her to her feet.

“You need to follow me,” he said. His dominance was louder than the roar of fire in the floors below, and the woman, a submissive, looked down at her feet.

Charon thought of Nikos walking through the desert, forcing himself to keep going with the power of his own dominance.

“You aren't afraid. You will get to your feet and walk. ”

The woman nodded. She grabbed Charon's arm as the house trembled dangerously, and the floor beneath them buckled.

“Keep walking,” Charon ordered, half dragging her to the stairs. He raised his voice. “Sabre!” The smoke threatened to choke him as he inhaled, but he managed to get out the words before he reached the stairs.

He couldn't see Sabre through the smoke.

He dragged the woman down the stairs and through the burning first floor, and when they emerged into the smoldering garden, he was relieved to find Sabre sitting on the street outside.

Charon guided the woman into the street, where a group of sobbing courtesans pulled her into their arms.

“I have to keep walking,” she said in a soft voice, stumbling as they pulled her to safety. “No, I have to keep... I was told to keep walking...”

There was a crack, a chorus of screams, and Charon turned in time to see the sides of the first floor buckle and fold. Fire spat onto the walls of the House of Gold, and another cry went up. Charon stepped back, coughing, as Yves gingerly took him by the arm.

“Charon.” Yves’ voice sounded distant through the roar of fire and Charon’s hacking coughs. “You’re burned. You need to see Laurent.”

“It isn’t...” Charon coughed again, and he felt a touch on his neck. The pain in his throat and lungs eased, and Charon turned to Laurent. Laurent’s magic, which he rarely used in private, let alone out in the open, coursed through Charon like a stream of clear water.

“There are others,” Charon said. “A woman, the courtesans from the House of Silver...”

“Allow me to treat my friends first, Charon.” Laurent’s voice was low, pitched so the others couldn’t hear. “I’ll see to them. Just promise me, the next time Sabre thinks of joining you in your heroics? Send him back to me.”

“He’s safe?” Charon asked. Laurent nodded grimly. “Do you know who set this?”

“Who says it’s been set?” Laurent asked, but Charon knew he had to have noticed that the fire had come from the outside in. Laurent turned toward the woman Charon had rescued, and Yves, who’d refused to let go of Charon’s arm, feebly tugged him

toward the other side of the street.

“We’re too close,” Yves said. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice shook. “Please, Charon.”

“I’m all right,” Charon said, but he followed Yves to safety regardless. Guards had finally arrived to douse the fire, but Laurent had gathered enough onlookers to quench the surrounding flames that the other buildings were only slightly charred.

Charon helped Yves sit down, but Yves still wouldn’t let go. “You could have died,” he said. “You know that, don’t you? You could have died in there.”

“Yes. And that woman would have died if no one had gone in there to find her.”

Yves breathed in heavily. “Can you stop being so...so Charon for a minute and think about the fact that maybe people don’t want you to get eaten by a fire?”

Charon touched Yves’ cheek. “I know. Thank you for thinking of me.” He’d put so much dominance into his voice to get the courtesan from the House of Silver on her feet that it came too easily now. Yves blinked slowly, likely lulled by the need to submit. “Let go, Yves.”

Yves gently loosened his grip on Charon’s arm. “Yes, sir.”

Something stirred low in Charon’s belly at that, and he tried to force it down. Yves didn’t call anyone sir unless they’d thoroughly spanked him first, and even then, it was a rare thing. Of course it would take Charon charging into a fire for him to say it unprompted.

Percy ran over, wearing only a robe and slippers. His yellow hair was a mess, and he had the wide-eyed look of panic. “Yves. They caught the man who started it.”

Yves used Charon to get to his feet. “What? Who? Is it someone we know?”

“I don’t think so.” Percy gestured toward the guards’ cart.

A pair of guards pushed a young man into it, and Charon stood to get a better look as murmuring spread through the crowd.

The man was young, barely out of his teens, with shaggy black hair and raw, dark bruises around his wrists.

Charon moved closer, drawn to the cart as though pulled by a tether, and the boy raised a hand to shield himself as one of the courtesans from the House of Silver threw a stone.

It went wide, smashing into the cobbles on the other side of the cart, but the guards didn’t so much as look at the courtesan who threw it.

The boy had bruises on his hands as well, and old blood stained his nails dark in the flickering streetlights.

“That boy’s been tortured,” Charon said.

Yves sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth. “You’re sure? How can you tell?”

“I’ve seen it before.” The boy was young enough to resemble Aster, though his skin was pale and he looked underfed. Another courtesan threw a stone at the cart, and the boy cringed as though he’d been whipped.

“They’ll kill him if the guards don’t hurry,” Yves said.

Charon was inclined to agree. The crowd was starting to turn ugly, terror twisting into

something dark and bestial now that they had someone to blame.

The guards slowly started to move the cart away from the smoldering wreckage, but some members of the crowd followed, their eyes blazing. “What are you going to do?”

Charon turned to look at Yves. “What makes you think I’ll do anything?”

“Because he’s a kid, and he’s scared,” Yves said. “Because I know you.”

He was right. As the cart trundled too slowly away, Charon could feel the compulsion to follow.

Whatever had led the boy to set fire to the Pleasure District lay in the haunted shadows in his eyes and the bruises on his fingers and wrists.

At least one of his fingers had looked swollen and broken.

Setting a fire with broken fingers had to be painful.

“All right,” Yves said. “We’ll meet them at the guard house.”

“We?” Charon asked.

Yves gave him a dubious look. “Did you think I’ll let you go alone after I watched you run into a burning building? Really?”

“I could order you,” Charon said.

Yves narrowed his eyes. “Oh, so now you threaten to sling me over your shoulder.” He turned around and walked after the cart at a brisk pace.

Charon could understand why so many of Yves' clients were so inclined to spank him senseless.

He caught up with Yves easily, pitching his voice so only Yves could hear.

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“If I tell you to leave, you leave,” he said. “Do you understand? That boy may have been working on someone else’s orders.”

“Or whoever pissed him off is in the crowd,” Yves said. “Convenient for them if a mob kills him off, isn’t it?”

Charon was impressed. For someone who grew up in the country, Yves had the right turn of mind to guess what Charon was thinking. “I don’t trust the city guard to treat him gently, either. There could have been noble clients in the House of Silver. They’ll want a quick ending.”

Yves shuddered, but he kept walking. A few others in the crowd tried to follow, but Charon could hear Laurent barking orders in the distance, and the crowd slowly drew back.

The guard house wasn’t far from the Pleasure District, and since most of the people who spent a few hours inside were drunk nobles who’d been kicked out of the various establishments, it was well-maintained.

The guards at the entrance shifted uncomfortably when they saw Charon and Yves, but Yves just smiled.

“His Grace, Duke de Valois, asked for us to interrogate the man who came in from the Pleasure District,” Yves said.

Charon tried not to register his surprise.

Using Sabre's title and his close proximity to the king was a risky gamble.

Still, it made sense that Sabre would send someone like Yves, who held no title and wouldn't intimidate the prisoner.

Yves only needed to flutter his lashes and preen a little for the guards to let them through. Charon wanted to make Yves stay in the main office, but now that Yves had introduced them as Sabre's agents, he couldn't do so without arousing suspicion. Knowing Yves, he'd probably planned for that.

"Don't look so grim," Yves whispered, as they headed down the stairs to the holding cells. "What is he going to do, tremble at me?"

Charon wasn't concerned about Yves' safety. He was worried about what Yves might notice about him—the way he recognized injuries from torture, the way he knew how to speak to terrified young men desperate for a comforting voice. But it was too late now.

Charon stepped into the spacious, barely-protected holding cells.

They were lightly furnished for their noble "visitors," but the boy wasn't even sitting on the cot set up at the far end of the room.

He was curled up on the floor next to a chair with his knees to his chest, staring into the middle distance.

When Yves explained why they were there, the guard at the desk shrugged.

"They just brought him in," he said. "If you asked me, I'd say he looks more like a victim of a fire than someone who started it. Get a name out of him if you can, will you?"

Charon didn't make any promises. He asked for bandages and clean water, which the guard gave him with a befuddled look. He opened the gate to the cell—unlocked, because no noble wanted to think they were actually being detained. The boy shuffled toward the corner of the wall.

“Your dominance isn't just a part of your voice,” Haris had said, when he'd first trained Nikos in interrogation. “It's in how you move. If a sorry bastard can't stand after I'm done with them, you don't stand either. It makes them think you're on their side.”

He hadn't let Nikos speak at all, at first. Nikos had to comfort terrified prisoners without saying a word, fumbling awkwardly through using his dominance in a way he'd never considered before.

It became a tool, something he could use and put away like the rest of an interrogator's instruments.

It had taken months before Haris had been satisfied enough to let Nikos use his voice again.

Charon sat down a few paces from the boy.

Behind him, he could hear Yves getting to his knees.

Charon didn't speak. He unwound the bandages he'd taken and set the jug of water on the floor between him and the boy.

The boy stared at the jug before he looked at Charon's hands—which meant he was more thirsty than afraid.

The boy lasted five minutes before he started inching forward. He half crawled

toward the water, but froze when Yves made a sympathetic sound, a habit that Nikos had learned to suppress early on.

“I can bandage your hands,” Charon said, and the boy stared up at him, too afraid to follow his submissive instinct to look down. “Yves, sit next to me so I can show him how it’s done.”

Yves gingerly sat next to Charon, and Charon turned to start wrapping Yves’ fingers.

“If your finger is broken,” Charon said, “it will need a splint. It will hurt at first, but it is a good pain. Like drinking water when your throat is scraped dry. I have felt that before, in the mountains. Are you thirsty?”

The boy stared at him.

“Yves, show him your hand.” Yves held up his bandaged hand.

“That is all that I will do to you, if you allow me.” Charon started unwinding the bandages.

He kept his dominance strong in his voice and his slow, assured movements, but it wasn’t the intimate call of command that he used at the House of Onyx.

There was no expectation in it, just a slow, quiet promise of safety.

Yves was blinking heavily at his side, clearly influenced.

“Would you like me to bandage your hands?”

“Can’t...” the boy glanced at the water jug.

“I will help you with that, as well.”

The boy kept looking at the jug. Charon finished unwrapping Yves’ fingers and approached, keeping low. He took the jug and held it up, and the boy crept forward like a stray animal.

“When they come to you,” Haris had said, “you’ve already won.”

Charon held the water jug to the boy’s lips, watching as he struggled to swallow even the faintest trickle. He’d been without water for some time, then. He hadn’t eaten much, either, and by the way he sat, favoring his left leg, his foot was injured as well.

“Careful,” Charon said. “You’ll have more when I’ve seen your hands.”

The boy was so lulled by Charon’s dominance by now that he placidly held out his hands when Charon set down the jug.

Charon had been right—someone had been torturing the boy, albeit without the rigid structure of the Arkoudai interrogators.

The boy hissed in pain once or twice, but by the time Charon was done wrapping his swollen fingers, some of the panic had ebbed in his eyes.

Charon fed him a little more water, then set the jug down again. “Tell me who you are.”

“Jesse.”

“That’s good, Jesse. How old are you?”

“Fifteen,” Jesse said. Yves made another sound, and Charon kept his expression

neutral.

“They say you set fire to the House of Silver,” Charon said.

“Was trying for the rest.” Jesse looked down at his hands. “It ain’t right, what they do.”

“They? Courtesans?”

“No. Them.” Jesse’s brows narrowed. “The nobles. The ones who run it all. They said they’d give me a place to stay. Food to eat.”

Charon glanced at Yves. Even when teenagers took apprenticeships in pleasure houses, like Laurent de Rue had, they didn’t see clients until they were of age. “You were in one of those houses?”

“No. Different ones, near Red Harbor.” Jesse blinked quickly, and he raised his hands to clumsily rub his eyes with his wrist. “A noble there said he’s starting houses like they have here.

He said it would make us rich.” He hunched his shoulders.

“I didn’t earn a copper, when I could’ve done more working the docks on my own.

So I stole from the kitchen on my way out, and they... hurt me.”

Charon could feel Yves looking at him. Pleasure houses had to be approved by the crown.

Plenty of illegal brothels existed—there was no way to avoid that—but nobles were banned from starting any without the crown’s knowledge.

It could ignite a civil war between the lower and upper classes, and there were far more commoners than nobles.

“Do you know the noble’s name?” Charon asked. “What they looked like?”

“I don’t know. I thought he was pretty at first. Tall. Dresses nice. He didn’t give me his name. We all just called him sir.”

“Can you describe the house?” Charon asked.

The boy frowned. “The door was blue.”

Slowly, Charon eased as much information from Jesse as he could.

The boy’s memory was fogged by terror, but Charon pieced together a rough estimate of who he was and why he’d thought setting fire to the Pleasure District would free him.

The noble who’d tormented him had spoken of coming “back” to Duciel, and Jesse had thought that meant he was in charge of one of the houses in the Pleasure District.

He’d meant to burn them all, and Charon suspected that he’d thought that dying by fire would be more merciful for a courtesan than what he’d endured.

“They hang firebugs at the harbor,” Jesse said at last, “even though the king said no one gets hanged no more. Will they do that to me?”

“No,” Charon said. “I’ll do what I can to help you.”

Jesse sighed. “You’re not really from here, are you? I can tell. You still think they won’t hurt me if you ask them nice enough.”

When Charon finally stood, his knees cracked in protest. He helped the boy onto the cot, then turned to Yves. Yves looked on the verge of tears. Charon pulled him to his feet, and when he brought Yves to the cell door, he found the guard had fallen asleep in his chair.

“That’s comforting,” Yves said.

Charon shook the guard awake before he led Yves up the steps, but the soothing effect of his dominance would probably last for a while. When they emerged into the cool night air, he let go so Yves could walk off and kick a stone across the street.

“Whoever did that to him deserves to be ripped to shreds by dogs,” Yves snarled. He was crying, tracks running through the makeup he wore to hide his freckles. “I’m not saying he was right to do it, but his hands... He’s fifteen.”

“I know,” Charon said.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked questions myself.” Yves sighed heavily. “You shouldn’t have had to do that by yourself. It has to fuck you up, using your dominance like that.”

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Charon thought of Aster saying much the same thing to Nikos long ago. “It isn’t pleasant, but it was necessary.”

Yves took a deep breath. “What do you need to come down from it?”

Charon raised his brows. “I’ll be fine.”

“You walked into a fire, saved someone’s life, and then used your dominance to calm down a tortured kid. Let’s just assume you’re not fine. I’m not fine, and I was just watching.”

Charon almost brushed it aside, but he thought of Aster lying in his arms, pitying Nikos for what the interrogators made him do. “I never learned what makes it better.”

Yves looked like he wanted to kick something again.

“We’re going to tell Sabre what we heard, and I’m staying in your room tonight.

” Charon opened his mouth, and Yves shook his head.

“You’ll have to tie me to my bed otherwise.

Just let someone else take care of you before you decide to, I don’t know, overthrow the monarchy on your day off and install a republic. ”

“That might be beyond my skill,” Charon said.

“Good.” Yves smoothed down his hair with shaky fingers and grabbed Charon by the arm. “It’s about time that you found a limit.”

Yves scrubbed out the tea kettle in Charon’s room and tried not to think about the smell of charred wood drifting through the Pleasure District.

He knew that life wasn’t exactly charmed for most courtesans.

It certainly hadn’t been for Sabre de Valois, when he’d been sentenced to serving in the district after his family was charged with treason.

If it was seen as a punishment only slightly better than being hanged at the gallows, it could probably stand to undergo a change or two.

But Yves hadn’t really considered it much.

Being a courtesan had been so simple for him—almost laughably so, after a lifetime of raising his own siblings and working on the farm.

It was easy to ignore the ugly, dark corners of the district when he was living in the House of Onyx with a carefully curated list of devoted clients.

He thought of the way the boy had leaned toward Charon like a whipped dog seeking a gentle hand, and had to set the kettle down and stare into the fireplace. Unfortunately, that only made him think of Charon rushing into the fire in the House of Silver.

Charon was still downstairs, talking to Laurent and Sabre.

The courtesans from the House of Silver were all staying in empty rooms in other houses for now, including the House of Onyx, but they probably wouldn’t be allowed

to take clients until they had a new place to stay.

Percy had invited Yves to stay with him, Nanette, and Simone in his house in town, since the district was effectively closed that night, but Yves busied himself in Charon's room instead, cleaning his already spotless shelves and rearranging blankets on the couch.

Charon had seemed odd back in the guard house.

He hadn't been odd in the way a person would be after risking his life in a burning building; his demeanor had changed when he sat down on the cell floor.

Even his face had shifted, muscles moving in a way Yves hadn't seen before, his expression that of a stranger.

The way he'd held himself was different, and he hadn't spoken in the lower city accent he had since Yves first met him.

His speech was curt despite the soft tone of his voice, his vowels clipped, and there was something unusual in the way he pronounced words like were and fire.

It was the echo of an accent Yves had only heard when he was new to the House of Onyx, and Yves would bet his right arm that it came from Arktos.

Why did interrogating a prisoner, even so gently as Charon had done, make him more of an Arkoudai?

Yves had just finished steeping a pot of tea when Charon came back.

He'd set Charon's favorite books on the side table, the cookie tin he knew Charon usually kept for Yves' benefit was out just in case, and he had a pair of towels and a

case of supplies from his room.

He put on his most pitiful expression when Charon eyed the towels. “Tea in the bath, please?”

“You’re using your spank me voice,” Charon said. He was still talking a little like an Arkoudai, short and abrupt, without the comfortable roundness of Starian speech. The talk in the cells was probably still weighing on him.

“Yes, but this time it means, you’re covered in soot and tea in the bath is better than smelling like a house fire. ”

Charon raised his brows when Yves picked up the cookie tin, but Yves hadn’t pulled out his best pleading-submissive act for nothing. They took the tea to the baths, which Yves had already filled with scented water.

“I know I’m not your submissive,” Yves said, trying not to sound like he was wheedling, “but you might need a temporary one. Just for tonight.”

“I would rather not use my dominance at the moment, Yves.” Charon stripped down, and Yves tried not to stare at the way his thigh muscles shifted as he stepped into the bath.

“Not like that. I mean you might need to come down a little. You’re in the bath, but you might as well be standing at attention.” Charon looked sharply up at him, and Yves kept his gaze demurely downcast as he slipped into the bath. “Let me wash your hair?”

It would probably be easier if he were a dominant. All he’d have to do would be to order people around instead of beg for it—but begging had its own benefits. Yves moved behind Charon and sank his fingers into his hair, which was thick, dark, and

curled in the heat.

“Are you visiting Gerakia when you leave?” he asked. “Does that mean you’re going to see one of their colleges?”

Charon twisted his head slightly to look at him. “One or two.”

“Which one?”

Yves kept Charon talking as he gently massaged the smell of smoke out of his hair.

He kept his voice low, and when he’d moved from Charon’s hair to his back, Charon didn’t brush him aside.

Yves even made him smile with a joke about Kallistoi artisan guilds, and without meaning to, Yves found himself kneeling over Charon’s lap before they were done with the tea.

They were seated on a low bench at the waterline, but the air was too full of steam for Yves to feel a chill.

Charon had a tattoo over his chest, a symmetrical series of branches with stylized moths in the place of leaves.

Yves traced the wings of a moth with his fingers, and Charon took a short, sharp breath.

It wouldn’t have been noticeable if they weren’t so close, but Yves could feel it as though he’d done it himself.

“We should go to bed,” Yves said. He felt Charon’s hands at his waist, feather-light,

and in the secure, heady warmth of the baths, being loved didn't feel quite so impossible.

"You're getting married soon," Charon said, but he was looking at Yves' chest with a heat that made Yves shudder pleasantly.

"Not yet." Yves glanced up at him and down again, a clear sign from any submissive. "It doesn't have to mean anything. It's just me, Charon."

But it did mean something. Maybe Charon had his reasons, but Yves couldn't deny it.

"You're not just Yves," Charon said.

"And you're not just what you were in the cells tonight." Yves placed his hands on Charon's thighs and parted them. He sank to his knees in the bath in front of Charon and kissed his inner thigh. "Everyone thinks you want to give it rough. But you should treat me the way you really want to."

Charon reached down and stroked Yves' temple.

He twined his fingers in Yves' hair, softly, carefully.

Yves took Charon's cock in his hands, and Charon let out a barely perceptible sigh.

His muscular thighs framed Yves' shoulders perfectly, and when he guided Yves' mouth to his cock, it was with the light touch of a dom who knew his submissive would anticipate what he wanted.

He trusted Yves to behave, and that did more for Yves than any frustrated spanking or half-hearted punishment.

It stood to reason that Charon's cock was as thick as the rest of him, but Yves was nothing if not determined.

He glanced up at Charon as his lips stretched around Charon's girth, and was rewarded with a satisfying tug on his curls.

He took it all at once, with none of the contrived, sloppy gagging many of his clients liked, but with an ease that made him feel more than a touch conceited.

He knew Charon could tell he was proud of himself, because Charon cracked the faintest smile.

Yves would have smiled back if his mouth weren't full.

He drew back almost to the head, then down again, delighting in the way Charon's cock brushed the back of his throat.

Breathing was a necessity for lesser men.

Yves worked himself over Charon's cock, gently cupping his balls with one hand as Charon boxed him in with his thighs.

When he finally pulled up for air, Charon held his mouth open with his thumbs, forcing him to sit there and pant.

"Breathe," Charon ordered.

"Do I have to?" Yves tried to ask, but Charon's thumbs were in the way. Charon tapped Yves on the cheek and held him there a few seconds longer. Yves squirmed, eager to get back onto Charon's cock.

When Charon finally let go, Yves took him down all at once again.

He held himself there, his nose pressed to the curly black hair at the base, and tried to look up at Charon as though daring to pull him off.

He worked his throat and tongue to massage Charon's cock, and Charon's legs closed tighter around his shoulders to hold him in place.

You may think you're proving a point, Yves thought, but I'll black out on cock if I have to.

"I know that look," Charon said, and took Yves' face with both hands.

He ground into Yves' mouth, somehow managing to fit himself deeper still, and Yves felt his throat flutter and seize.

Charon moved him halfway up his length, then down again, not giving him enough room to catch his breath.

Yves moaned and wriggled in the water beneath him, and he reached down to stroke himself.

He lasted a few more seconds before he had to draw back with a gasp. Charon hooked his mouth open with one hand to keep him in place, and Yves shot him a dirty look.

"Stay," Charon ordered. He pressed the tip of his cock to Yves' lower lip, and Yves whined plaintively. "Keep your mouth open."

Yves stroked himself faster, failing to stay still as Charon took his own length in hand. "I can do that," he tried to say, but with Charon's thumb parting his teeth, it

came out in an unintelligible moan.

“No. You’ll stay.” Charon was flush with heat, his eyes dark and wide, his black hair hanging over his face. “You’ll be good for me, won’t you? You know how.”

Yves tried to lurch forward to take Charon into his mouth, and Charon pulled him back.

“Be good, Yves,” Charon said. The way he said Yves’ name sent a ripple of pleasure down his back. Charon came into Yves’ mouth as he held him there, coating his tongue, and Yves closed his eyes and rocked his hips forward. “Don’t swallow until you’ve come.”

Yves kept his eyes closed as he stroked himself through it, mouth open, enthralled with with the taste of Charon.

Charon removed his thumb and tilted Yves’ head by his throat.

Just that touch was enough to tip Yves over the edge, and he swallowed heavily as he came, caught between Charon’s legs with his hand on Yves’ throat.

When he looked up again, Charon was looking down at him almost fondly.

“There,” he said. “You do know how to be good.”

“I’m always good,” Yves said, and for the first time in that terrible, chaotic night, Charon laughed.

Yves slept on Charon’s couch. They stayed up with the cookie tin open between them and read books in silence just as they had a thousand times before, as though what had happened in the baths—or the cells, or the House of Silver—hadn’t disrupted a

perfectly ordinary evening.

And that was fine. Yves had said that it didn't need to mean anything.

But they weren't acting as though it hadn't happened; they were acting as though it were just a part of their usual routine, like slipping into a robe.

That was far more dangerous. Discomfort and avoidance meant Yves could file it away as a favor between friends.

This felt like Yves' feelings for Charon were bleeding into everything, muddling his plans.

He woke in the early morning to the sound of Charon sitting up in bed, and he turned around to look up at him. Moonlight slid along the edges of Charon's jaw and glinted in his eyes. For a second, it seemed like Charon was looking at him, but then he turned aside.

"You're thinking about that boy, aren't you?" Yves asked. He kept his voice quiet, unwilling to break the stillness of the moment.

"No." Charon's voice was just as soft. "Someone like him."

Yves didn't dare move. He felt like if he did, the uncertain balance of the quiet room would tip over, and Charon wouldn't speak again.

"He thought he was in love, but when all you know is pain, any comfort feels like love. It's the first thing they teach you.

" Charon's voice was low, but Yves caught the pain he couldn't quite hide.

“Half of them fall in love with you when you’re the one bandaging their wounds.

But he didn’t know that it was happening to him, as well. He was too young to see it.”

Yves stared at Charon. He’d turned his head from the moonlight, and his shoulders were hunched as though he were trying to sink into his own shadow.

“Charon,” Yves said, “I?—”

“His name was Nikos,” Charon said.

Yves sat up carefully. He moved across the room and climbed onto Charon’s bed.

His feet slid on the soft sheets, and he braced himself on Charon’s arm for balance.

His hand slid over the tattoo of the hawk with a flaming branch—a bird that spread wildfires, chasing out prey and devastating the land in its wake.

It was a predator clever enough to hunt, but too thoughtless to consider the consequences.

Yves covered the tattoo with his palm.

“Nikos is a nice name. I bet I would have liked him.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Charon said.

“Oh, Charon.” Yves smiled and rubbed his arm. “You know better than to tell me what to do.”

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Yves had spent the night in Charon's room more times than he could count, but this was the first time he'd woken up in Charon's bed.

He was tucked in the cool, light covers, with his favorite blanket from the couch draped over his shoulders, and a plate with an egg tart, toast, and fruit sat on the bedside table.

If this was the way he'd be rewarded for giving a blowjob to a friend, Yves was about to start being very generous.

He sat up and checked the window just in case Charon was out in the garden, but the only people there were Johan and Oleander with the cat.

Charon had no reason to stick around, of course—Yves had told him that it hadn't meant anything, after all—but Yves couldn't help himself.

He tied his robe, grabbed the breakfast tray, and slipped out of Charon's room.

He didn't need to go far to find Charon.

He was downstairs, along with half the House of Onyx, an exhausted-looking Laurent, and most of Yves' suitors.

They were all crowding around a woman with curly blond hair and a white gown embroidered with strawberries.

Lord Marteau had her hands in his and was speaking warmly into her ear, and Laurent was being accosted by Lord Yeltsey, who kept pointing at the stairs where Yves was standing.

Raul hunched in the back, looking anxious and lost. The woman with Lord Marteau looked up, and Yves gripped his tray tightly with both hands.

“Oh,” Yves said. “Hello, Pearl.”

Pearl was Yves’ youngest sister, barely nineteen and cursed with enormous eyes that made her look perpetually lost. She stood and ran up to Yves, who had to juggle the tray to give her a confused, one-armed hug.

“Peter and Tony are outside with the carriage, Darr,” Pearl said. “Harriet’s calming Mother down. Sunny keeps saying you’re fine, but everyone says there was a fire in the Pleasure District, and when I saw that burned building down the way, I almost couldn’t go on. Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” Yves said. Had the fire truly only been the night before? It seemed as though a year had passed between the moment Yves had seen fire through the window and waking up in Charon’s bed. “Tell Mother that the fire wasn’t even close.”

“It sure looks close to me!”

“My dear.” Lord Marteau approached and held out a hand to Pearl. “Perhaps you should sit down and let Yves explain what happened last night.”

Pearl was a submissive like Yves, but she had no experience in turning down a dominant. Yves tried not to sigh as she melted under Lord Marteau’s attention. “If you say so, my lord.”

Lord Marteau winked at Yves and took the tray. Yves looked over his shoulder to try and catch Charon's eye, but Charon was talking to Laurent now, his expression dark. "There isn't much to tell. Someone set fire to the House of Silver."

"But it isn't safe here. You have to admit that.

" Pearl grabbed Yves' hands and dragged him toward the door.

His suitors closed in, trying to murmur words of comfort, but Yves kept glancing at Charon.

Charon's brow was furrowed in concern, and his shoulders were tense and tight. Something was wrong.

"We'll keep him quite safe, young lady," Lord Yeltsey said.

"Mother found someone for you," Pearl whispered, eyeing Lord Yeltsey suspiciously.

Lord Yeltsey, who was the most harmless noble Yves had ever met, backed away like a kicked puppy.

"He's not handsome like these fellows, but he has money, and he'll keep you out of danger.

Or maybe you can just come home, and you can live with me when I get married. I won't mind."

"When are you getting married?" Yves asked. Pearl had always been an anxious shadow at home, emerging only when Yves was around to coax her out. Simply being in the city, surrounded by strangers, had to be jarring for her.

“Eventually.” Pearl’s voice shrank to a squeak. “I’m old enough, you know. I was thinking I could find a nice house and bring you, Sunny, Tony and Peter there.”

That would be effectively moving the family away from their parents, but Yves thought better than to mention it. “That’s sweet, Pearl, but...”

“But nothing!” Pearl’s squeak rose until it was almost audible to someone who wasn’t pressed to her side. “Someone’s setting fires in the Pleasure District! I’m not going to bury you.”

“You won’t have to, my dear,” Lord Marteau said. Pearl tightened her grip on Yves. “I have it on good authority that the man responsible is dead.”

“What?” Yves felt something heavy drop in his stomach. He looked at Charon, and Charon nodded shortly. “Why? How?”

“Someone saw fit to remove him, I suppose.” Lord Marteau waved a hand. “The crown may be merciful, but there could have been nobles in that house last night.”

“Here, now, Theo,” Lord Yeltsey said, going pink in the face. “There were still courtesans and servants inside.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Lord Marteau turned to Yves. “Any loss of life would be deplorable.”

“That was nice of you to say,” Pearl whispered to Lord Yeltsey.

Yves blinked tears out of his eyes before anyone could notice. “Are you sure someone killed him?” he asked.

“Allegedly,” Lord Marteau said. “But not to worry. I can post my own guards at the

doors of the House of Onyx if you wish.”

“That will be entirely unnecessary, Theodore.” Laurent swept through them all with the same brusque dominance in his voice that had shaken onlookers out of their stupor the night before. “My lords, if you would please vacate my house so that I may assess our safety to my own standards?”

It wasn’t a request, however prettily Laurent said it. Lord Marteau looked like he might object, but Raul scuttled out with the faintest nod to Yves. Lord Yeltsey paused before he left, gazing into Yves’ eyes.

“You have a kind heart,” he said, “if you’re sorry for a man who could have killed you.”

“I’m not...” Yves struggled to get the words out.

“It’s all right.” Lord Yeltsey took a step back. “That’s what I like about you.”

Pearl frowned as he left. “Well, some nobles aren’t terrible. But that doesn’t mean you should marry them. That one probably has lovers hiding in his attic, or illegitimate children who will show up one day to duel you for their inheritance.”

“Lord Yeltsey is immune to scandal, Pearl. It’s almost impressive.”

“Men like that are the ones you need to watch. People are already killing each other. Do you really feel sorry for the one who set the fire?”

“He was just a boy,” Yves said. He thought of the way the boy had shaken when he inched toward the water jug, and his stomach rolled unpleasantly.

“And already a killer.” Pearl shuddered.

“You should go back.” Yves towed Pearl to the open door, where Tony and Peter had left the carriage to peer inside. Tony looked Yves up and down as though searching him for burns, and Yves glared at him. “What were you doing, sending Pearl in there?”

“There were too many nobles,” Tony said, “and they were mostly dominants. Pearl could sneak through easier than us.”

“You know how she gets in a crowd of people,” Yves said, glad to have a place to channel the unease and horror of the past day.

“I’m right here,” Pearl said. “Thanks ever so much.”

“Sorry, Pearl, but you were sweating in there. Do you two do this often? Send her in to slip past a group of dominants like a lamb in a pit of wolves?”

“You’re calling your suitors wolves?” Pearl asked.

“Hush while I’m defending you,” Yves said, and Pearl snorted.

“You’ve been gone for half her life,” Tony said. “Why do you suddenly care what any of us do now?”

“Because I still love you, you shit.”

“Funny way of showing it, running off to the city and leaving us alone with Ma,” Tony said.

Yves opened his mouth. He wanted to ask, why do I have to be the one who has to stay?

Why am I responsible? Since he'd first learned that Tony and Peter wouldn't eat on time if he wasn't the one making breakfast, all he'd wanted was a chance to live the life he'd craved.

Now he was being blamed for it, while the House of Silver was a ghastly vision of soot and charred wood, and a poor, tortured boy had been killed in the cells.

Maybe he was selfish. It was why he acted like a brat half the time. Hadn't he earned a little pampering, after everything?

He glanced back through the door, where Charon was standing with Laurent.

Couldn't things just be simple?

"We'll tell Ma you're safe, Darr," Peter said, putting a hand on Tony's shoulder. "He didn't mean it. We're a little on edge right now, thinking you were hurt and all."

"We do love you," Pearl said.

"I know," Yves sighed. "I know."

"You're still doing the marriage contest after all this?" Peter asked. "Ma will want to know. She brought this man all the way from the country to see you."

Yves bit his cheek. "Yes. I'm still doing it."

Tony shook his head in silent disapproval and turned for the carriage. Peter mouthed another apology as he followed, and Pearl paused, clasping her hands together.

"What's the next contest?" she asked. "Cousin Harriet might want to know."

At least Harriet was there. She might not have been one of the Cooper siblings, but she was a better peacekeeper than Yves. “It’s a hedge maze. There’ll be food, if you want to come.”

“Oh, I can’t,” Pearl said. “That sounds busier than a summer festival.” She looked down at her feet. “I’m getting better, though.”

“I know you are, Pearl.”

Yves watched his siblings climb into their cart.

Tony was right; Yves had left them. Still, it seemed like no matter how much time passed, they were always the same.

Tony was abrasive and blunt as their mother.

Pearl was a shadow. And Peter was always trying to be the big man, desperate to fill Yves’ shoes as the one to hold everything together.

Yves turned back to the House of Onyx. Laurent had retreated to his office, and Charon sat next to the breakfast tray, his face in shadow.

“I don’t really feel like eating,” Yves said. “Do you?”

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“You should have something,” Charon said, without looking up.

Yves sat down on the couch next to him. Silence stretched between them, broken only by the scratching of a pen in Laurent’s office.

“Someone killed him,” Yves said at last. “And I’m going to bicker with my family, arrange a hedge maze party, and flirt with rich men like it never happened.”

Charon was silent for a minute. When he spoke, his voice was low and soft. “Laurent said it happened early this morning.”

“Do you think whoever did it saw us leave the guard house?” Yves felt a ripple of fear course through him as he thought of the boy’s killer simply walking into the cells. “They didn’t kill the guards. That means they were rich enough to bribe them.”

“He mentioned a noble,” Charon said. “Sabre is already making inquiries. He’ll be discreet, and he’ll have the weight of the crown behind him.”

“What happened to the boy?” Yves asked. “What if he has a family?” He tried to think about how his siblings would react if it had been the House of Onyx that burned, and a hard lump formed in his throat.

“In cases like this, they often don’t have families powerful enough to search for them. But he has Sabre, now.”

“And us,” Yves said. Charon gave him a curious look.

“I have an idea, Charon. I was going to invite only a few nobles to the maze and the ball, but what if I opened the guest list up a little? The more nobles there are in one place, the easier it’ll be for Sabre.

They’re allowed to refuse the crown entry on their own lands.

You can’t refuse at a garden party or a ball. ”

Charon eyed him warily. “That could be dangerous. If they did see us at the guard house, they could try to corner you.”

“Not if I’m careful. Not if we’re careful.” Yves grabbed Charon’s hand. “Come with me. You’re good at reading people. We both are. Maybe we’ll see something.”

“You’re serious about this,” Charon said, looking down at him.

“I don’t like thinking that he died alone down there,” Yves said. “At least we can make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else.”

Something bright glinted in Charon’s eyes, and he squeezed Yves’ hand. “I’ll be there, Yves. We’ll find the person who did this, and we’ll set it right.”

The Swan Maze was one of the wonders of Staria, but most of the locals in Duciel considered it an eyesore.

King Adrien’s grandmother had commissioned an architect to build it for one of her submissives over fifty years before, as an homage to her “complex mind.” She’d also torn down two city streets and displaced almost a hundred people to do it, but as Laurent had told Charon one night over a bottle of wine, no one ever said she was a benevolent queen.

Charon wasn't sure what to think of it. The maze had survived King Emile's reign because a trust had been put aside for it, and Charon suspected the only reason Yves could requisition it for his personal use was because King Adrien was about as interested in hedge mazes as his father.

Pieces of the maze were made with brick, iron, or marble, and glass panels appeared at random throughout, possibly for a symbolic reason that had been lost to time.

A pond for the former queen's swans lay in the center, and visitors to the maze usually fled in terror the moment the resident swans hissed at them.

It wouldn't have been Charon's first choice for a contest, but he could see why Yves would be drawn to the chaos.

"I assure you," Laurent said, standing at the entrance with his hands raised, "everyone will have a fair chance to enter the maze."

The suitors and nobles grumbled amongst themselves.

There were more curious spectators than Charon expected, since Yves' updated guest list had been rushed out to noble houses in Duciel only a few days before.

More people arrived by the minute as word spread of Yves' next contest for a husband.

Even Laurent's sister, who was busy working on a new play, had appeared to lean against one of the hedges and grin as Laurent tried to keep order.

Yves was nowhere to be found, but he'd given Charon a map of the maze the day before, with key locations he would try to stay near if Charon needed him.

“The rules are as follows,” Laurent said, and the crowd erupted into sporadic hissing as people tried to hush each other into silence.

“The suitors Yves has chosen for this task are to enter the maze first, and our other invited guests are to enter last. If you find Yves, you are permitted one kiss—” Laurent paused to sigh, “on any part of his body that you wish. This will also secure your position at the next contest. You must release Yves to run after you catch him. Anyone who does not will be eliminated. Anyone who falls prey to distraction will be eliminated.”

“What does that mean?” A tall, blonde woman in a checkered dress stood a few feet away, hands on her hips.

She had a solid, strong build, with muscular arms and a square, freckled face.

Her hair was braided under a short veil, a tradition for unmarried adults in rural Staria.

“Distractions? People get distracted all the time. That’s human nature. ”

“Other courtesans entered the maze an hour ago,” Charon said. “They’ll try to seduce the suitors away.”

The woman raised her brows. “That’s no good. Yves needs someone loyal.”

Charon took in her open, freckled face, cornsilk hair, and green eyes. “You know him.”

“I’m his cousin.” She smiled, but it wasn’t Yves’ cheeky grin. “Harriet.”

“Most of his family don’t call him Yves,” Charon said.

He took a step back, quietly urging Harriet to follow him away from the closest knot of onlookers.

Yves hadn't talked much about Harriet, but from what he remembered of Yves' enormous family, she had practically lived with them since she was five.

She'd been folded in with the rest of the siblings, and Charon wondered if Yves had also been charged with taking care of her while his parents ran the farm.

"It's his name," Harriet said. She shrugged. "Even Pearl calls him Yves when his parents aren't around. They're upset because changing his name feels like distancing himself from them. Which he is, but I get it. Our family can be... intense." She turned to look at Charon. "How do you know him?"

"We live in the same house," Charon said, and Harriet's face lit with sudden delight.

"Oh, let me guess. You're not Laurent—he's the fancy boy with the hat.

Charon?" Charon nodded, and she took his hand in a firm grip.

She had an easy, bustling air of dominance in her voice, the kind that made several submissives in the area look her way expectantly.

"Yves wrote to me about you. All good things. Too many good things, actually, suspiciously good." She tried to glare at Charon, but broke into a laugh.

"Oh, you're probably fine. Does Yves like any of these men, do you think? "

"He might favor a few," Charon said.

"Very diplomatic of you." Harriet said. "His mother and sister sent me here in case

someone tries to set the maze on fire. All that nasty business with the Pleasure District scared her. But I'm really here because I'd kick myself if I missed all this. Yves running a husband competition? I love it."

Charon watched the first group of suitors practically run over each other to enter the maze. Raul stumbled a few paces behind, looking terrified. "You don't share his mother's opinion, then."

"Cousins don't have to follow the same rules as everyone else.

" Harriet giggled as a noble pushed another suitor into the hedges at the entrance.

"If Yves weren't the black sheep, it would have been me.

But I love the country, so I get away with being a dom who can't find a nice submissive to settle down with. "

"Did Yves always want to get away?" Charon asked.

Harriet shrugged. "Wouldn't you? The whole place fell apart when he left.

He'd been in charge of everyone's meals, the work schedules, lessons for the young ones, cleaning, stopping fights, fetching healers...

It was a mess for a while. They tried to make me do it all, but I acted like I was going to run off after him instead, so they hired a few more farmhands and figured it out.

Imagine that. Four people had to be hired to do all the work Yves was doing.

I wouldn't be an oldest Cooper kid if you paid me. "

Charon thought of Yves as he'd been when he first came to the House of Onyx.

He'd finished his chores during his probationary period so quickly that Laurent had thought he'd paid someone else to do it, and then he'd spent the rest of his time scouring the city for theaters, cafés, and gardens.

He'd thrilled at the thought of being a man of leisure, and had quickly set himself up as the resident spoiled brat of the House of Onyx.

Charon wondered if Yves had ever had a moment when he could truly be a child.

It was, he realized with an unpleasant jolt, something they had in common.

Harriet clapped her hands, startling Charon out of his reverie.

"I know. I'll find Yves myself. It'll scare the shit out of him."

"Do you want to come?" When she winked at Charon, he could see Yves in the wicked twinkle in her eyes.

"Give me a hand over the hedge, in any case. We'll go around the side."

"It may not be safe," Charon said. Harriet didn't act like someone trying to gather news of Yves for her aunt.

She seemed to be exactly who she was—a rare, unguarded person who genuinely liked Yves.

He wasn't sure it would be wise to let her slip into a maze full of nobles, particularly when one could be responsible for a young boy's murder.

“It’s a public maze, so there may be pickpockets waiting to take advantage.”

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“Oh, that’s almost quaint.” Harriet wrapped an arm around Charon’s. “Yves said you were nice. That’s good. He needed a few friends in the city.” She walked alongside Charon as they rounded the corner, stopping at the side entrance to the maze. “Is there a trick to it?”

“Not that I know of,” Charon said.

“Right.” Harriet rubbed her hands together and bent to tie her skirts in a knot. “You try it the normal way, and I’ll do it my way. Shout if you see him.”

Harriet proceeded to climb onto the top of the hedge with a chorus of snapping twigs and rustling leaves. Charon heard a thump and a giggle as she collapsed on the other side, then another rustle of bushes as she climbed another hedge.

Charon took the left path, which led down a hodgepodge of brick and hedge. He listened for Harriet, who was gleefully breaking all the rules of hedge mazes everywhere by barreling through it.

“Hisst!”

Charon stopped short as a piece of the hedge lifted up like a window, scattering leaves onto the path. A pale hand popped out and gestured frantically.

“Hisst!”

“Yves?” Charon ducked down to stare into the hedge. Yves looked up at him from a small tunnel built into the hedge. He was dressed in white, which was streaked with

green from the hedges, and he looked like he'd just run off with the royal treasury.

"Get in here," Yves whispered. "Quick, before someone sees you." He shimmied backward through the tunnel.

"It's a little small for me," Charon said.

"That's your fault for being built like a hot, sleeveless wall, Charon.

"Yves disappeared into the tunnel, and Charon tried to gently climb inside.

The tunnel was supported by wood, with green paint that stretched past the hedge leaves to blend in better.

It squeezed him uncomfortably as he moved, and when the flap closed behind him, he was left in pitch darkness.

He shuffled forward until he reached the other side, which opened up into a shady pavilion shielded on all sides by high hedges.

Yves sprawled on a pillow in the middle of it all, with a basket of fruit and glazed scones next to him.

"I found this place a few years ago," he whispered, gesturing for Charon to join him.

Charon sat on the other side of the basket, and Yves fished out a scone.

"I think the queen used to come here with her lovers, but I'm the only one who knows about it anymore.

I saved you the honey and cinnamon one."

Charon couldn't imagine the old queen shimmying through a small tunnel for some peace and quiet, but Yves' talent for gossip was reliable. "Shouldn't you be outside?"

"Yes, but this'll thin out the ones who don't want to put in the work, and it'll give Sabre's people time to seek out the nobles we invited." Yves popped a grape in his mouth. "He dressed up his spies like courtesans, but they're all too serious to pass as them."

"You may want to come out regardless. Your cousin is in the hedge maze, and if the noble who killed that boy is here, that could mean trouble."

Yves nearly choked on the grape. Charon thumped Yves' back, and Yves grabbed Charon's arm with both hands to brace himself.

"Harriet's here? In the maze?"

Charon couldn't see Yves' face well enough in the dark to read his expression. "Yes."

"She's going to scare them more than the swans," Yves said. "I need to find her."

"You aren't worried that she could be in danger?"

"Oh, not Harriet. She's been a farmer her whole life. She could probably throw you if she wanted to."

"She seems to like you," Charon said.

"She has to be, if she's made it all the way to Duciel. She's like Pearl; they hate cities. They make them feel boxed in." Yves flashed a smile. "I feel that way about the country, so we understand each other."

“She was climbing over hedges when I lost sight of her,” Charon said, and Yves covered his mouth with both hands to hide a laugh.

“I should stop her before she breaks an ankle,” Yves said. He covered the basket and dusted off his outfit. “Help sneak me out?”

Charon waved a hand to the tunnel, and Yves wriggled in. After a few seconds of that, Charon gently nudged Yves’ leg with a boot. “You’re showing off.”

“What? No! I’m so modest it’s painful.” Yves finally climbed all the way in, and Charon waited a few seconds to follow.

“I think I hear her,” Yves said, standing on his tiptoes as Charon squeezed free on the other side. “Hoist me up, will you?”

Charon held out a hand, and Yves scrambled up him like a tree. Charon wrapped an arm around Yves’ waist, and Yves braced himself on Charon’s shoulder to peer out over the hedges.

“There he is!” someone shouted.

“Shit!” Yves tried to duck down again. “Set me down! Set me down! She’s this way!”

Yves took off down the path, turned back to Charon, and started hopping anxiously in place.

Charon knew he should have been practical.

Yves should have been paying attention to his suitors, not dragging Charon around to find his cousin.

But as he watched Yves, Harriet's words stayed with him.

Yves had never had any time to himself before he left home.

How much had his parents really raised him, and how likely was it that Yves had raised himself while looking after his siblings?

Neither of them had truly had a childhood.

Was it so wrong, then, to indulge in something impractical?

Charon strode after Yves, and Yves took off again. They narrowly missed Lord Marteau, who slammed into a truly horrifying statue of a jester blocking the path between them, and Yves had to hide behind Charon to avoid the swan pond. They almost ran straight into Harriet, who saw Yves and screamed.

Yves screamed back.

"You little ass!" Harriet shouted, and drew Yves into a crushing embrace. Yves hugged her back just as tightly.

"When did you start wearing a veil?" he asked. "I thought you hated that."

"Ma insisted. She thinks people won't notice that I'm too much like you if I wear my hair up."

"Fat chance. How many doms have you been seeing on the side, you incorrigible whore?"

"Like knows like, Yves."

Yves beamed at her. “Oh, I missed you. You’ve met Charon?”

“Did you hear screaming?” someone called. Yves went pink, and Harriet barked out a laugh.

“Your mother brought the troops with her,” she said. “But I bet I can get out tonight, if you want to treat me to dinner.”

“Treat you? ”

“You’re the rich boy,” Harriet said. “Is that one of your men?”

Charon turned to find Lord Marteau a few feet away, red-faced and panting.

“Nice seeing you again, Harriet,” Yves said, and he bolted like a rabbit into the maze. Charon took a step to follow him, but Harriet moved in front of Lord Marteau instead, cocking her hip.

“Well,” she said, “don’t you look like a dom in need of a challenge? Your collar’s loose.”

“What...” Lord Marteau stared at her. “What are you? You aren’t a courtesan.”

“No, honey,” Harriet said, “courtesans are expensive. Have you ever gotten on your knees for another dom before?”

“Harriet!” Yves appeared from around the corner again. “Stop stealing my suitors!”

“I’m only borrowing!” Harriet called back, and Lord Marteau pushed past her to reach Yves. Yves made a squawking sound, laughed, then Lord Marteau emerged with a triumphant smile and a ribbon wrapped around his fingers.

“No,” he said sharply to Harriet, who just smiled at him. “No.”

“I could have fun with that one,” she said as he fled. She shook out her skirts. “But let’s leave Yves to his challenge. I’d like to borrow you . You can let me in on what Yves hasn’t been telling me in his letters.”

“Reveal nothing!” Yves shouted, and went running off past the fork in the path, followed by a beet-red Raul.

“Don’t listen to him,” Harriet said, and took Charon’s arm again with the same coy air Yves had at his brattiest. “I never do.”

“You were the one to set the rules to this engagement, you know.” Laurent de Rue stood in the doorway to the House of Onyx lounge, dressed in a splendid evening suit with an embroidered black robe. Yves rubbed a sore elbow and winced.

“I didn’t think so many of them would tackle me so enthusiastically.

” At least Raul had only begged for the faintest kiss on the cheek, but everyone else had seemed intent on kissing Yves’ neck, chest, or for a good half-dozen of them, his ass.

One suitor had tackled him from three paces away, the grass stains wouldn’t be washing out of his clothes any time soon.

“I only counted eleven. What happened to the rest?”

“Four were chased out by swans,” Laurent drawled, and Yves smiled. “The courtesans from the House of Silver found three. They won’t thank you for the favor, by the by.”

“They’ll thank me when I’m gone,” Yves said.

The king was personally funding repairs to the House of Silver, but the courtesans who’d worked there were living out of the Houses of Gold and Iron in the meantime.

The House lords there weren’t keen to share attention between their guests and their usual courtesans, so the man in charge of the House of Silver had been running back and forth in a frantic attempt to not lose all their clients in one go.

If Yves could give those courtesans a little extra money to laze around in a hedge maze and flirt with nobles, he didn’t mind.

What he did mind was that his cousin had taken Charon away hours ago, and still hadn’t delivered him.

He didn’t think Harriet would seduce Charon.

She did prefer doms, but Charon wasn’t egotistical enough for her taste.

He was more concerned with what she was probably telling Charon.

Yves hadn’t exactly been a model son by the time he left, and he didn’t want Charon thinking he was a brat.

Or... well... an unprofessional brat. There was a difference, however small, between a man who was a delightful brat for money and one who was an inconsiderate brat in real life.

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“I do wonder,” Laurent said, as Yves buttoned up a clean jacket. “At this rate, you may not have enough suitors to choose from.”

“A tragedy,” Yves said. Laurent raised one perfect eyebrow.

“Mm.” There was enough mild disappointment in Laurent’s dominance to make Yves bristle.

“What?”

“Oh, I said nothing,” Laurent said. “If you wish to eschew finding a husband and marry yourself, I suppose you aren’t the first. It would simply be a waste of all those flowers if you eliminated all your suitors before you reached the aisle. Unless you already have someone in mind?”

Yves looked up at him. Laurent couldn’t be talking about Charon.

He’d been there when Charon had said it would be impossible.

So who else was he hinting at? Lord Marteau was determined, that much was true.

Raul was probably nice, if he could carry a conversation long enough for Yves to understand his motivations.

Lord Yeltsey was sweet in a hopeless sort of way, and he was flighty enough that Yves felt secure that any marriage wouldn’t last too long.

“I’m not sure,” Yves said, carefully.

“May I speak to you as a married man, Yves?”

“You’ve been married for this entire conversation,” Yves said. Laurent gave him a small, warning glare.

“You needn’t marry someone to be bound to them,” Laurent said. “Sometimes...” he tapped the list of remaining suitors on his palm. “Sometimes, you get to know someone so well that perhaps you’re practically married as it is, except you haven’t said it aloud.”

“That’s not how you and Sabre met,” Yves said, brow wrinkling in confusion. What was Laurent talking about?

“Think of who you know who might fit that description. Think very hard.”

Yves opened his mouth. He shut it again, then drummed his fingers on his knees. “Nanette and Simone?”

Laurent pressed his fingers to his temples. “Nanette and Simone. Of course. Yes. Of course.” He turned to leave, fingers still pressed to his temples and grumbling under his breath.

Yves wondered if arranging the contests around Sabre’s investigation was starting to crack Laurent’s unflappable mood. Everyone knew that Simone and Nanette were an item, but neither of them believed in the institution of marriage.

“He’s stressed,” Yves told himself. He headed out of the lounge and toward the foyer. Anyone would be beside themselves with a gaggle of lust-driven, wealthy men to manage.

He stopped short when he reached the entrance.

Harriet was there, clinging to Charon as though they were old friends.

She'd taken off her veil and let down her hair, which cascaded down her shoulders in loose, wavy curls, and she'd tugged her hemline down enough that her breasts were in danger of popping out.

"Oh, Yves," she said, and patted Charon's arm. "You have the most charming housemates."

"Upstairs, Harriet," Yves said, grabbing her by the sleeve. He looked at Charon, but Charon wasn't staring at Harriet's long, gold hair or ample cleavage. He was watching Yves with a cold, dark intensity that made Yves shiver.

"Hello, Charon," Yves said. "I hope she wasn't too much."

"I was lovely," Harriet said. "He bought me a cake. Get off, Yves, you're pinching."

"Excuse me," Yves said, and dragged his protesting cousin up the other set of stairs and into his room. She wrenched free of his grip and turned to examine it all with a low whistle, and Yves slammed the door shut.

"What were you doing?" Yves hissed.

"Learning all about you." Harriet lifted a diamond necklace off a hook on the wall. "Is this yours?"

"Put that down." Yves took the necklace from her and set it back on the hook. "I mean, what were you doing looking like you were trying to tumble Charon?"

Harriet blinked the big, wide eyes that made her an absolute menace in the Starian countryside. “Am I not supposed to?”

“Of course you’re not supposed to!” Yves cried. “He’s—he’s Charon!”

“Yes, and he’s massive,” Harriet said, with a low note of appreciation in her voice that made Yves want to throttle her. “And unattached. Unless he isn’t?”

“No, he isn’t attached to anyone.” Yves tried to sound nonchalant, but his voice wavered. Harriet was clearly too distracted to notice.

“I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have a little fun,” Harriet said. “I wasn’t trying to come on too strong, of course, but if he wanted to...”

“Well, he doesn’t,” Yves snapped.

Harriet raised her brows. “Oh. You’re jealous. ”

“I’m not jealous of anyone,” Yves said.

Harriet glanced at the door. “Then what if I went down there and asked Charon to bend over the tea table?”

“That’s against the rules,” Yves shouted.

Harriet fell silent. They’d set the rules when they were teenagers, on the way to their first spring festival.

They couldn’t tumble anyone who spoke ill of the other, had to avoid anyone with a partner who wasn’t supportive, and under no circumstances were they to poach someone out from under each other.

“So you do like him,” Harriet said. Yves groaned and turned away. “Oh, Yves, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have teased you if I knew.”

“It’s not as though it’ll go anywhere,” Yves said, and collapsed on his bed. Harriet lay down next to him and reached for his hands. She took them in hers, threading their fingers together. “I overheard him talking to Laurent about it. He said an attachment to me would be impossible.”

“Then he’s an ass,” Harriet said, “and I’ll slip a toad in his boots before I leave.”

“Don’t do that.”

“You sound like you’re actually besotted,” Harriet said. She squeezed his hands. “What happened to the boy who said he’d never fall in love?”

“I’m not,” Yves said, but he couldn’t even convince himself. “I’m not good for him. He needs someone who’s serious. Someone who understands all the languages he speaks and knows about art and carpentry and cultural rituals in rural Thalassa.”

Harriet pressed her lips together for a few seconds. “What kind of rituals?”

“Things like scooping seawater out with conch shells to bless the keystone of a house. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Huh.”

“He doesn’t need someone who hates mud squeaking complaints behind him as he travels the world,” Yves said. “I know I’m spoiled. I’ve worked very hard to become this way.”

“That’s not usually how being spoiled works,” Harriet said.

“And I know that there’s something dreadful in his past that he won’t tell anyone about, and it’s the kind of thing that someone who grew up with a huge, loud family in the middle of Staria wouldn’t possibly understand.”

“Have you told him any of this?” Harriet asked.

She winced at Yves’ horrified expression.

“All right, but I think you’re lovely. You’re smart as a whip and you’re bold enough to do what you want, even when everyone else is too meek to stand up for themselves.

I think anyone would be lucky to have you.

” Harriet released his hands to brush a tear from the corner of his eye.

“Well, I love you ,” Yves said.

“Of course you do.” Harriet stroked his cheek, and Yves laughed weakly. “Maybe he thinks it’s impossible because you’re too beautiful and charming, have you ever thought of that?”

“Don’t patronize me, Harriet.” Yves wrapped his arms around her. “I don’t have any clients tonight because of the maze contest. Stay with me for a while?”

“Bribe me with one of those ruby earrings, maybe,” Harriet said, and Yves lightly smacked her. “But I’ll stay.”

Harriet couldn’t remain with him for long. Yves’ mother was bound to look for her eventually, and so when the house started filling up with clients, Yves snuck Harriet out the side door with the ruby earrings and a book of salacious drawings that they

didn't sell in the country.

"You'll come to the ball?" Yves asked. "It should be grand. I'll be blindfolded for most of the dancing."

"I don't have a dress for that kind of ball," Harriet said. "Pearl does, but she'd be too much of a mouse to go. I'll try to convince your mother to let you be in the meantime. You might want to talk to her eventually, though."

Yves sighed. "You know how she is."

"Yes, I do." Harriet squeezed Yves' hand in farewell. "And I don't think anything would have happened between Charon and I."

"You're just being nice," Yves said.

"I don't know about that." Harriet gave Yves a searching look. "It's a funny thing, Yves. All that flirting, primping, and hinting I did? It didn't even matter. It seemed like all Charon wanted to talk about was you."

Seven

Considering that he'd only had two weeks to plan a ball that would attract most of the nobles in Staria, Laurent had outdone himself.

The ballroom belonged to the Duke de Mortain, King Adrien's husband, and Laurent's hired workers had spent days transforming the severe, muted room into a sparkling flower garden.

It was as though someone had lifted a country fair out of a field and dropped it onto the dance floor, then sprinkled crystals everywhere for good measure.

It was precisely the sort of atmosphere Yves adored, and Charon stood in the servants' entrance with his arms crossed tight over his chest, taking in the way light from hundreds of candles glimmered over the floor and along the walls.

Most of the courtesans in the Pleasure District were already there, hoping to ensnare a client or two out from under Yves.

Nearly every noble was in attendance as well, save for King Adrien.

Isidore de Mortain, the king's consort, stood off to the side, watching the gathered nobles carefully.

As the previous king's spymaster, he'd no doubt been informed of Sabre's plan for the ball.

Nearly every servant there was in Sabre's employ, trained to listen to the attending nobles and report on any suspicious behavior.

Charon doubted anyone would confess to kidnapping, torture, and murder at a party, but the nobility didn't have a reputation for discretion.

"Would you look at that?" Laurent said. He was standing next to Charon, dressed in ostentatious black velvet with amethysts on his cuffs, and he adjusted them with a wicked smile. "All these people, and here you are without a mask."

"I don't need one," Charon said.

"We can't have you standing out," Laurent said, ignoring Charon's pointed look at his own lack of a mask. "It's a good thing I thought to have a suit and mask brought in. With a cloak—Yves prefers them, you know. He thinks they look dashing."

"Won't he be blindfolded?" Charon noted the swirling capes of the suitors lining up in the center of the dance floor. Even some of the suitors Yves hadn't chosen were wearing them, and courtesans were eyeing them from the shadows with a calculating hunger.

"The suit's in the room where I'm keeping Sabre," Laurent said. "You don't want to be underdressed."

"I don't need to be here," Charon said. "There are enough people to ensure Yves' safety." He didn't think he could stand an entire ball watching Yves dance with adoring suitors. Some dominants in the crowd may have been masochists, but Charon wasn't one.

Laurent shot him a hard look, all artifice gone. "Then leave."

It was a challenge. Charon felt the cold sting of Laurent's true dominance scraping against his own, daring him to turn around and walk out of the ballroom.

Some gossips said that Laurent had softened since he married Sabre, but the flintlike core that had propelled him through the Pleasure District and into a noble title was still there.

Any other dominant would have backed away or challenged him for the insult of using his dominance so pointedly, but if Laurent's was like a sword, Charon's was like stone, and he stared back with an unmovable patience.

The musicians by the balconies started to play, and Charon turned as a pair of curtains opened at the far end of the room.

A line of scantily dressed young men appeared, draped with flowers and vines like tree nymphs in a play, and bearing Yves on their shoulders.

The lights of the ballroom seemed to glow brighter for his presence, and the music slowed in Charon's ears, going distant.

Yves was grinning, a silver mask over his eyes, hair burning gold in the candlelight.

He was in a sheer silver cloak, tight silver pants, and little else, and he laughed in delight as his entourage set him down in front of the line of suitors.

One of them stepped forward to take his hand, and Yves bowed with a cheeky smile.

He almost stumbled into his dance partner immediately and let out a startled laugh.

"The suit is with Sabre, you said?" Charon stared at Yves as he was guided through the first steps of a quadrille.

Laurent nodded. “You should have time if you hurry.”

Sabre looked up with a grin when Charon opened the door to the small parlor.

Sabre was hardly dressed for the event, with nothing but a slip of fabric to cover his cock and his violet collar, and he was fastening a chain to a conspicuous hook in the wall.

“Oh, Charon. Your suit’s hanging up over the mirror.

You won’t be able to come back for your old things, though, so I’ll bring them by when Laurent and I are done here. ”

Charon raised a brow.

Thankfully, the suit was not to Laurent’s opulent taste.

It was sleek black with a hooded cloak lined with gold, and a black mask that gleamed with glass beads.

It wasn’t to Charon’s taste either, or even Sabre’s.

It looked like something Yves would like.

Charon wondered if he should simply take the suit and toss it into the bin.

Laurent’s well-meaning meddling was starting to wear thin.

“Don’t,” Sabre said. “You’re thinking of going back. Try it, just for a night.”

“You think you’re helping,” Charon said.

“Maybe.” Sabre didn’t even have the grace to look sheepish.

Charon ran his hand over the cloak. “You and Laurent think that Yves’ flirting means something it doesn’t. If his intentions were true, he would have said something. Instead, he’s dancing with his chosen suitors tonight. None of them are me, and they shouldn’t be.”

“Why?” Sabre asked. “I know you don’t speak of what happened in Arktos?”

“And it’s good that you know better than to ask.” Charon’s dominance must have been burdensome, because Sabre made a soft sound and sank into a chair. “You can tell Laurent to stop trying.”

Sabre looked down at his hands, cowed. Charon knew he had likely ruined what was supposed to be a lovely night for Sabre and Laurent, but his iron control was cracking. The sensible thing would be to leave the suit and return to the House of Onyx.

He thought of Yves, masked and sightless, reaching for him in the middle of a ballroom draped with flowers, and he took the suit down from the mirror.

It fit him perfectly, and when he looked at himself, he saw a stranger—tattoos covered, the hood of his cloak shading his masked face just enough to obscure the shape of his jaw. He took a step back, and his cloak swirled around his legs.

“There’s a space in the ballroom waiting for you, if you want it,” Sabre said. Charon left the parlor without a word.

When he returned to the ballroom, Yves was dancing with Raul.

It was a country dance, with a ribbon wrapped around the dancers’ hands to link them

together, and Charon felt a pang in his chest as he realized that Yves had found a way to dance with Raul without touching.

Since Yves couldn't see, he had to rely on tugs of the ribbon to move, but Raul kept forgetting to lead and sent them stumbling over the dance floor.

Yves laughed. "You have to lead, Raul!"

"Hey!" One of the other suitors turned to Laurent. "He's not supposed to know who we are."

Raul blushed pink, but Yves pulled his ribbon, sending them in another direction. They passed close to the dancers ringing the open circle in the ballroom, and Charon moved forward.

"Don't listen," he heard Yves say. "I'm glad you came."

"So am I," Raul said, and they whirled away.

Charon caught a glimmer of yellow—Oleander stood to the side, glaring at them both, hands shoved in their pockets. The music died, and Yves' laugh rang out like the tinkle of breaking glass. He led Raul back to the line of suitors, and Lord Marteau smiled smugly as he took a step forward.

Laurent cleared his throat and raised a hand, and the musicians stilled.

The dancers and onlookers turned to look, and even Lord Marteau paused, brows knit in confusion.

Laurent smiled, head tilted. Charon could imagine what he'd been like as a courtesan—his elegant charm hiding a dominance sharp enough to kill, his strange

violet hair and eyes a novelty in the Pleasure District.

The ballroom was arrested by his presence, and when he turned to Charon, he realized with a cold rush of unfamiliar terror what Laurent intended.

Laurent pressed a finger to his lips, then extended a hand to Charon. An invitation.

Charon took a step into the circle. Yves' lips were slightly parted, his hand still extended for his next partner, clearly confused by the sudden silence.

Charon could feel the eyes of the ballroom turned his way as he crossed the distance between them.

Lord Marteau moved as though to intercept Charon, but Laurent shook his head, and Charon stepped around him.

Yves turned to him like a sunflower following the light, and Charon thought of Nikos kissing Aster behind the tea shop in Axon.

The boy he'd been had only wanted something good and bright to hold onto in the crumbling, lonely chasm his life had become.

Charon found, as he stood before Yves under the eyes of half of Duciel, that he still wanted that.

One good thing. A candle easily snuffed out, too delicate for hands that had been trained to hurt.

But maybe he could have this, just once. Just for a night. A dance.

Charon took Yves' hand, and the music swelled, drawing them close like a great

wave pushing them into the center of everything, bright and beautiful.

A calloused hand enclosed his, and Yves felt something shift inside him.

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The night had been wonderful so far. He was pretty sure he'd guessed most of his suitors by touch or scent—or in Lord Hugh's case, by the little hopping step he made every time he had to turn.

But then the ballroom had gone silent, and the man taking Yves' hand was strangely familiar.

Yves had felt that hand on his before. He'd felt the warmth, the steady assurance of his steps, the weight of his dominance, but no matter what client or suitor ran through his mind, none of them fit.

The song was one of his favorites, an old country dance they still played in dance halls in lower Duciel, and Yves didn't need sight to follow it.

Even so, the man who held him guided him through the steps with a firm touch on his lower back and a steady grip on his hand, and Yves felt a rush of heat roll through him as he followed.

He wasn't laughing like he had through the other dances.

This was different, more somber, as though the man guiding him was too intent on Yves to even smile.

Yves tilted his head up, trying to get a glimpse of him through the slit at the bottom of his mask, but all he saw was a flash of black and gold.

"All right," Yves said at last. "I give in. Who are you?"

The man didn't answer. He lifted Yves as he turned, possibly to avoid a dancer at the edge of the circle, and Yves shivered at the way his hands wrapped around his waist. He should have been terrified of falling, like he'd been when someone tried to swing him in the first dance.

He should have objected. But he couldn't. He wasn't afraid to fall.

The man set him down, and Yves' breath left him as he was turned again, led back down a line.

He felt flushed and strange, and he itched to take off his mask.

He hadn't felt this way with anyone—not even as his favorite clients took him in the House of Onyx, bringing him to a glorious release on a bed of silks.

His waist burned with the touch of his partner's hands, and his breath came short and hot.

Tears were stinging the corners of his eyes, and he felt a strange ache in his chest, a low, deep yearning that left him dazed and unsure.

He stumbled, and his partner stopped to steady him. A hand touched his cheek, reverent, light, and Yves impulsively stretched up on his toes, lips parting in a silent expectation.

He heard a faint sound, and he could tell, almost instinctively, that the man holding him felt the same ache as he did.

"Please," he whispered. But before he could say, tell me who you are, warm lips pressed his, and Yves reached up to clutch a silk cloak sliding over strong shoulders as he kissed back. It was hot and fierce and tender all at once, and Yves clung to him

as he was lifted off his feet a second time.

“Please,” he said again, before his breath was taken again in another warm kiss.

“Please, please, tell me, please.”

The man kissed him one last time, gently set Yves down, and withdrew. The silk cloak slid out of Yves’ hands, and he suppressed a groan of dismay as footsteps clicked across the floor.

He ripped off his mask. A cry rang out from the suitors behind him, but Yves was too busy searching the crowd. Cloaks swirled everywhere, black and red and gold, too many to count among the flowers and crystal ornaments lining the ballroom. Yves stood there, clutching his mask in both hands.

“Yves.” He turned. Lord Theobold Marteau was there, smiling warmly, one hand extended. “If we’re done with this pretense, perhaps the rest of us might have a turn.”

Yves looked at him. “That wasn’t you.”

“Of course it wasn’t. I would never take such liberties unless you wished me to.” Lord Marteau leaned in with a conspiratorial wink. “Would you?”

Yves stared down at his hand. Music was playing again. He turned to the men eagerly waiting for a dance, and up into Lord Marteau’s eyes.

It was probably a fluke, the sensible part of him said. Anyone could get carried away during a dance. Someone being a good dancer didn’t make them kind or thoughtful. Raul was atrocious at dancing, but Yves had thoroughly enjoyed himself, hadn’t he?

He put the mask back on, and the line of hopeful suitors disappeared.

Yves tried to lose himself in the affection of his suitors and the thrill of the music, but it wasn't the same.

He kept forgetting the steps—something he hadn't done since he was a boy—and even though a few partners tried to kiss him after they were done, Yves gently turned them aside.

None of them gave him that same warm, aching feeling, and when he finally took his mask off, he couldn't bring himself to smile and fawn.

He just stood there, awkward and uncertain, looking into the eyes of men who only wanted to possess him.

“Thank you for...” Yves cleared his throat. “For an engaging night. For now, please enjoy yourselves.” He gestured to the far edges of the ballroom, and courtesans emerged to pull the prospective suitors away. Only Raul didn't follow, and Yves was surprised to find pity in his big, soulful eyes.

“Can we talk?” Raul asked. “Privately?”

Yves didn't want to talk. All he wanted was to ask Laurent who had danced with him after Raul, but years of politely acquiescing to his clients took over his body. “Of course.”

He led Raul to a balcony, trying to smile at the nobles and wealthy suitors eyeing him as he passed, and then he twitched the balcony curtains closed. It overlooked a small courtyard, where a courtesan was not-so-discreetly dragging one of Yves' suitors into the bushes.

Yves leaned on the balcony railing and looked Raul up and down.

He seemed nervous, as usual—the most he'd ever spoken in Yves' presence had been around Oleander's cat, and Yves wasn't sure he had it in him to have a true conversation.

Still, he might be the only suitor who would be honest about the man Yves had kissed.

“Who was the man I danced with after you?” Yves asked, right as Raul blurted, “I used to work in the House of Silver.”

Yves stared at Raul. Raul stared back.

“You were a courtesan?” Yves was thrown.

Raul was so touch-averse that he tensed if Yves even stood too close.

How would that work in the House of Silver?

Unless, Yves thought with an unpleasant shiver, that was where it started.

Being a courtesan was work, and it sometimes involved doing things that weren't to one's personal taste, but most house lords had ways to protect a courtesan if a client went too far.

Most, but not all. The current lord of the House of Silver was a good sort, but his predecessor had a notorious reputation. “When?”

“Years ago. You were just starting out in the House of Onyx.” Raul twisted his hands together, and a distant memory stirred in Yves' mind of an anxious face in a tangle of black hair, and finger-shaped bruises along the jaw and throat. Yves squinted at Raul, who cringed back.

“You were the man I gave all my pocket money to,” Yves said.

It had been a foolish risk, but Yves had been certain that he could wrinkle a few extra gifts out of his clients to make up for it.

He still felt a little sheepish about handing all his money to the first sad-eyed former courtesan he’d met.

Percy had laughed at him for it— you really are a country boy at heart, aren’t you—and Yves had told no one else.

Generosity wasn’t exactly a virtue among courtesans.

“So you made it out,” Yves said.

“Yes!” Raul’s face lit up in another rare, small smile.

“Yes, I did, thanks to you. I made it home, and it turned out my brother...my brother had an accident, and he couldn’t make glass anymore, but I still knew the old ways.

I’ll be the head of the house officially when I marry, which means I’ll own most of the glassmaking houses in Kallistos. ”

And Kallistos supplied glass almost everywhere. Yves gave Raul a long, considering look. This bashful, shrinking violet was probably richer than the king. “Why couldn’t you tell me this before?”

“I don’t know. You’re just so...” Raul gestured helplessly. “So beautiful, and nice, and you make me laugh, which I haven’t done in a while. I know you don’t love me, though.”

“Oh,” Yves said, automatically. “Of course I do.”

“You don’t,” Raul interrupted. “That’s all right.

I only want to repay you. I would have gone to the quarries otherwise, and they would have killed me there.

I know you still have the rest of your contest, and I understand if this is too presumptuous, but I can offer you something the rest of them can’t.

” Raul rocked forward, then back, then finally forward again.

He shakily took Yves’ hands in his. Yves could feel his fingers trembling.

“I can give you security. I must marry to keep my position. You need to ensure that you don’t have to cater to nobles for the rest of your life.

I can provide that. You’ll have all the money you’d like, and you can live anywhere, love anyone.

You’ll have the space to do it. You won’t even need to visit more than once or twice a year, for holidays. ”

Yves blinked slowly. Raul let go of his hands and started wringing them again.

“I can write a contract,” Raul said. “If I break it, guild law entitles you to half of my fortune.”

“And you’d do that for me,” Yves said. “All because I helped you once?”

“Because I like you,” Raul said, “and I think you deserve it.”

It was the strangest proposal Yves had ever received. Dozens of past clients had begged for his hand with vows of eternal adoration; Raul wasn't offering that. He was being practical, but he cared about Yves, and he was willing to risk half his fortune to prove it.

He just didn't love him.

Still, it wasn't about love. None of the other suitors loved Yves, did they?

Yves thought of the person who'd swept him so carefully across the dance floor, and the hollow ache in his chest returned.

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“You don’t have to decide yet,” Raul said, when the silence stretched between them. “But please consider it.”

Yves nodded. He felt numb and distant from his own thoughts, a specter drifting in the aching loneliness of his body. Raul got up to leave, and Yves raised a hand to stop him.

“The man I danced with after you,” Yves said. “Do you know who he was?”

“I thought you wore a mask to be impartial,” Raul said. “No, I don’t know who he was. It was too hard to see his face. But he came in late, and he left as soon as the music ended.”

Yves frowned. Maybe that was the only kind of love he was suited for—fleeting and anonymous, nothing stable, all flash and glitter. Surges of emotion came and went, but security was sensible. He should be happy to have something sensible.

“I’m sorry,” Raul said. There was so much kindness in his gaze, but he was right. Yves didn’t love him. “He seemed like a good dancer.”

“Thank you, Raul,” Yves whispered, and Raul closed the curtain behind him.

Yves heard a murmured apology behind the curtain, and it switched open again. Yves stood, half expecting Raul to have changed his mind, and stepped back when he saw Oleander standing there.

“Is it true?” Oleander asked. They sounded a little breathless, and their eyes shone a

touch too brightly. “After all this, you’re accepting the richest man of the group?”

“Look, Olly,” Yves said, “I don’t really have time to deal with whatever you’re going through.”

“I’m not going through anything,” Oleander said. “It’s just that you’ve been monopolizing everyone, and now all it took was one wealthy man to open his purse.”

“If you want him, why don’t you try charming him instead of bothering me?”

” Yves snapped. All the confusion and heightened emotion of the night spilled over in one exhausted rush.

“Do you know why I made it to the top, Oleander? Because I didn’t waste time wondering what other courtesans were up to, and I bothered with my own business. Maybe you should try that.”

Oleander looked almost hurt, but Yves pushed down the pang of guilt. They needed to learn, and Yves had enough to deal with. “I have offers, you know. Just today, a noble told me that he could offer me twice what Laurent pays me.”

“Then do that,” Yves said.

Oleander hesitated, opened their mouth, and drew back. “I was just...fine. Fine.” They turned to go, leaving Yves alone with the cool night air and his utterly bewildered heart.

Charon strode through the streets of Duciel. His cloak billowed behind him in a cool spring wind, and music drifted from the night market.

He was a fool. All this time, he’d been quietly punishing himself for the sins of his

youth.

He'd been living as an exile, paying penance for fleeing Arktos, for never questioning his role as an interrogator, for Aster's death, for the death of the child that had never been allowed to flourish inside of him.

Arktos had been the first to tear apart the garden that could have been Charon's life, but when he no longer had anyone to do that terrible work, he had picked up the same tools and ensured that nothing would grow.

It was time to put those tools down. He could still feel Yves' lips on his, warm despite the evening chill.

He hadn't truly been afraid of hurting Yves.

He'd been afraid of releasing the grip he had over his own life.

Love was terrifying, and the man who'd talked himself through the desert and into the mountains bordering Staria wasn't supposed to feel afraid.

Charon felt it now; fear, heady and thick, making his heart drum faster and his palms itch as he approached the House of Onyx.

A carriage rolled past him, and he caught a glimpse of Oleander in the window—probably out on an assignation, which meant the house would be largely empty.

He paid no mind to Johan, who was watching the door, and practically flew up the stairs.

He found what he was looking for in a small cloth bag behind a row of books on the

highest shelf.

Gold clinked as he emptied it into his palm.

The coins were the same ones he'd stitched into his uniform when he was a boy, engraved with the symbol of the Arkoudai who had left Katoikos to defend the borders centuries ago.

It represented the war Arktos never let die, the military that was no longer necessary, the oath of fealty that Charon thought he'd broken.

He would have been buried with them if he remained in Arktos, and he'd kept them out of the same ruinous guilt that had led him here.

Nikos had been young and foolish. He'd loved too easily and couldn't pick up the pieces when he fell.

He could have used someone to care for him—someone who could have given him the freedom he needed to understand his grief, to make foolish decisions, to live.

Yves would have given him that. He thought of how prettily Yves had begged in his arms, the thrill of dominance that surged inside him as he'd kissed Yves with all the fervor he'd been holding back for so long.

He slipped the coins in his pocket. He'd show them to Yves when the night was done. He'd tell him everything—what he'd done in Arktos, the journey that shaped him, the way Yves had become so integral to Charon's life. Yves deserved to know the truth.

Morning was breaking when he made it back to the house of Onyx. He was shirtless and streaked with soot and he smelled like the forge, but he passed the baths to head right for Laurent and Sabre's bedroom.

He swung open the door, and Laurent scrambled up to his elbows with a squawk of alarm. A lump of sheets between Laurent's legs moved to reveal Sabre.

"What?" Sabre asked. He slung the sheets off his shoulders and stared at Charon. "Oh. You look..."

"I'm in love with Yves," Charon said.

Laurent struck a match and lit the lamp by his bedside. "I assumed."

"You did kiss him in front of everyone," Sabre said. "Good for you."

"Does he know?" Laurent asked.

"No." Charon was still flying on the giddy weightlessness he'd felt since they'd kissed on the dance floor. "But he will. I'll tell him tomorrow."

"You seem..." Laurent glanced at Sabre.

"Energetic," Sabre said. "You can always just tell him now."

"No, he prefers some level of dramatics." Charon set his cloak down on a chair and started pacing across Laurent's rug. "Perhaps a play. Rose could—no. No. I'll need a barrel of flowers and access to the roof."

Laurent nodded. "Right."

"Or I could take him to the fountains by the Crescent Gardens," Charon said.

"Yes," Sabre said. "That's an option."

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Laurent asked.

“No,” Charon said. “And yes.” His mind was already reeling with half-formed plans.

A few weeks ago, he would have approached this calmly and quietly, if at all.

Now, his thoughts flitted about like an upturned cage of butterflies.

“I respect your discretion in not telling Yves until I’ve arranged matters. Good night.”

“Night,” Sabre said, faintly.

Charon closed the door. Tomorrow, he would tell Yves the truth—the whole truth, even the parts Charon had been holding from himself.

He’d bring him to the gardens with a cake from his favorite cafe to bribe him.

Even if Yves didn’t care for him in the same way, telling him would be enough.

A small part of Charon believed that the kiss they’d shared had spoken to something real—something that had been stirring inside for too long.

Charon was done being sensible and cautious.

He headed down the stairs with his coins clasped tight in his fist. It was time, he thought, to act a little more like Yves.

Eight

The cavalry came the next day.

Sensibility “Sybil” Cooper, matriarch of the Cooper clan and a dominant who could put even old King Emile in his place, arrived outside the House of Onyx in the family carriage shortly after dawn.

Pearl, Yves’ younger sister, sat on the driver’s bench with Harriet while Tony clambered down to approach the front door.

The sturdy carriage horses eyed the House of Onyx with a casual disdain that his family rarely allowed themselves to show in public.

Yves slipped down the stairs just in time to meet Tony at the entrance.

The last thing he wanted was to have half the House awake to watch his family raise a fuss in the foyer.

He barely felt like checking with Laurent to see if the invitations to the next contest had been sent out, let alone like facing his mother at the crack of dawn, but it seemed that fate was determined to spit on him.

“What?” Yves asked. Tony glanced over his shoulder, and a curtain in the carriage window twitched.

“Ma says she won’t meet you here,” Tony said.

“All right,” Yves said, tired beyond all reckoning. “Tell her that’s nice of her and to have a safe trip home.”

“Darling! Cooper!” Yves winced. He hadn’t felt his mother’s particular brand of dominance in years, and it was like a firm thumb and forefinger twisting his ears until they burned. “Get in the carriage this instant!”

“I’m too busy whoring, Mother,” Yves called. Harriet snorted, and Tony pulled his cap down over his eyes. “I’m tired from being fucked by my prospective suitors all night. Come back tomorrow.”

The curtain twitched again. “Darling Cooper.”

“It’s Yves,” Harriet said, before Yves could open his mouth. She winked at him.

The carriage door swung open, and Yves stared into his own face in twenty years—beautiful and fierce, curly hair going gray at the temples, with freckles merging into splotches over her cheeks and nose.

“That’s enough,” his mother said. “We’ll meet you at the Grouse and Bee.”

“Will you?” Yves asked. “Because I don’t know how you’re going to make me come.”

Go on, he thought, glaring at his mother. Did you think I was a brat in my teens? Because I’ve been a professional for years.

His mother gave him the same sharp glare.

“The two of you,” Tony muttered, disappearing into his hat. “It’s like watching someone fight their own reflection.”

“Don’t butt in, Tony,” Yves said.

“Don’t mutter, Tony,” Sybil said. She and Yves resumed glaring at each other. “Darling. Make yourself presentable and meet us in half an hour. It’s the least you can do.”

“The least I can do after what?” Yves asked. “Escaping you?”

“Why do you do this?” Pearl cried, throwing the reins down. “She’s never like this with anyone else!”

“She’s like this because I’m the eldest,” Yves said.

“She’s like this because you’re like this,” Tony mumbled. Yves and Sybil turned their glares to him, and Tony hunched his shoulders. “But it’s my fault for saying it, sure.”

Yves was about to tell his mother to go back home and worry about the rest of her children when he remembered what Charon had said the last time Yves received a summons. He didn’t need to meet her at a place of her choosing, but he didn’t have to outright reject her, either.

“I’ll see you at the Honeybee Court in half an hour,” Yves said. “It’s a cafe in the Crescent Garden. Don’t worry, I’ll cover the bill.”

“For everyone?” Harriet asked. Pearl smacked her on the arm, but Harriet looked unaffected.

“Of course,” Yves said. “I can afford it.” He smiled sweetly at his mother. “Whoring is lucrative.”

“We can cover our own costs,” his mother said. “We aren’t destitute.”

“Did I say you were?”

“Not again,” Tony groaned. He slumped back toward their mother, and Yves kept smiling brightly until Pearl and Harriet urged the horses forward. He didn’t drop his expression until they’d disappeared behind the line of pleasure houses, then immediately scrambled upstairs to change.

Charon met him in the hall between their rooms. He looked slightly disheveled, and his black hair curled in his face as though he hadn’t yet had the time to brush it and tie it back.

“Yves.” There was an odd sense of urgency in his voice, but Yves barely noticed it, too preoccupied with the imminent threat of tea with his mother.

“Sorry, Charon, I’m meeting the general for war talks.” He opened his door and started digging through his closet. “What is it?”

“War talks?” Charon stood in the doorway, frowning.

“Meeting my mother at the Honeybee,” Yves said. He pulled out a shirt and wriggled into it. “She’s probably dragging along whatever husband candidate she chose to bring me to heel. And anyone who will join her on a trip to intimidate me into clipping my own wings has to be an ass.”

“Do you need someone to come with you?” Charon asked.

Yves snorted. “Absolutely. But I don’t want to subject you to my mother.” He stepped into some trousers—tight ones, just a touch too flashy to be respectable. “And here I’d had such a lovely night.”

“I heard,” Charon said, and Yves hesitated in the middle of tugging on his boots.

Did Charon know that he'd kissed one of the dancers?

Not that it mattered, of course. Yves could kiss anyone he wanted to.

It was only that the kiss the night before had felt right in a way Yves still couldn't name, and when he lingered on it too long, he started to feel that low, deep ache in his chest again.

"It was eventful," Yves said. "It was a shame that you couldn't make it."

"Yves," Charon said, as Yves smoothed down his hair. "About the ball last night..."

"I'm so sorry." Yves shoved a ruby ring on his index finger. "I really do want to talk about it, Charon, but I have to get to war right now." He stopped to get on his tiptoes, brushing a lock of hair out of Charon's eyes. "Let me get that. You look nice with your hair down, you know."

"You always look—" Charon started to say, but Yves was already turning to the stairs. He stopped and twisted around.

"Sorry? Did you say something?"

"I'll tell you when you return," Charon said, "unless you'd rather have someone there with you."

"I'd need an army," Yves said, and ran back down the rest of the stairs.

He took a hansom cab to the Honeybee. The cafe was mostly outdoors, with a small kitchen in a brightly painted shed and tables set around the garden.

Most of Yves' family was waiting for him when he arrived, seated in a half-circle of

tables with Yves' mother and a tall, squirrely older fellow next to her in the middle.

"Yves!" Yves took a step back as Sunny bolted out of his seat. He was big for his age, about thirteen and already towering over the rest of his siblings. He grabbed Yves in an embrace that almost cracked his ribs.

"Ma's about to explode," Sunny whispered. "I asked her to take me to an opera yesterday and she looked like I was asking to join you in the House of Onyx."

"I'll take you instead," Yves said. Sunny claimed he couldn't hold a tune to save his life, but he was always asking Yves to describe operas for him in his letters.

Out of all of Yves' siblings, Sunny was the one who loved city life the most, and he'd said more than once that he'd like to follow in Yves' footsteps one day.

"You'll have to sneak me out." Sunny took Yves' hand—just like he had when he was young, even though most people his age would have been mortified to be seen holding their brother's hand in public—and led him to the center table.

"Leave us here to talk, Sunshine," Yves' mother said. Her dominance was oppressive as usual. Sunny instinctively looked down, but he didn't let go of Yves' hand.

"He hasn't seen me in ages, Mother. Let him be.

" Yves sat down, and it struck him that Sunny might have held his hand out of an instinctive bid for comfort.

Growing up as a submissive in the Cooper house wasn't the easiest experience, especially without Yves to take the brunt of his mother's displeasure.

Yves felt a pang of guilt, which quickly turned into the familiar outrage that he had to

be the one to protect them in their own home.

“Darling.” Sybil gestured to the man sitting next to her. “I’d like to introduce you to Lester Hatfeld.”

Yves smiled at the man. He was at least thirty years older than him, which wasn’t a problem in theory, but it bothered Yves that his mother thought that no one younger would be interested.

He was looking at Yves like someone about to pick through a tart at a breakfast table—which was, again, not technically a problem, or it wouldn’t have been before yesterday.

But Yves couldn’t get the dance at the ball out of his mind, the surety of being held by someone who wanted him as more than a bauble to put on a shelf and fuck occasionally.

“So we’ve met,” Yves said. He turned back to his mother. “He isn’t on my approved list.”

“Here, now,” Lester said. His voice had a reedy, thin dominance to it, and Yves felt like a cat having his fur brushed the wrong way. “A submissive should greet their dominant on his knees, with his head bowed.”

“Good thing you’re not my dominant,” Yves said. Sunny let go of Yves’ hand and covered his mouth. “Mother. I already have a plan for my future. Admit that I’m a lost cause and move on.”

“I can’t simply move on,” Sybil said. “People in the village are starting to talk.”

“They’ve been talking since the dawn of time.”

“That is no way to speak to a dominant, let alone your mother,” Lester said.

“Lester.” Yves didn’t bother to put on a polite smile anymore. “The first rule of working with a courtesan in Duciel—don’t insert yourself where you’re not wanted.”

Lester’s face went dangerously pink. “You’d have the back of my hand for that.”

“No, he will not,” Sybil said sharply, and Lester drew back, cowed.

“You’re the one who picked him for me,” Yves said. “That’s a reflection on you and your taste.”

“I have never,” Lester said, rising to his feet, “been more insulted in my life.”

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Sybil raised her hands in the air, knocking Lester off balance and back into his seat. “No one else wanted you!”

At the table nearby, Harriet sucked in an audible breath.

“Yes, they do.” Sunny’s voice was small at Yves’ side. “They do, Ma. That’s why you came running. Everyone in Duciel wants to marry Yves.”

At that moment, Yves would have gladly given away every cent he’d earned to set Sunny up in a house next to the opera. He patted Sunny’s back where his mother couldn’t see, and Sunny ducked his head and looked away sheepishly.

“They want to own you,” Sybil said, looking into Yves’ eyes. “Is that what you want? To be owned by someone who thinks they can buy you?”

“That’s not what this is?” Yves gestured to the red-faced Lester.

“Ma, you and Pa run one of the biggest farms on this side of Staria. Anyone from town who asked for my hand would be asking for part of that. Here, I control what I give to people, and I control what they can take from me. And people do want me. Even submissives want me.”

Sybil raised her brows. “What does a submissive want with another submissive?”

“Maybe my company. Maybe my companionship. Maybe he likes me, Ma.” Yves slammed his hands on the table. Sybil rose to meet him, staring into his eyes.

“Does he love you?”

“Does he ?” Yves jerked a head to Lester. “I’m sorry we can’t all have the love you and Pa have. It must be real special. A true love, for him to ignore how you tread all over your children because you can’t handle us having minds of our own!”

“Oh, no,” Pearl moaned.

“I tried,” Sybil said. Her voice was shaking, and she clenched her hands on the table.

“I did try, Darling. But at every turn, you tested me.”

“If I was a test, then you failed,” Yves said.

Part of him shrank at the hurt in his mother’s eyes, but he’d already gone too far to turn back.

There was only one thing he could do to end it now.

And it would work. It would be fine. He could manage it, even if it didn’t feel the same as love.

Even if the one thing he wanted was, as Charon had said, impossible.

“It’s too late. You can bring as many dominants as you want here to look at me as though being a courtesan is something shameful, but it won’t matter.

Raul Vitrier, the wealthiest man in Kallistos, proposed to me last night. ”

Sunny gasped outright. Harriet pressed a hand to her chest. Sybil looked almost tearful.

“Yves,” Harriet said. “I think?—”

“He’s a submissive, Mother.” Yves leaned across the table, refusing to break eye contact. “He’s kind, and he’s thoughtful, and he cares about me. And in a few weeks’ time, he’s going to be my husband! ”

Charon stood by the gates of the Crescent Garden.

A low wind swept over his boots, bringing the scent of rose blossoms and the citrus oils Yves liked to apply to his neck, and petals stirred on the pebbled walkway.

Voices rose at the tables in the garden, but they merged into a cacophonous din in Charon’s ears.

It’s too late. Yves had said it himself.

Charon had spent so long punishing himself for his past that Yves had, quite practically, moved on to secure his future.

Charon had even helped ensure that it would happen.

Raul would have never caught Yves’ eye if Charon hadn’t thought him a more deserving match.

All Charon would have now would be a masked dance and a kiss in the candlelight. Yves had made his choice.

Charon left the garden. He thought of Nikos turning his dominance on himself during the long walk to Staria and considered trying again. You don’t love him. You never loved him.

The words wouldn't come. Perhaps Charon had ruined his chance at being with Yves, but he couldn't deny how he felt.

He let it take hold inside him, a pain almost deeper than the one that had drawn Nikos to Staria.

Nikos hadn't truly known what love felt like.

He'd only known the promise of love. What he felt for Yves was that promise made real, and he had himself to blame for not acting on it quickly enough.

He walked back to the House of Onyx alone. Laurent tried to stop him in the lounge, where he was no doubt trying to resolve some burgeoning issue between a worried-looking Nanette and Percival, but Charon brushed him off and ascended the stairs to his room.

If it hadn't been for Yves living next door, Charon would have left years ago. A part of him had thought that Yves might want him after the night of the fire, but that had just been the result of stress and heightened emotion. Yves had to think about his future, and so did Charon.

He was halfway through gathering his things to be disposed of in the refuse pile at the edge of the Pleasure District when someone opened his door without knocking.

"Turn around and close the door," Charon said. He didn't bother tempering his dominance. He heard knees thump on the wood floor and a whimper of pain—the intruder was a submissive, then—but the door didn't close, and so Charon turned. "I said?—"

Yves knelt in the doorway, blinking hard, one hand on the frame. "That was dirty, Charon."

“Why are you here?” Charon asked. He could hear the harshness in his voice, but he couldn’t manage to soften it. It felt as though all the gentility he’d tried to acquire since coming to Staria had died in the Crescent Garden. “You should be planning your wedding.”

“Laurent told you already?” Yves stared at the partly empty room, and his face paled. “What are you doing? I thought you weren’t leaving until the summer.”

“Plans have changed.” Charon dropped a stack of books in one of the rubbish boxes, and Yves winced.

“But that’s A History of Doves, ” Yves said. “It’s one of your favorites.”

“I can’t take it with me to Gerakia. You may keep it if you like.

” Charon forced himself to take a deep breath.

He didn’t need to punish Yves for his own foolishness.

“I’m sorry. I have to go. I’ve been here too long already, and it isn’t your concern.

You should focus on your wedding. I’m sure it will be a good one.

Raul...” Charon could taste the bitterness of jealousy on the back of his tongue, and he swallowed it. “He is a kind man.”

“Do you disapprove?” Yves hadn’t risen from his knees. “Because half my family does. It would be nice to have someone on my side when it happens.”

“I know,” Charon said. “But I can’t.”

“Can you at least help us with Olly?” Yves asked. “I mean, Oleander. They haven’t come back since last night.”

“Many people overindulged at the ball, Yves. They may be recovering.”

“Yes, but they haven’t fed their cat.” Yves looked down.

“I think it might be my fault. They overheard Raul propose to me last night, and they said some things that worry me, now that they haven’t come back.

I think someone’s been making them an offer.

A noble, Charon. I didn’t think it meant anything until now. ”

Charon frowned. The boy who’d set the fire at the House of Silver had spoken of a noble making promises. “You don’t think Olly was lured by the man who tortured that child?”

“I don’t know,” Yves said. “I just know they wouldn’t go anywhere without their cat. They love that ugly, old thing.”

Charon’s skin went cold as he remembered seeing Olly’s face in a carriage outside the House of Onyx. “I saw them last night, outside. They were in a carriage, but I thought they were going to a client’s overnight.”

“In their first year as a courtesan? Laurent wouldn’t allow that.” Charon mentally kicked himself as Yves’ words struck home. He should have noticed. He’d been too giddy at the memory of dancing with Yves to consider that something had been wrong. “Was there a crest on the carriage?”

“I didn’t see it.” Charon set down the rest of his books. “But Johan was at the door.

He might have.”

Yves tried to get to his feet, and Charon gently pulled him up by the arm.

Yves glanced up at him, and his eyes were so full of confusion and worry that Charon had to step away, unsure if he could trust himself not to tell him the true reason he was leaving so soon.

But that could wait. If Olly had been taken by the man setting up illegal brothels near the harbor, then they didn’t have long to find them.

Johan was downstairs, sitting by himself while Laurent and Sabre spoke in their office. He jumped when he saw Charon’s expression, but Yves swept in before he could bolt, easing him back down to his chair.

“Johan,” Yves said, with all the smooth charm of the best courtesan in Staria, “did you see a carriage stop by the House before Charon came home last night?”

Johan raised his brows. “I don’t know. Wait.

Yes. It was a big black one, with an owl on the side.

I remember because it almost ran me over the other day when I was going out for more soap.

Why? Does it have something to do with Olly?

” He looked like he was on the verge of tears.

Johan and Olly had never been particularly close, but Johan was an emotional young man.

“Maybe,” Yves said. He glanced at Charon.

“That was Lord Marteau’s coach. He always has owls on everything.

It’s part of his family heraldry. But that doesn’t make sense.

Lord Marteau is one of my suitors. He couldn’t be doing something like that if he’s planning to marry me. I’d be bound to notice.”

“He couldn’t be doing something like what?” Johan asked.

Charon looked at Yves. Yves was the highest-paid courtesan since Laurent, and he’d thrown the nobility into chaos just for the chance of having his hand in marriage—a step up from being a kept pet, because marriage meant a share of a lord’s title and holdings.

His retirement from the Pleasure District would create a vacuum, one that other courtesans would struggle to fill.

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If a man wanted to create his own string of brothels far from the king's control, he couldn't simply abduct Yves.

People like Jesse, the boy who'd set the fire, didn't have powerful friends to seek them out.

Olly was a Katoikos citizen far from home.

But if someone were to marry Yves, that would give him a way to spirit Yves away without causing a fuss.

People would think that they were retreating from the public eye for a time, and so long as Yves appeared in public now and then, his new husband could use his skills and submissive magnetism to gather new clients to the brothels.

It would be risky, but far more profitable than torturing scared young urchins into obedience.

A spark of rage burned in the core of Charon's body, hotter than the sun that had beaten down on him in the desert.

Lord Theodore Marteau had family holdings by the sea.

He even played at being a pirate in his choice of dress, prancing about like the thieves who raided Staria's shoreline.

If he'd taken Olly, then he wouldn't hesitate to use Yves until he was like the boy

who'd died in the cells, starving and hopeless, desperate for any comforting word.

"Charon." Yves' voice shook. "You're scaring me."

"What is it?" Johan asked, as Charon stood. "What's happening?"

"Stay here," Charon said, with as much dominance as he dared to use so close to Laurent's office. "Tell Laurent and Sabre that they needn't clean up after me."

"No, I'm not doing that," Yves said, scrambling after Charon as he strode for the door. "You don't think it's him? But he's been so public about courting me. Wouldn't he want to stay low? And I can't imagine him killing anyone. Charon. Charon, maybe you should turn around."

"Stay in the House of Onyx, Yves." Charon found the tone he'd used on his way to Staria—cold and hard, strong enough to cut through the bite of hunger and grief. "Plan your wedding."

Yves' footsteps faded behind him. Charon kept walking, steady and resolute, his hands bare, a calm, quiet fury eating through every vein of his body. It was more powerful than dominance, as hot as love, as desire, as years of nights spent reading in his room with Yves drinking tea by the fire.

Then he heard footsteps again, faster this time, and Yves appeared beside him with his hands pressed flat to his ears and a scowl forming over his beautiful face.

"I'm not leaving you," he said, with all the ferocity of a true brat. "And you can't make me."

"If I tell you to run, you will listen," Charon said.

“I can’t hear you and I’m not running.”

“You will listen,” Charon said again, harder now, and Yves stared at him for a few steps before slowly nodding.

“You’re...” Yves’ pupils were blown wide, but there was fear there, and Charon wasn’t sure how much of it was because of him. “You’re talking like an Arkoudai, like you did after the fire.”

“Good.” Charon turned onto the street where the noble houses stretched out before the palace. Their glass windows glittered in the light of the sunset.

Yves fell silent.

Charon remembered the way to Lord Marteau’s house easily enough.

The colorful washing had been taken in for the night, and the window shutters were open to catch the breeze.

Charon tried the front door, and it opened under his touch.

Lord Marteau hadn’t expected anyone to break into his home, or he trusted his servants to turn away any unwanted visitors.

Yves crossed the threshold nervously after Charon, and Charon held an arm out to stop him as a servant appeared from a room down the hall.

He was a young man, his brown hair slightly tousled, and he blushed as he looked up at Charon.

“Um, sir,” he said. “Lord Marteau isn’t accepting visitors.”

“Be silent.” Charon’s voice held enough dominance that the man tried to fall to his knees there in the hall, but Charon caught him by the shirt collar before his knees hit the floor. “Did Lord Marteau bring a person home with him last night? They had dark hair, like mine. Nod or shake your head.”

The man nodded. His legs were limp, and his feet slid for purchase as he trembled under the weight of Charon’s dominance. Yves gasped behind him, and Charon heard a clatter as Yves must have reached for something to steady himself.

“Where are they?” Charon asked. “The person who came here last night. Where are they being held?” The man glanced down. “A basement? A cellar?” The man nodded, and Charon lowered him to the ground. “Good. And he plans to take them to the coast? Speak.”

“Yes, sir.” The man got to his knees rather than attempt to stand. “He’s been taking some of the maids lately, when they disobey. Jaz let two out, and we haven’t seen her or Prim since. We aren’t allowed down in the cellar anymore.”

Charon nodded to himself. It had been Lord Marteau then, his cheery demeanor barely hiding a simmering temper, a small, petty tyrant wielding his title like a truncheon. “How many servants remain here?”

“F-five, sir. Only five. We didn’t want to, sir, he made us, we were too afraid to tell anyone. He can send us to the brothels or bury us, and no one’ll raise a finger. We didn’t have a choice.”

“Find them,” Charon said. “Tell them to run. They will not have to carry out your lord’s wishes again. However, if you summon your lord, you will discover that there are people far more fearsome than a Starian noble. Do you believe me? Yes or no.”

“Yes,” the man said.

“Good. Find them.”

Charon let go, and the man half-crawled, half-ran down the hall.

“You shouldn’t do this,” Yves said. “If Olly is down there, we need to get Sabre, the king...the guards, even.”

“Then get them,” Charon said, and made for the stairs.

“I thought Olly was in the cellar,” Yves said.

“I will retrieve them when I am done.”

Yves jumped up a few steps to press himself to Charon as the servant returned, dragging a young woman with him.

Two more young women and a man about Yves’ age followed, holding candlesticks and a poker as makeshift weapons.

They stared up at Charon and Yves as the young man tried to tug them toward the door.

“Go,” Charon said, and as one, they fled into the night.

Of course Lord Marteau only employed submissives.

He likely thought it would be easier to give them orders—or like some nobles, he enjoyed domming a person who could lose their livelihood if they dared to say no.

Charon quietly noted this as the rage drew him further up the stairs, toward the well-furnished second floor.

“Stay here,” Charon said, and Yves dropped to the rug, looking dazed.

Charon reached down to touch Yves’ hair, and the part of him that wasn’t roiling with fury ached at the fear in Yves’ eyes.

“It will be better with Raul. He would not do what I will do now, but it is necessary. No one should think they can enslave you. An example must be made.”

“Charon.” Tears streamed down Yves’ cheeks and into the corners of his full mouth. “Please. Let’s find Olly and go.”

“It isn’t Charon,” he said. “Not right now.”

He turned away.

He found Lord Theodore Marteau asleep in a gaudily decorated bedroom at the end of the hall. When Lord Marteau woke to the sound of the door opening and saw him standing in the doorway, he tried to scramble to the dresser.

“Stop.” Charon’s dominance, unfettered at last, rang through the room. Lord Marteau may have been a dominant, but Charon’s power pressed down on Lord Marteau like a hammer on an anvil. “On the floor. Hands and knees.”

“You can’t?—”

“Now,” Charon said, and Lord Marteau slipped off the bed with a thump that shook the walls. Charon strode forward and placed his boot on Lord Marteau’s left hand, waited for the man to meet his gaze, and pressed down until he heard the crack of bone.

Lord Marteau’s scream echoed in the small room.

“The boy Jesse,” Charon said. “He had four broken fingers. Let us see how many you have.”

“You’re insane,” Lord Marteau gasped. “You—you whore, you filthy fucking slut, you think I—” He shrieked again as Charon raised his foot, removing the pressure from his fingers.

“Only two,” Charon said. He got to one knee in front of Lord Marteau and grabbed his right hand. Lord Marteau tried to scramble away, but Charon held him there, his grip as firm as iron. He pulled back a forefinger. “Two more.”

Lord Marteau didn’t scream on the fourth. He whined, high and keening, as he writhed beneath Charon. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“The boy,” Charon said. “Did you kill him yourself? Did you pay the guards to look away?”

Lord Marteau gaped at him, panting, sweat streaking his handsome face. “He was just a whore. There are hundreds others like them. They’d die otherwise, on the streets.”

“Laurent said he was strangled,” Charon said. He squeezed Lord Marteau’s broken fingers. “Did you enjoy it?”

Lord Marteau whined again. Charon hauled him up onto the bed by the throat, then started to tear strips off his nightshirt. “Usually, this requires a few tools. Particular ones. But I believe I can make do with what I have.”

“Why are you doing this?” Lord Marteau asked. “For the boy? Did you want him? I have others. Younger ones, if you desire them. Eager. Obedient. I’ll even let you mark them.”

“Yves,” Charon said, as he tied Lord Marteau’s hands to the bedposts. “Give me Yves.”

“Yes. He’s yours.”

“Will you let me take him?” Charon asked. He tightened the ties around Lord Marteau’s wrists, cutting off the flow of blood there. Lord Marteau wouldn’t need to use his hands for long. “Even if he struggles? Even if he hates it? If he weeps, if he bleeds?”

“Just let me live,” Lord Marteau said. “I’ll let you use him however you like. He’s pretty, isn’t he? Pleasing?”

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“Yes,” Charon said. He opened the dresser that Lord Marteau had been reaching for and found a thin, sharp knife.

He brought it to one side of Lord Marteau’s eye and pressed a thumb to the other corner.

“Very pleasing, when he looks at you with his wide, trusting eyes. His golden hair. The freckles over his nose and shoulders. A beautiful sight.”

“Very,” Lord Marteau whispered. “He’ll be yours as soon as I’ve brought him into my household.”

“Mm.” Charon pressed the knife down, then to the side, like digging an oyster from the shell. The body beneath him thrashed and screamed, then started to sob, wet and miserable.

“No,” it cried. “No, please. Please.”

“Once more,” Charon told it. “Look into my eyes. What do you see, my lord? Do you see mercy?”

“I beg you,” the body said. “Don’t do this. He was just a whore. No one. The boy was no one. Even Yves—there will be others, his beauty will fade...”

“Do you see mercy?” Charon asked it again. “Tell me.”

“No,” it said, in a tremulous voice.

“Good,” Charon said, and pressed the knife to the corner of its other eye. “It will be over soon.”

The body cried out, and Charon stuffed a strip of cloth in its mouth with bloody fingers.

“No, no,” Charon said, as its mouthed garbled words into the wadded cloth. “You won’t die from this, not yet. First, we’ll do something about the pain. Then you’ll tell me where your brothels are. Then I’ll let you choose what I take from you next.”

The door creaked open behind him, but Charon didn’t turn to look.

“Go back to the House of Onyx, Yves,” he said.

“Charon.” Yves’ voice came from lower than Charon would have expected. He must have crawled to the door, too overcome by Charon’s dominance to stand. His voice came closer, and the body on the bed thrashed again. Charon lay a hand on its chest to steady it. “Charon. You need to let him go.”

“You’re disobeying a direct order from a dominant,” Charon said.

“I know. I do that.” Yves was so close now that Charon could feel his breath on his thigh. “Charon, can you look at me?”

He kept his gaze fixed on the body.

“Please, Charon. I need you to look at me.”

The body howled softly. It—Lord Marteau kept flexing his hands, which were starting to turn purple. “Return to Sabre. Tell him what you saw here. Get Oleander out.”

“I’m getting you out, first,” Yves said. Charon felt a hand on his thigh. “Nikos?”

Charon turned.

Yves had been crying, but there were no tears in his eyes now. He was staring up at Charon steadily, boldly, in a way that few submissives allowed themselves to do for long. He sat up on his knees and turned Charon’s face further from the sobbing noble on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” Yves said. “I’m sorry that someone taught you how to do this. But you need to stop now.”

Charon thought of Aster lying in his arms, his gaze distant, apologizing for what Nikos had become.

“I was a monster long before you met me,” Charon said. “This is what I’ve always been.”

“I know what you are,” Yves said. “And you’re coming home with me.”

“Even Sabre can’t excuse what I’ve done tonight.” Charon stood. He carefully loosened the ties around Lord Marteau’s wrists, and another sob shuddered in the air. “There will be consequences. I will leave Staria tonight.”

“No.” Yves grabbed his arm. He kept avoiding having to look at Lord Marteau, even as the man started howling for his attention.

Charon guided Yves out of the room and shut the door.

“No, you can’t. Sabre and Laurent will find a way around it.

King Adrien will understand. Lord Marteau killed that boy, I heard him.

He's enslaving people. There are laws against that. People were hanged for that, once."

"I'm sorry, Yves." Charon descended the stairs.

He didn't tell Yves that there was only a slim chance that Lord Marteau would survive in time for help to come—or that even if Laurent were summoned to heal him, he would not hurry for a man who tortured children.

Murdering a noble who enslaved the poor was an act that incited rebellion in Charon's history books, and if King Adrien were wise, he would sweep it under the rug before others realized that the nobles who owned their lands and farms were only made of flesh.

They found Oleander in the cellar, alongside a boy of eleven and one of Lord Marteau's maids who Charon had seen on his first visit.

Oleander was oddly quiet as Charon broke the shackles binding them to the floor, and the maid had the same expression as those who'd been terrified into numb silence by the interrogators.

She flinched away when Charon extended a hand, but Yves spoke to her softly and urged her to her feet.

The boy sobbed and clung to Charon, but Oleander just stood, their gaze distant and cold.

"What happened to him?" the maid asked, in a toneless voice.

“He’s upstairs,” Charon said. There was a familiar glint in her eye, and Charon lowered his voice. “I will confess to what has been done to him.”

The maid nodded and picked up the chain that had run through her shackles. She wrapped one end around her hand, climbing up the stairs and out of the cellar.

“Wait,” Yves said, but Charon shook his head and glanced down at the boy.

Yves grimaced as the maid left, but he didn’t call for her.

Instead, he helped Oleander while Charon half-carried the boy.

When they reached the door, a hoarse cry rang out from the lord’s room upstairs, and the maid descended empty-handed.

She gave Charon a curt nod, smoothed down her unkempt hair, and strode into the night without a backward glance.

“Did she...” Yves’ voice trailed off into an uneasy silence.

“It was more mercy than he deserved,” Charon said. “Come. We have more work to do before the night is done.”

Nine

Yves felt unsteady on his feet as he entered the House of Onyx with Oleander, Charon, and the boy they'd found at Lord Marteau's house.

Lord Marteau had showered Yves with attention over the years.

He had given Yves rings and tapestries from his family holdings, clothes, purses of gold, and scent for Yves to wear during his assignments.

He'd been arrogant, yes, and a little cold to others, but he hadn't seemed like the sort of man who would torture and murder children for the sake of earning gold.

Yves sat down on the couch outside of Laurent's office.

People were speaking around him, but he couldn't piece together what they were saying.

All he could think of was how Lord Marteau had always spoken of piracy as a fun, harmless jaunt for nobles who lived by the shoreline, as though all he'd done was buy a ship and take a pleasure cruise to Diabolos before returning home.

After what Yves had heard through the door of Lord Marteau's room, he was sure that old Theodore would have been more than happy to raid as many coastal towns as he wanted, if it were halfway lucrative.

I'll let you use him however you like. Charon had become Nikos in that moment, the

boy who'd been fashioned into a tool against his nature, pain bleeding out of him like an open wound as he crouched over Marteau.

Yves had been terrified—not for Marteau, who was more of a monster than Charon claimed to be—but for Charon, who had seemed to be teetering on the edge of a precipice.

“There’s no need to leave Staria,” Laurent was saying, as Yves tried to draw his mind out of that horrible room, with Charon looking dispassionately down at the man sobbing on the bed. “We can make arrangements with the king.”

“I’m not sure,” Sabre said. “Lord Marteau was from an old family. If people hear how he was killed, it could cause unrest.”

I have others. Younger ones, if you desire them . Marteau’s voice rang in Yves’ ears.

“It would be better for me to leave regardless,” Charon said. “A trial would draw too much attention.”

“There are still people in his brothels,” Yves said. His voice sounded too harsh in his own ears, sharp and caustic, like his mother’s. “Why do we care what happened to the noble who hurt them when they’re still in there? ”

Silence fell in the office behind him, and Sabre stepped out, his expression wan. “Yves. I’ve ordered soldiers to search Marteau’s holdings.”

“And what they find won’t be reason enough for unrest?” Yves snapped. “But no, no, we have to exile Charon. That’s the answer.”

“It won’t be for long,” Sabre started to say.

“Except it will.” Yves got to his feet. “When he leaves, that’s it. He isn’t coming back. He’ll go off to Lukos, or Katoikos, and he’ll fall in love with it, and I’ll—the rest of us will still be here.”

“Why does it matter?” Yves had almost forgotten that Oleander was still in the room. They were sitting in the corner, holding their cat and staring at Yves with an unflinching gaze. “You’re getting married and running off to Kallistos, aren’t you?”

Yves fell silent. He hadn’t thought of Raul once all evening. Not when he’d sought Charon out, not when he was terrified that someone would attack them in Lord Marteau’s house, not when he had knelt next to Charon and brought him back from the edge of the encroaching darkness in his eyes.

“Well?” Oleander asked. “Aren’t you?”

Charon stood. “Yves is right. When I leave Staria, I won’t return.

” He passed Yves without looking at him.

Yves watched him go, breathing hard. He hadn’t followed Charon through everything just to let him walk away like some noble exile into the wilderness.

He raced up the stairs after him and burst through the open door.

“So this is it,” he said. Charon had his back to Yves as he folded clothes into a bag. “You’re leaving. You’re going to run away and pretend like this didn’t happen.”

“It happened.” Charon’s voice was too level, but it didn’t have the terrifying bluntness that Yves had heard while he’d tortured Lord Marteau. “I won’t deny that.”

“But you’ll deny this,” Yves said. “You didn’t take his eyes out until you heard what

he was willing to do to me, Charon. Did you think I wouldn't notice? And now you're leaving because you think you're some monster."

"I cut out a man's eyes tonight," Charon said.

"Maybe he deserved it."

"No." Charon turned, and the pain in his eyes made Yves take a step back. "Don't become someone who would say that, Yves. Stay here. Marry Raul. He would never hurt you."

"You wouldn't hurt me," Yves said. "You're not as terrible as you think you are."

"I am." Charon met Yves' gaze and held it, his expression hard. "I knew what I was doing."

Yves felt like he was slipping off the edge of a cliff in the rain, unable to grasp a ledge as a yawning emptiness opened before him. "What if I don't care?"

Charon turned away. "You should. If you marry Raul, perhaps you'll become someone who always cares, no matter what darkness you see in others. He'll treat you with nothing but kindness."

"But he won't love me like you do," Yves said. Charon froze. "You do, don't you? What you said to Laurent about us being impossible, you were talking about Nikos, about what you'd done in Arktos. You weren't talking about me."

He knew it was true as soon as he said it.

Charon loved him. He'd loved him for years.

Every late night they'd spent together, every time they'd taken up the kitchen while the other courtesans rolled their eyes, every sidelong glance and unspoken word, it was all there between them, as obvious as the fact that Charon was running from it.

"You heard what I said to Laurent," Charon said.

"And it's bullshit." Yves took a step forward. "An attachment is impossible? Well, consider me attached, Charon. Nikos. I'm attached to both of you. Do you think I'd have gone into that room for someone I didn't love?"

Charon held his bag over one shoulder, staring down at Yves as though his heart might shatter. Yves moved closer.

"Tell me that you don't love me, Charon." He grabbed the strap of Charon's bag. "Tell me you haven't loved me all this time."

Charon took a slow, deliberate step toward Yves. Yves could feel the heat of his body, and as Charon stooped closer, he remembered that same warmth the night of the ball, comforting and familiar. It was his dominance, always present but never oppressive, like a fire burning in a hearth.

"Tell me that wasn't you who kissed me at the ball last night," Yves said.

Charon raised a hand, then hesitated. The blood on his fingers had gone dark like flakes of rust, and it lay thick under his thumbnail. Charon dropped his hand.

"Goodbye, Yves."

The air left Yves' lungs as though he'd been struck in the chest. He turned stiffly as Charon left the half-empty room, and tried to force himself to follow.

He wasn't a man who simply let things happen.

He'd left his village for Duciel despite the protests of his entire family, he'd built a reputation for being the best brat in the Pleasure District, and he even convinced Laurent to plan his wedding.

He didn't give up. He didn't break. He bent—prettily, with his hair tossed artfully and a glitter of mischief in his demure expression.

He wasn't the kind of man to sob like a child in the room of the man he loved.

He wasn't someone who would sit down in the middle of the floor and let Charon walk away.

It was Olly who found him there. He didn't know how long he'd been sitting in the growing dark, nursing the pain that felt like something had cracked in his chest, but when he looked up into Olly's face, he realized that the only light came from the hall outside.

"I don't want to see you right now, Olly," Yves said. His voice sounded thick and miserable.

Olly crossed the threshold into Charon's room. They were still holding their cat, and they reached out wordlessly to take one of Yves' hands. Yves stared at them curiously, but Olly just placed Yves' hand on the cat's soft fur.

"It helps, sometimes," they said.

Yves let out a soft, hiccupping sob and stroked the cat. He rumbled in pleasure, and that was enough to bring the tears rushing back, ugly and weak, his whole body shaking with the force of them.

“If he doesn’t love you enough to stick around, we can set fire to his things in the garden,” Olly said.

Yves was almost startled out of his misery by that. He looked up into Olly’s big, dark eyes. “I can’t do that.”

“All right,” Olly said, and returned to petting their cat. “But the offer stands.”

Yves stood in the middle of King Adrien’s private ballroom and tried to feel something.

“It was very kind of him to offer,” Raul said.

He’d been treating Yves like a delicate soap bubble ever since Charon had left Duciel.

Yves knew he was being unfair. Charon had been right: Raul was kind.

He was thoughtful. Yves quite liked him, even when he was so meek and nervous that he tried to shrink into the wallpaper.

They could have been good friends, if Yves weren’t so deep into melancholy that he couldn’t even be excited about using the king’s own ballroom for the wedding.

King Adrien was supposed to be in attendance, a rare appearance for a wedding that featured a courtesan and a Kallistoi.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:50 pm

Yves knew exactly why King Adrien was coming, of course.

The coast near Red Harbor had been burning for days—riots had broken out when the first of Marteau’s private brothels were raided.

Someone had grabbed the guestbook, which featured several judges who’d been ferrying prisoners to the brothels.

The king’s soldiers had knocked one too many heads in the ensuing fight, and now the navy was stranded as rioters took over the harbor.

Everyone was saying that Yves had been the one to discover Lord Marteau’s plot, so the king was treating him like a personal friend in the hopes of preventing Duciel’s citizens from following suit.

King Adrien may have been the most agreeable king in recent history, but he couldn’t risk a riot in the capital.

So now here Yves was, letting the king’s steward plan a wedding while Sabre conscripted Laurent into some clandestine business for the crown. Here he was, trying not to scream in the middle of an empty ballroom.

“Maybe we should go outside for a minute,” Raul said, and Yves looked up at him in alarm, blinking fast.

“Sorry. I was a little overwhelmed.”

Raul nodded. “I understand that. We’ll have a smaller ceremony in Kallistos when I introduce you to the family.” He nodded to the doors, and Yves gratefully took the chance to escape.

Over the past few days, Raul had become almost talkative.

Yves could tell it was to make up for his own unnatural silence, but he couldn’t seem to muster up the energy.

He’d moved out of the House of Onyx and into Raul’s townhouse.

He’d packed most of his things for the trip to Kallistos, and he was dithering on renting a house in Duciel to live in while Raul made glass halfway across the continent.

He’d even invited his family, despite the fact that they’d left for the country after that disastrous afternoon in the garden.

His mother would probably never speak to him again.

He took a slow, steadying breath.

“Well, I think it’s nice, even if you’re bored by it,” Percy said.

Yves blinked. Three days had passed—days of ribbons, flower arrangements, invitations, and dance troupes filing into the city. The coast was still burning. Yves stood in the palace tailor’s personal home office and stared at himself in the mirror.

“What?” Yves looked at the suit. It sparkled with gold and white, with diamonds on the lapels and boots with gold plating on the heels. “Oh. Yes. It’s nice.”

“Show a little enthusiasm, honey,” Percy whispered.

The tailor, a small, excitable man named Silver, frowned from Yves’ feet. He finished pinning the hem of Yves’ trousers and stood, but he was examining Yves like an unfinished cake sagging on the counter.

“No,” Silver said. “I don’t think I can do anything about that.”

“About what?” Yves asked, twisting to check his suit for tears.

“Your energy,” Silver said.

Percy groaned softly. “For fuck’s sake.”

If Silver heard, he didn’t react. He just sighed, the image of an artist with a flawed canvas. “I’m sorry. I can try, but my clothes are supposed to match you, and...” He shrugged a shoulder. “If you need to return it, I understand.”

“Why on earth would he return it?” Percy asked. “He’s marrying the richest man on Iperios!”

Yves squinted his eyes shut. Days passed in a haze. He moved through them as though in a dream, and when he found himself hiring a carriage to his parents’ farm, he barely thought to wonder why.

The Cooper farm wasn’t the same as it had been when Yves left.

They’d moved to what used to be the Chastain lands, taking up the fertile land there for wheat, barley, and too many root vegetables to count.

They fed half of Duciel, and they could afford a bigger house at the edge of the farm,

one with large bay windows and a painted roof for good luck.

Yves stepped out of his hired carriage and watched Pearl open the front door with a look of shock on her small, round face.

“This was a mistake,” Yves whispered. He hadn’t meant to do it.

Sabre had come back from whatever task the king needed him for, but Laurent was still gone, and Yves couldn’t mope around Raul’s house without feeling acutely guilty.

So he’d paid for a carriage and directed them out of Duciel, and now he was...

here, feeling lost and young, back to the boy he’d been when he’d left home in a huff.

“I’ll get Dad,” Pearl called, and disappeared into the house.

“No,” Yves said, but his voice was too soft to carry. He stood frozen on the grass while the driver tended to the horses, and when the door opened again, he half wanted to get back in and flee for Duciel.

His father had aged since Yves had seen him last, and his sun-bleached hair lay thin under his cap, but he’d always walked with a limp.

He leaned heavily on a cane as he approached, and Yves forced himself forward.

Don’t make your father walk to you, a familiar voice said in his mind.

It was the same voice that had enforced all the rules Yves’ had followed to keep his siblings from going feral all over the countryside, and he listened to it automatically, intercepting his father before he reached the horses.

“Darling.” His father nodded and took Yves’ arm. “I hear you’re getting married. Card arrived in the mail. Don’t reckon I have the clothes for it, but the card looked nice.”

“Well, I’m marrying a submissive,” Yves said, “so it doesn’t really matter.”

His father gave him a hard look, but his expression shifted, his brows coming together. “Hm. Doesn’t matter? No marriage doesn’t matter, Yves, unless it ain’t a marriage.”

“Dad.”

“Just saying. Just saying. Hm. Hm.” His cane slipped on a clod of earth, and Yves grabbed his arm tight to keep him steady. “Harriet says you had a friend. Big man. Not from here.”

Yves silently cursed Harriet and her loose tongue. “Not that kind of friend, Dad. And he’d been in Staria for a while. It doesn’t matter where he came from before.”

“Hm. Hm. Doesn’t matter. Don’t wear that face, Sybil, our son’s come to visit.”

Yves sighed when he saw his mother’s silhouette in the dark behind the front door. She emerged into the sunlight, dressed in worn working clothes with her hair pinned back with a scarf.

“Hey, Ma.”

She didn’t answer.

Yves helped his father in the front door in time to spot Pearl, Sunny, Tony, and Peter staring at him at the end of the hallway.

They didn't bother hiding themselves as Yves was ushered into the kitchen, where his mother sat him down at a new oak table and poured him a glass of water infused with cucumber and lime slices.

"Something tells me you aren't here to apologize," his mother said.

Yves closed his eyes.

His mother tapped his knuckles.

"I know that look," she said. She glanced at her husband, who sighed and picked up his cane.

"Check on the dairy," Yves' father said. "Not sure what matters, but the dairy does. Some things do. Don't leave before I'm done, Darling, hm, hm."

Yves' mother didn't speak until the thump of his father's cane had faded.

"Your father used to do that," she said.

"Go away behind the eyes. It was worse after he came back from the navy, you know. He lost days like that, weeks. He'd drift, and me with a little boy I didn't know how to be a mother to, running around, asking questions, wanting to know why his dad wasn't talking. "

Yves sank back in his seat. His mother had never spoken of his father's time with the navy, or the strange, tense years that had followed his return. It was another one of the rules that drove Yves out of the country, strange and seemingly arbitrary.

Yves' mother sat down next to him. "I know what happened to send Sage away, Darling. Now I want to know what's sending you away."

“So you’re being a mother now,” Yves said, but the old resentment didn’t have the bite it used to. “I could have used one before, instead of—of someone who just threw everything on me and blamed me when I wanted to leave.”

He could have handled it if his mother had snapped back. What he couldn’t prepare for was her silence. She stared into his eyes, holding him there, her blond hair falling in front of her sun-weathered face.

“I know I wasn’t kind to you,” she said. “I didn’t know how to be a mother.”

“You could have practiced,” Yves said, “instead of turning me into one.”

“All right, Darling,” his mother said. “Yves. Let’s practice. What are you doing here? You didn’t come to fight.”

Yves looked away. “Maybe I need a mother right now.”

His mother covered his hands with her own. “For what, Yves? Is it this man you’re marrying? Has he hurt you?”

“No. No, he hasn’t.” Yves tried to banish the heat of tears building in his eyes. “He’s nice. So nice. He won’t touch me.”

“Then who was it?” His mother squeezed his hands. “Who hurt my baby?”

Yves closed his eyes, but his mother held him there, quietly, waiting.

He thought of how she must have felt when her husband came back from the navy.

How hard it must have been for a young woman who didn’t know how to manage her husband’s fits of terror and silence around the needs of a farm and children, how

agreeable Yves had been, how easy it had probably been to give him one little task here and there.

Not too many at first, but he'd been so eager to please, hadn't he?

He hadn't learned to complain until it was too late for both of them.

It didn't make it hurt less, but it helped, and he took another breath and opened his eyes.

"I love someone else," Yves said. "But he's gone. He didn't love me enough, or he thought—he thought that something in his past was too much for me to handle."

"Is it?"

"I don't know." Yves tried to bring himself back to that room.

The sound of Charon gouging out Lord Marteau's eyes, the blood on his hands, the strange, dark emptiness of his expression.

"I don't think I'm the only one who can stop him from going...

back there. But I think I can understand it, if he lets me. "

His mother was quiet for a minute. Outside, Yves could see someone go by leading a roan horse toward a field, and a bird fluttered about on the windowsill.

"I can't tell you what to do," his mother said. Yves snorted. "Oh, don't you start. But if you want him so badly, and this man you're marrying is so nice, how nice are you to disappear because you can't stop thinking about this other fellow?"

“I know it isn’t fair, Ma. I’m trying.”

His mother pursed her lips. “This wedding of yours. The king will be there?”

“I’m trying not to think about that,” Yves said.

“Time was, you’d be over the moon for something like that to happen.

” His mother released his hands. “If you think you can learn to love him, tell me and I’ll come to the wedding.

But if you change your mind, I’ll be here, and I won’t turn you away.

For all the mistakes I’ve made, you’re still my son.

You’ll make the right decision in the end. ”

“There’s no chance you can tell me?” Yves asked.

“You truly must be hard-pressed to ask me to give you an order,” she said, and patted his hands. “You’ll figure it out, love. Just give yourself time.”

Ten

Smoke drifted through the docks of Red Harbor, mingling with the storm clouds that lingered over the smoldering wreckage of the old lighthouse.

The spiny red wildflowers that gave the harbor its name grew in every crack of the boardwalk and crept up stone walls, and little red petals stuck to Charon's boots as he helped a group of carpenters hold up a wall.

Yves had been right, of course. Whether a noble was killed or not wasn't as important as what was happening in Red Harbor, where outrage had boiled over into a fierce, hot fury that set half the coast ablaze.

Charon had gotten there right after the lighthouse had fallen, and now the navy drifted nervously in the harbor mouth while people tore apart the judicial offices and robbed Lord Marteau's shipping businesses.

In the meantime, houses needed to be rebuilt.

The people who'd been taken from Lord Marteau's brothels were supposed to receive care from the crown, but crown soldiers were being turned back at the border of the harbor.

A former whore from Diabolos had opened up her house to them, but there wasn't enough room for healers, nurses, and anxious family members, so Charon had quietly joined the workers building new structures on the property.

It was good to work. It kept his mind occupied, dragging it away from the expression on Yves' face as Charon left him, and the deep, aching pain that always followed.

All Charon had wanted to do in that moment was to stay—to kiss Yves again, to bring him to Gerakia and Thalassa, to ignore the dark, bitter creature that had dragged its way to the surface that night.

But he couldn't do that to Yves. It would be better for Yves to find someone who would be strong enough not to kill for him.

In the end, when the time came for Charon's will to be tested, he'd been nothing but an interrogator.

He dug into the earth so the stonemasons could lay a foundation for a new infirmary.

He set up tents for people wounded by the smoke and fire.

He brought distilled water across the harbor by the barrel, and when people asked for his name, he shook his head and moved on.

He thought of Yves, and he walked the docks to try and shake the restlessness from his bones.

When one of the children taken from the brothels died, the harbor burned again, and Charon got to work digging graves at the edge of town.

He kicked his spade through the rough roots of the red flowers that grew there, and he gently lowered the sacks holding the people who had died in fires too fierce for the rain to douse.

Charon thought of Yves again, and his chest ached so deeply that he had to stop to

catch his breath.

He helped two older women nail support beams into a shelter for Lord Marteau's victims, and let their quiet chatter drown out his thoughts.

He moved automatically, pushing his mind into the far distance, so engrossed in his work that he didn't notice the voices had quieted until it was too late.

Someone tapped Charon on the shoulder, and he turned.

"All right," Laurent de Rue said, and punched Charon square in the jaw.

It wasn't the strongest blow in Charon's memory. Laurent's knuckles glanced off Charon's cheek, and Laurent hissed in pain and clutched his hand.

"Why are you here?" Charon asked. "Is Sabre here as well?" He didn't mention the crown. The people of Red Harbor were still wary of the nobility at the moment, and it wouldn't do to implicate that Laurent and Sabre were part of it.

"I'm not here for that." Laurent drew himself up. His violet hair was disheveled, and he had dirt on his boots and his fine blue jacket. "I'm here because of you."

Charon frowned slightly. "You agreed that I should leave."

"That was Sabre, and I didn't suggest shattering Yves' heart to pieces in my house, did I?"

Charon took a step back. "Yves and Raul were already engaged."

"Yves," Laurent said, and paused when he saw the two women watching from behind the unfinished wall.

He lowered his voice. "I have spent years watching you two dance around each other. I've seen Yves follow you around like a puppy, and you're no better than he is."

"You're so tied up in each other's lives that I might as well strap you both together and ship you off to Lukos until you work this out."

"Yves loves you, you idiot. You know that."

"I know that. Most of Staria knows that, and where are you? Where are you, Charon?"

"Yves said that people in the brothels would need help," Charon said, staring at Laurent numbly.

"He's a mess, Charon." Laurent stepped closer, "and so are you. Do you think I would sneak into a city on fire for you if I didn't think you were making a mistake?" Laurent smoothed his hair out of his face. "Were you lying when you told me you loved him?"

"I wasn't lying," Charon said. "But you don't understand what I've done, Laurent. Who I am."

"Of course I know who you are," Laurent said. "Sabre told me what they found in that house. You did it for Yves."

"Which is why I have to stay away."

"No," Laurent snapped. "If you're going to be a coward, admit it. Or," he added, pointing to the wreckage of the harbor city, "you can get out of here, go back to Duciel, and tell Yves the truth before he marries a man he doesn't love."

Charon stared out over the harbor. There were still small fires spouting up in the

embers of the lighthouse, and several ships had run aground rather than wait for the harbor to open again.

He thought of the coast of Thalassa, where they danced in the waves on the equinox, and thought of taking Yves there.

The aching loneliness in his chest throbbed like a wound.

Laurent was right. Charon had been a coward.

He'd come too close to the darkness that roared to life in the wake of his fury that night.

Yves had seen it, and he hadn't turned away.

It was Charon who hadn't been able to face it.

If he returned to Duciel, that meant he would need to accept that it could come back to him one day.

Yves could be hurt, or someone could accost them in the street, and that empty horror lurking in Charon's mind could claw its way to the surface.

He couldn't trust himself to accept it, but Yves had.

Charon turned back to find Laurent watching him.

"It may be too late."

"Then find out." Laurent adjusted his coat. "If you go now, you might make it in time. And if you don't, then I sincerely hope you never come back to Duciel again."

Charon's heartbeat quickened, and his gaze swept past the harbor to the fields that stretched toward Duciel. "How long do I have?"

"Four days," Laurent said.

"It takes six to get there."

Laurent smiled. "I'm sure you'll find a way. You might find a peculiarly fast horse stabled with my carriage horses at the Last Willow Inn, but he's reserved for Charon, not whoever decided to leave his luggage in my house."

"Yves won't be happy to hear you call him that," Charon said.

"Someone would have to tell him, then," Laurent said, and turned on his heel to walk smartly away. He always did need to have the last word.

Charon looked to the sky. The sun was already setting.

That didn't give him long before the barricades at the gates would close to people leaving the harbor.

He'd passed the Last Willow Inn about half an hour's walk to the harbor.

A fast horse could get him to the next village by midnight, where he could trade for a new one.

If he were lucky, he could make it to Duciel in time for the wedding.

Whether Yves would listen was another matter.

Charon set down his tools where the others would find them, rolled back the sleeves

of his white linen shirt, and made for the harbor gates.

Three days before the wedding, Yves' family returned to Duciel.

They came with a stream of visitors eager to attend the strangest retirement party of a courtesan's career, eyeing the banners and ribbons blanketing the Pleasure District with a mix of confusion and delight.

Yves invited Sunny and Harriet to the opera with Raul, and his mother surprised them all by asking to come.

She sat between Yves and Raul while Sunny stared in awe at the singers below, and even bought Sunny an engraved woodcut of a scene from the opera.

Yves could tell by the hard line of her mouth that she was trying to do better by them, even if she clearly still didn't seem to like the idea of Sunny yearning for the city.

Yves hugged her awkwardly as they left the opera. "This'll be all Sunny talks about for years," he said.

"Oh, I'm certain." Sybil sighed. "That man, Raul. He is nice..."

Yves leaned in closer, watching Raul and Harriet listen to Sunny babble about the opera with slightly dazed expressions.

"But is nice enough?" she asked.

Raul nodded thoughtfully as Sunny showed him the woodcut, and Harriet gave Yves a reassuring smile.

"I don't know," Yves said. "I suppose he'll have to be."

Charon traded his second horse at a small village with nothing more than a mill, a wheat farm, and a collection of small houses huddled around the creek.

He hadn't slept more than an hour or two, and his boots were thick with mud from the road, but exhaustion had turned to a heady burst of energy that carried him down the overgrown lane and through the village.

One of the farmers who worked the fields stopped to offer him water, and Charon looked at the proffered cup for a few seconds before he realized what it was.

He downed it at once and handed it back, and the farmer looked up at him with a worried frown.

"What's happening?" she asked. "Is it news from the harbor?"

"No," Charon said. "Nothing like that." He caught her eager look, and an impulse took hold of his weary mind. "The man I love is getting married in three days."

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“What?” She turned to look back at the other farmhands working the fields. “And you’re...”

“Trying to stop the wedding,” Charon said, “if I can get to Duciel in time.”

The farmer gazed up at him, holding the cup tight in both hands. “If you go to Riversedge, my cousin Lou has the fastest mail cart in Staria. I bet he can get you halfway to Duciel faster than buying another horse. Just tell him Quinn sent you.”

“Thank you,” Charon said. Quinn shrugged and looked down, a blush rising on her cheeks.

“Well,” she said, “it’s the least I can do. I hope you get there, sir.”

“So do I,” Charon said, and urged the horse toward the sloping valleys beyond.

Two days before the wedding, the king invited Yves to tea.

“I’m glad you could come on such short notice,” he said.

King Adrien wasn’t as magnificent in person as his portraits and mosaics made him out to be.

Yves had seen him plenty of times in passing—it was simply a consequence of knowing Sabre, who’d been practically a brother to Adrien for most of their lives—but he hadn’t really had a proper conversation with the man.

Up close, he was just another submissive, except he had the power to destroy half of Staria with one wrong decree.

Yves didn't think he would have the stomach for that kind of responsibility, personally.

Adrien had to be more ambitious than a courtesan to actually want that life.

"If I passed this up, I think half the Pleasure District would kill me," Yves said. He tried not to pick at the pastry on his plate and looked down at the teacup on the tray beside him. "Is that from Katoikos?"

"What? Oh, the teacup? No." Adrien lifted his and examined it, trying to find the pattern stamped on the inside.

"It's from Arktos. They keep bees in the south, and a diplomatic envoy sent this set with a cart of honey.

It's a rare delicacy there, I believe. I remember Charon—you know Charon. He worked with you, didn't he?"

Yves' stomach lurched. "Y-yes, he did."

"I spoke with him about it once," Adrien said. He set down the teacup. "He seemed rather fond of honey himself. Do you know if he was truly an Arkoudai?"

"Was?" Yves cleared his throat and took a hurried sip of his tea.

"Sabre said something odd when he left for crown business earlier," Adrien said. "Something about you both leaving the House of Onyx at the same time. That's a spot of bad luck for old Laurent, isn't it?" His eyes twinkled with good-natured

humor, but Yves couldn't even muster a smile.

"Yes," he said, into the rim of his cup. "Bad luck indeed."

"Good for you, though," Adrien said, looking into his teacup. He hummed softly to himself in the uncomfortable silence. "You're the hero of the hour, it seems, and you've found quite a match for yourself. You must truly love this man to leave Duciel at the height of your popularity."

"Oh," Yves said, softly. "Oh, yes."

"To your good fortune, then," Adrien said, and toasted Yves with a warm smile. Yves nervously toasted back, but when he brought the cup to his lips, he didn't have the heart to drink.

A mail cart wasn't the most comfortable place to sleep, but Charon had managed in worse conditions.

He remembered the night he'd slept in a loose pit in the clay close to the mountains, trying to avoid Arkoudai patrols.

Lying in a shaking cart surrounded by bags of letters and parcels was hardly a struggle by comparison.

Charon let the jostling of the cart lull him into a pleasant haze as the Starian landscape trundled by.

As Nikos, he had been running away from what he'd been in Arktos.

Now, Charon felt as though he were running toward himself.

He couldn't be with Yves without shining a light on the places he preferred to keep hidden.

He explored them now, trying to recall the lessons with Haris, the dead in their uniform pits, and the way his body had rebelled before his mind knew that something was wrong.

He took out the coins he still kept in his pocket and ran his fingers over them.

Would the god of the dead let him cross the river after what he'd done?

The Arkoudai said that Death was impartial, that a ruthless despot would cross in his boat as easily as a healer.

Perhaps something in the river washed souls clean.

Perhaps Death simply didn't care. Perhaps, as some radical thinkers among the Arkoudai said, he loved humanity anyway.

Charon didn't think he could be so impartial.

He hadn't been impartial toward Marteau.

Still, that was to be expected. People weren't gods.

Charon had no responsibility to carry the world safely on his shoulders.

He did what he could, where he could. And the darkness, the emptiness, the cold part of himself that had emerged as he gouged Marteau's eyes from their sockets? Where did that fit?

Charon had thought that he needed to be a better man than the one who'd crouched over Lord Marteau that night, but perhaps he didn't. He was just a man who could choose to be kind, who could falter, who loved a man who had embraced him even when he could not fully embrace himself.

Charon lay in the shaky cart as it turned toward Duciel, and dreamt of Yves in an empty ballroom, his movements graceful and sure, arms out to welcome him into the dance.

The day before the wedding, Yves peered out the window to find Duciel obscured by rain.

The wedding garlands that the crown had paid for drooped on lampposts and fences. Spectators in Duciel for the wedding ducked into cafes and crowded the public eating houses, and rivers of rainwater wound down the streets to the bottom of the hill.

Raul approached the window and bent to squint at the rain.

"That's not ominous, I hope," he said, and flashed Yves a small smile.

"I bet it'll clear up by tomorrow," Yves said. He gave Raul the bright smile he reserved for his clients, and Raul blushed. "You'll see."

Charon gave his fourth horse away to a young, red-headed man leaning against a cart selling discounted love potions.

Charon could barely see the man's face in the pouring rain as he handed the horse over, but another horse stood in the safety of a tree, and a fox slept in a pile of blankets in the cart.

The man offered Charon a handful of coins for his trouble, but he shook his head.

“I need to get to Duciel,” he shouted over the roar of the rain. “It’s too dangerous to ride. You’ll take care of the horse?”

“We could always use another,” the man shouted back. “What are you doing in Duciel?”

Charon looked up at the advertisement painted on the cart, which he could just make out. Love potions, it read. True love guaranteed in three days or less.

“Let’s say I won’t need one of those,” Charon said.

The man laughed. “Good.”

Charon took a few steps into the rain before looking down at his clothes.

He’d been going without much rest for days, and he could feel the dirt of the road clinging to his skin.

The rain could only do so much, and he didn’t have time for a bath at an inn.

He wasn’t sure Yves would look kindly on anyone appearing from behind a thick layer of grime to confess their ardent affection.

He looked back at the man leaning against the cart, and raised his voice over the rain.

“You don’t happen to have a bar of soap, do you?”

The morning of the wedding dawned through thick storm clouds, revealing a washed-out city full of drowned flowers and listless banners.

Raul huddled close to Yves under their umbrella as they walked from the carriage to

the palace, and Yves looked up as a peal of thunder rolled over the city.

The wedding wouldn't take place until nearly sunset, but the storm wasn't likely to settle down by then, and guests were already taking refuge in the main hall.

"The dance troupe King Adrien hired should be here by noon," the steward said, as servants took Yves' sodden coat. "There will be a private performance, then the ceremony before sunset, and the cake should arrive any moment."

Rain drummed on the windows as Yves was led through the palace halls.

He dimly heard Raul speak, but he kept thinking of the sound of the rain on the roof of the House of Onyx.

It always sounded so comforting, muffling all sound as Charon stoked the fire and Yves dug through the tin of cookies.

The rain at the palace sounded wrong, too distant, as though Yves were drifting away from his body.

"Yves?"

Raul was standing in front of him, a hand outstretched, not quite touching Yves' arm. His mouth was pressed tight in concern, and Yves felt a wave of guilt roll through him as he realized they were already at the doors to their private dressing rooms.

"Are you all right?" Raul asked.

"Yes," Yves said. "Yes, it's just the rain. I want this," he added, more for himself than anything. "You're a good person, Raul. Anyone would be lucky to have you."

“That’s nice of you to say,” Raul said. Was there a hesitation in his voice, or had Yves only imagined it? “I’ll let you dress.”

Yves opened the door to his dressing room. His suit was hanging up on the far door—complete with a sheer robe to dramatically toss when he made his entrance at the ceremony, and golden boots that would have made Yves the envy of the Pleasure District.

He should have felt something. He should have been anxious or elated. He would have even settled for melancholy, but all Yves felt when he saw the suit was the same distant, faraway nothingness he felt when he listened to the rain.

Charon was only a few miles from Duciel when his legs gave out.

He’d been running for hours. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten or slept. He’d drunk handfuls of rain as he ran through the muddy street heading for Duciel, but now he could only lean against a road marker and try to will his legs to stop shaking.

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He'd made it from Arktos to Staria on less.

But the man who'd crossed the desert had been young, and Charon could feel the creeping weight of age pulling at his bones as he held himself up by his arms alone.

Duciel lay before him, a city on a hill half-hidden by the rain, taunting him with its nearness.

"You can walk," he told himself, and forced all his dominance into his voice. He took a few steps away from the road marker and swayed dangerously. "You aren't hungry. You aren't tired. You can walk."

He staggered forward. Shapes formed in the downpour, carriages and covered carts, people walking with cloaks held over their colorful clothes. They watched Charon as he passed, and one of them, a pale man with a hood shielding his angular face from the rain, made his way toward him.

"You look dead on your feet," he said. "What's wrong?"

"Have to get to Duciel," Charon said. A man with brown hair darkened by the rain steadied Charon by the arm, but Charon shook him off and kept trudging forward. "There's a wedding."

"Oh! That's where Cillian and I are going." The man in the hood smiled brightly. "But we got held up by the rain. Miserable stuff, but the mud is an interesting texture."

“Astra, don’t,” Cillian said. “We’re performing at the wedding, if we can get there in time. Are you a guest?” His gaze rose from Charon’s muddy boots to his unbound hair, which fell over his face in dark curtains.

“No. How long before the wedding? Where is it being held?”

The men glanced at each other warily. “It’s at the palace,” Astra said. “Right before sunset, which isn’t fair, in my opinion. I’m going to catch a cold at this rate.”

“No, you won’t,” Cillian said.

Charon looked up at the palace at the top of the hill. He wouldn’t make it in time if he kept this slow, plodding pace. The others in the parade of performers were already starting to pass them, though a few paused to give Cillian inquisitive looks.

“Why are you going to the wedding if you aren’t a guest?

” Astra asked. He walked easily alongside Charon, occasionally kicking up mud like a bored child.

Cillian gave him a warning look, but Astra had the air of a born brat, and proved Charon’s estimation right by stepping solidly into the middle of a mud puddle.

“I have to stop the wedding,” Charon said. He was beyond false pretense now. He had no energy left for anything but the truth, and it spilled from his lips with the hot, painful pull and push of his lungs. “I have to tell Yves that I love him. Properly, this time. Before it’s too late.”

“You’re in love with the groom?” Astra asked, loud enough that most of the people around them slowed to listen.

“One of them,” Cillian said, when a young woman whispered in his ear. “I think he means the courtesan.”

“Yes. Yves.” Charon pushed himself forward. “He told me that he loved me, but I couldn’t—couldn’t admit it yet. I have to tell him. Let him know. Even if he doesn’t want it any longer.”

Astra and Cillian exchanged another look, and Astra moved closer to place a slender, pale hand on Charon’s arm.

“You must love him a great deal to do this,” he said.

“More than I can say.”

Astra paused as though carefully choosing his words, then squeezed Charon’s arm. “Then we’ll get you there,” he said. “You just need to go a little farther, then you can rest.”

Charon nodded. Astra’s voice held no dominance, but there was something in it that rang true in Charon’s mind, and as he took another step toward Duciel, he felt a rush of energy surge through him.

Exhaustion lingered at the edges of his awareness, but he felt oddly free of its control.

The city was so close that he could make out the roof of the palace—he couldn’t afford to fall by the wayside.

Charon strode into the rain. The crowd of performers followed, and trees bent in the wind before him as though heralding his return.

Thunder echoed over the palace, and Yves jumped, nearly spilling a glass of

champagne on his wedding suit.

“Someone’s anxious,” Harriet said. She and Percy had commandeered Yves’ dressing room when the steward reluctantly announced that the dance troupe had yet to arrive, and Harriet was delicately weaving flowers around the gold diadem in his hair.

She glanced at Yves in the mirror, but Yves couldn’t meet her eyes.

“I can’t imagine why,” Percy said. “You’re finally getting everything you’ve ever wanted. You’ll be richer than the king after this.”

“Of course,” Yves said.

Harriet gave Yves another meaningful look and ducked her head down to whisper in his ear. “He’s not a very perceptive man, is he?”

“He has other qualities,” Yves whispered back.

“I could always go in your stead,” Harriet told him, braiding in another yellow flower. “I might be a little stockier than you, but I have the right hair color.”

“Thank you,” Yves said, looking up at the rain through the high window, “but I’ve agreed to do this.”

“You could run after him,” Harriet said.

Percy groaned and threw down the silk robe he was examining. “What are you all being so cagey about? Who is he running after?”

“Charon,” Harriet said, just as Yves said, “No one.”

“Charon?” Percy’s expression went blank. “Why would you run after...”

“Think about it,” Harriet said, and Percy swiveled around in his chair to look at Yves.

“You mean to say that all this time, you haven’t just been prancing around Charon for the fun of it?” Percy asked. “But you always seemed so...but you were friends!”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, in any case,” Yves said, taking a sip of his champagne. “Charon wouldn’t admit to anything. I gave him the opportunity, and he left.”

Percy got to his feet. “And you didn’t make him talk?”

“Maybe I let him go,” Yves muttered into his drink.

Percy started pacing the room like an agitated cat.

“You let him go. You, Yves. You don’t let anything go. It’s in your nature to be a stubborn little ass. That’s what I like best about you! That’s why we’re friends!”

“ You try running after someone like a pathetic, sniveling wretch,” Yves said.

“Oh, so it’s your pride. ” Percy made a dismissive sound.

“He does have a point,” Harriet said innocently, twisting a flower in her fingers.

“I’m not here to be judged,” Yves said, feeling more than a little testy. “I’m here to get married.”

“Are you?” Percy asked. “What else have you been hiding from me? Is this Raul secretly a prince of somewhere?”

“No, but he’s nice.”

Harriet put one of the flowers in her own hair. “And nice is what you want?”

“I’m on the verge of kicking you both out so I can have a second to breathe, actually,” Yves started to say, but he stopped short when the door to the dressing room swung open.

Oleander stood on the doorway, damp with rain and hardly dressed for a wedding.

Yves hadn’t expected them to come in the first place.

They’d been uncharacteristically silent since that night at Lord Marteau’s, and Yves had assumed they would rather skip the wedding and work through whatever complicated feelings they had about being rescued by someone they thought of as a rival.

But there Olly was, looking slightly wild behind the eyes as they glared at Yves.

“He just passed the House of Onyx,” they said.

“He?” Harriet asked.

Olly took a heaving breath. “I saw him from the window. It’s like a parade out there.

There were circus performers or something, people dressed in these ridiculous pink and red outfits—but when they said who it was, people started leaving the pleasure houses to see what’ll happen.

Everyone says he’s coming to ruin the wedding. ”

“Who?” Yves asked, rising from his chair.

“Charon,” Olly said. “Charon’s coming here for you. ”

Dancers always did love a crowd. Charon spotted members of Cillian’s troupe talking excitedly to curious onlookers as they entered the city, and the Starian fondness for melodrama won out against the pouring rain as people gathered around the performers, staring at Charon.

The first time he’d entered Duciel, Charon had been no one.

Even in Arktos, he was just an interrogator’s apprentice—the patrols who’d searched for him likely didn’t bother looking too hard for someone most of Arktos tried to ignore.

He had entered Staria alone, and the world moved on, ambivalent.

No one could ever be truly ambivalent about Yves.

The sun had already crossed its zenith and was close to sinking behind the storm clouds that darkened the wheat fields beyond Duciel.

At the top of the hill, Yves was likely about to say his vows at any moment.

The crowd around Charon seemed to sense it, and Charon heard anxious murmurs through the ceaseless drumming of the rain.

Lightning illuminated the golden tiles of the palace, and Charon started to run.

Yves felt the air around him go still, as though time itself had ground to a halt.

He knew he should have been furious. How dare Charon simply waltz in and expect Yves to go running into his arms?

How dare he do this now, when Yves had wedding flowers in his hair and the king waiting for him to stand on the dais with Raul?

But he couldn't muster up the outrage through the sudden, overwhelming burst of elation that coursed through him.

"He's too late," Yves forced himself to say.

Olly narrowed their eyes and swayed in the door like a snake about to strike. "No. I didn't come all this way to tell you this only for you to say it's too late."

"Why did you come?" Yves asked.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:50 pm

“Because I don’t particularly like you.” Olly walked into the room and plucked at Yves’ golden collar.

“You’re frivolous and rich, and you aren’t even that interesting, but everyone trips over themselves to accommodate you.

And you don’t even have the sense to act like it.

All this time, I’ve had to deal with you and Charon taking care of my cat, and saving me from that cellar, and being...

you. You started calling me Olly, and now everyone does, and the other day?

I caught myself thinking it. Olly isn’t a name that belongs to a courtesan, it’s a name that belongs to a street urchin.

And I can feel it taking hold of me, making me... quaint, and provincial.”

“Do you like being quaint and provincial?” Yves asked, more than a little bewildered.

“No!” Olly cried. “Yes! Don’t ask me that! The point is, you make everything change to bend around you like some sort of curse, and I don’t like owing you. So I’m doing this one good thing, and now the scales are balanced. You and Charon can be insufferably lucky elsewhere.”

“You think this is a good thing?” Yves asked. He was still stunned by Olly’s confession. How were he and Charon lucky? “Interrupting my wedding?”

“Yes.” Olly prodded Yves in the chest. “So we’re done. I hope I never see either of you again.”

“You’re actually rather nice, aren’t you?” Harriet said, grinning as she leaned on Yves’ abandoned chair. Percy covered his mouth with a hand.

“No, I’m not, ” Olly said. “That’s something Olly would be. Now, are you going to go be disgustingly in love with Charon, or are you going to be miserable with Raul just so I can keep owing you?”

“Are you really miserable?” Yves went cold as he heard Raul’s voice over Olly’s shoulder.

Raul was standing just behind them, dressed in a fine, dark green suit with a Kallistoi sash over his chest. Yves winced at the hurt in his eyes, but the look of realization on his face was somehow worse.

“Were you in love with Charon this whole time?”

“I’m not doing this,” Olly muttered. They pushed past Yves, plonked themselves down in Yves’ chair, and started angrily drinking his champagne.

Yves moved into the doorway. “I didn’t think he wanted me,” he said. “You know we aren’t... We did this as an arrangement...”

“I know.” Raul stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets, looking like an awkward hunting dog left out in the rain. “But that explains a few things. He was protective of you when we spoke, and he knew so much about you. Is this why you’ve been so quiet lately?”

“Raul,” Yves said, “I can still do this. You need someone to marry you for the guild. I

agreed to do it. There's a contract."

"You haven't signed it yet." Raul closed his eyes for a few seconds and took a long breath. "And I can find another. You want to be with him?"

"I'm sorry," Yves said. "Raul, I would have been happy with you. You're a good person. You deserve?—"

"Please." Raul took a measured step back, "don't. If you want him...then this won't make it better. You should go."

Yves approached Raul and tentatively reached for him. "One kiss farewell?"

"For you," Raul said, and leaned in to brush his lips against Yves' cheek. "Good luck, Yves."

"Good luck, Raul."

Yves exchanged one last look with Harriet, who winked and made the same gesture she used to shoo goats from the house. He adjusted his diadem and fled.

He caught a glimpse of a footman reaching for him as he took off down the corridor, away from the ballroom where the wealthiest members of Starian society were waiting for him.

If he truly wanted Charon to work for it, he would have waited until he reached the altar.

He would have made him lay it all out before the king, or perhaps he would have rejected him outright and stormed off to cries of dismay.

Maybe Charon deserved it, a little, for leaving Yves in the House of Onyx that night, but Yves couldn't muster the necessary outrage.

He'd already wasted too much time, and of all people, Olly was right.

They were lucky. Yves would have killed for someone like Charon when he was young, and Charon was damned lucky to have Yves.

Yves burst out of the palace doors and hesitated when he saw the heavy sheets of rain falling over the city. His suit was dangerously delicate, thin waves of silk held up by strings of gold and diamond pins, and it would fall apart under such an oppressive downpour.

"You'd better make this worth it," Yves said to the hazy city, and he ran into the plaza.

Rain battered the flowers in his hair, and petals started falling into his face and shoulders.

His useless boots slid on the slick cobbles, and Yves made it three paces before he groaned in frustration, stopped, and wrenched them off.

He left them lying on the stones and sloshed barefoot over ribbons and banners that had been thrown down by the wind.

His suit clung to his skin like a sodden blanket.

Lightning tore across the sky, and thunder echoed around him as though he were caught in the hollow of an enormous bell.

He'd just reached the edge of the plaza when he saw a shadow moving in the rain.

It was massive, like fog creeping over the countryside in autumn, and Yves slowed as he started to make out the dim shapes of people.

There had to be at least a hundred, possibly more, with covered carts and horses and one woman trying to cover a violin with her coat, and they were all marching on the palace like an invading army.

At their head was Charon. His shirt was nearly invisible in the rain, sticking to his thick chest and powerful arms. His hair was unbound and lying over his face, his boots and trousers were mud-stained, and he walked as though he'd been carrying the entire city on his back for days.

He stopped for a breath when he saw Yves, and Yves felt that familiar ache in his chest again, followed by a rush of affection that almost startled him.

All he wanted to do was get to his knees there in the middle of the street, and it took all his strength to remain upright.

Charon opened his mouth, and even though Yves couldn't hear anything over the crack of thunder and roar of the rain, he knew Charon had said his name.

Yves wasn't certain who moved first, but he felt as though he were being propelled by a force outside of himself, striding through puddles and shedding flower petals onto the street.

Charon closed the distance, and Yves swayed to a halt as Charon finally stood before him, tall and beautiful and staring down at him with a familiar fierce intensity that Yves finally knew was love.

Then, in a slow, deliberate movement, Charon fell to his knees.

Yves' breath caught in his throat. Dominants didn't kneel for their submissives.

It simply wasn't done. Dominants didn't even kneel for King Adrien, the first submissive king in centuries, but there Charon was, on his knees in the rain.

Yves suspected that the only thing keeping him upright as well was Charon's eyes on his, and he could feel the gaze of the shocked crowd as they closed in around them.

"Yves," Charon said. "I was a fool." Yves opened his mouth to say something— yes, you were, no, you weren't, no, I don't care anymore— but Charon continued, his voice strong and sure.

"I thought that I left because you deserved better than the man I was, but I was just a coward. I was afraid that I'd hurt you. "

"You hurt me anyway," Yves said.

"I know." Charon said, and he took Yves' hands in his.

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you the truth, Yves.

I've been a soldier, a torturer, a traitor, an exile, a courtesan.

But more than that, more than all the things I've been and what I could become, I am a man who loves you.

If you still love me..." Charon squeezed Yves' hands so tight that Yves gasped.

"...then let me love you again tomorrow, and the day after, and when your vision fades and your bones ache, and when I am no longer strong enough to do anything more than say that I love you still."

Yves got to his knees, never minding that the rainwater pooling in the street was staining his wedding suit. “You’ll never leave me like that again,” he said.

“No.”

“And you know I have a reputation. A professional brat can’t give in right away.”

A smile started to tease the corner of Charon’s mouth. “I know.”

“That means I’ll need to leave town to save my reputation after this,” Yves said. “So you might as well come with me. We’ll see Gerakia, and Thalassa, and maybe even Lukos, if you’re a very good dominant and I’m feeling charitable.”

“Yes,” Charon said, smiling truly now. “Of course.”

“Good.” Yves grabbed Charon’s face in both hands. “Then I love you, Charon. And you never have to ask me if I still love you, because I’ll never stop, and you’ll never be rid of me.” He climbed into Charon’s lap to kiss him, and Charon wrapped his arms around Yves’ waist and kissed him back.

Between the heady rush of his own heart racing and the sight of Charon smiling at him as though he were a shaft of sunlight piercing through the clouds, Yves barely noticed that the crowd surrounding them had burst into delighted applause.

Eleven

King Adrien may have been a generous man, but he likely wasn't pleased to hear that one of the grooms in the biggest wedding of the season had fled the altar.

A crowd of witnesses didn't make an escape any easier, and Charon had to lift Yves over a fence to escape the curious spectators.

They took lodgings at an inn under Sabre and Laurent's names, and the moment they were safely inside the best room at the inn, Yves leaned against the door and laughed.

"We have made a mess," he said. "Do you think any of them will forgive us?"

"Eventually," Charon said, collapsing on a chair. The adrenaline that had urged him forward for the past few days was gone, leaving his limbs sluggish and his mind drifting. "You look beautiful in that suit."

"The suit is in tatters, Charon," Yves said, with a warm smile. It faded slightly as he took in Charon's slumped posture in the chair. "Are you all right?"

"Only a little tired," Charon managed to say. "Went from Red Harbor to Duciel in three—no, four days."

"You...you were in Red Harbor? But it's on fire!"

"Parts of it." Charon started easing out of his boots, and Yves knelt to pull them off. "You were worried about the people trapped there. I thought I would check."

“Right. And that wasn’t you being self-destructive either.” Yves tugged on Charon’s other boot. “But it takes a week to get here from the harbor. When was the last time you ate? Or slept?”

“Must have at some point,” Charon said.

Yves stood, his sodden wedding suit sloshing a little as he moved. “Wait right here.”

Charon didn’t think he could trust himself to move even if he tried.

He must have fallen asleep shortly after Yves left the room, because he had dim flickers of consciousness amid the dark, comforting warmth of sleep.

He had a faint recollection of Yves in his lap with a blanket and a tray of fruit, Yves leading him to a bath that was too small for both of them, a bed covered in thick woolen blankets, and Yves wrapped around him as night fell over Duciel.

When he woke at last, the sky outside the window was still dark, and the fire had gone out in the hearth. Yves was sprawled over Charon with a golden diadem wound in his hair, and Charon reached over to ease it loose. Yves lazily swatted his hand away and opened his lovely green eyes.

“I didn’t get married today,” Yves said. He sounded inordinately pleased with himself.

“No.” Charon tipped Yves’ chin up and kissed him softly. “You did not.”

Yves rolled onto his back and stretched like a housecat in a sunbeam. “And you love me.”

Charon moved over him, his shadow falling over Yves’ lithe, naked body, and Yves

gave an exaggerated shiver. “Yes, I love you.”

“Even when I’m being a brat?” Yves asked. “Because I can’t afford to stay out of practice. I’ll probably test you now and then, just in case.”

“I can handle you well enough,” Charon said.

“No, you can’t.” Yves arched his back and kissed Charon’s cheek. “You’re devoted to me. You adore me. You’ll do anything for me.”

Charon smiled. For all that Yves was speaking in the smug, indulgent tones of a courtesan about to be properly ravished, he could sense the need in Yves’ voice.

“But you’ll submit first,” Charon said. He pushed Yves up the bed and propped Yves’ legs on his shoulders.

“Because you’re devoted to me.” He bent down, folding Yves almost in half, and Yves gasped ever so faintly as Charon’s cock brushed against him.

“You adore me. You’ll do anything for me. ”

“I paid for oil for the bath,” Yves said quickly, and Charon almost laughed as Yves scrambled to reach the bedside table and remain pinned under Charon at the same time.

“Good boy,” Charon said, and opened the drawer for him.

“Who says I’m good?” Yves sounded almost offended.

“I do. Because that’s what you’ll be tonight. You’ll be so good that it will ruin your reputation as a brat.”

When Charon started to slick his fingers with the oil, Yves shook his head. "I don't need your fingers."

"You're certain?"

"Charon." Yves glared up at him. "I have wanted you to take me apart on your cock for years, and I'll be damned if I wait a moment longer."

"We'll have time," Charon said, grinding against him just to make Yves moan in frustration. "Perhaps I should take it slow. Ease you in."

"Charon," Yves said, so pathetically that Charon laughed. "I'm suffering and you're doing nothing to help me."

"No man has died for want of a cock, Yves."

Yves' eyes flashed. "Watch me."

Charon had to admit that he didn't have much patience himself.

He kissed Yves again, bracing himself over Yves in the way he knew he liked, thrilling in how perfectly they fit together.

When he eased his hard, aching cock into Yves, Yves sucked in a loud, shuddering breath that made Charon smile and run a hand over his brow.

"I'm not... It's not too much," Yves said. "It's just big." He ran his hands up Charon's arms, stroking his biceps. "Fuck, you're so big, Charon. Have I ever mentioned how fucking big you are?"

"Nearly every day for years," Charon said, and felt Yves give beneath him, almost

too tight for comfort at first but eager and hot. Charon thrust deeper, and Yves fell back again so Charon could bend over him. “Good. You’re being so good.”

“Tell no one,” Yves gasped, and groaned when Charon thrust the rest of the way inside him. “Please do that again. Please, Charon, I’ll do anything, I’ll even go camping in Lukos for you, just keep doing that.”

Charon fucked into him harder, and Yves’ lips parted involuntarily, his gaze fixed on some distant vision through the ceiling. Charon tapped his chin. “Look at me.”

“I can’t,” Yves said. “Not when you’re—ah—when you’re on top of me like this, when your weight...”

Charon pressed his body closer to Yves’, trapping him further, and Yves let out a shuddering gasp that held no artifice or exaggeration. “A brat who likes being overpowered?”

“Don’t make me form words, Charon,” Yves begged, and Charon kissed him soundly.

He thrust into Yves hard, making the bed shake and the frame rattle against the wall, and he watched Yves’ eyes go hazy as he slipped under into subspace.

Charon wasn’t surprised that Yves favored a rough touch.

He was so careful to keep his clients within their assigned roles, never venturing past the point of a bratty pet and their rich benefactor.

The real Yves—the one who had grown up on a farm with too many siblings to care for and an ardent yearning for more—wanted this, love without teasing or taunting, overwhelming and powerful.

He trusted Charon to not go too far, to be gentle when necessary, but still be himself.

Charon fucked Yves until the bedframe cracked the wall and lodged there, and the floor trembled and the mirror by the door almost swung off its hook. Yves came then, squinting his eyes shut and groaning low and plaintive, and Charon kissed his brow and slowed despite his own building desire.

“Keep going,” Yves whispered, and tried to grind down on Charon’s cock. “Please.”

“Show me how you fuck yourself, then,” Charon said, and Yves did it without question, bracing himself on the headboard. He was using his own body to get Charon off, his legs trembling, perfectly obedient. “Good. That’s good, Yves.”

Charon came inside Yves with a shudder of his own, and he held Yves through it as Yves’ body went limp with exhaustion and relief. When he pulled out, Yves raised his hands as though to draw Charon back again.

“Let me take care of you,” Charon said, and Yves looked up at him through narrowed eyes.

“Don’t have to ask,” he said.

Charon bent to kiss him one more time and rose from the bed.

He had left his best tea kettle with Laurent, but there was a serviceable one by the hearth, and Yves had left the rest of the food he’d acquired from the kitchens under a tin bowl.

Charon fetched water and a cloth for Yves, but he let his hands wander as he ran the cloth up his legs and along his inner thighs.

Yves submitted to it with a pleased smile, and he watched Charon as he stood to prepare a plate of fruit and stoke the fire.

They ate together on the floor before the fireplace, with Yves in Charon's lap and the kettle steaming on a hook over the fire.

"I could keep doing this, you know," Yves said. "Staying in inns, traveling. Running from disappointed kings."

"Let's avoid the last one," Charon said.

"Well, there are only so many kings in this world." Yves leaned his head against Charon's shoulder. "You'll have to get used to luxury on the road, though. I'll need a carriage, which means a carriage driver, and horses..."

"A carriage, but we drive it ourselves."

"But if there's an inn, we use it." Yves stretched his legs and settled back in Charon's lap. "There are enough diamonds on that wedding suit alone to get us to Gerakia without dipping into our private funds."

"Did the king give you that suit?" Charon asked, twisting to look at the strips of cloth and diamonds draped over a chair. Yves waved a hand at them idly.

"He didn't say I couldn't keep it," he said. "We should probably grab my things and leave early so he doesn't have the time to ask."

"You don't mind coming with me?" Charon had been worried about this.

Yves was a creature of habit. He loved Duciel, with its operas, gardens, cafes, and even the courtesans who only saw Yves as competition.

King Adrien would forgive Yves for the disastrous wedding if he wanted to stay.

“We’ll be traveling through the countryside for much of it. ”

“Yes, but so long as it isn’t my countryside, I don’t mind.” Yves turned in Charon’s lap and kissed him. “You’ve been talking about these places ever since I first met you. I won’t complain about the occasional tent or farm if you’re there.”

“Thank you,” Charon said. “Traveling Iperios wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Of course it wouldn’t,” Yves said. He got to his feet, naked and lovely in the firelight, and gathered the diamond suit in his arms. “So we might as well get started.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:50 pm

Yves and Charon's carriage trundled to the door of the House of Onyx a few hours after dawn, while most of the Pleasure District was asleep.

It wasn't a particularly elegant carriage.

Charon had spent the better half of one afternoon chipping off its gold paint after they'd been stopped by an exhausted, woefully incompetent highwayman a few miles outside of Duciel.

Two years of picking up dust from the streets of Gerakia, Kallistos, and Thalassa had worn down the rest of its shine, and it practically groaned under the weight of all the books, clothes, and boxes of luggage they'd acquired.

Yves and Charon, however, had lost none of their luster.

Yves stepped down from the carriage in a Thalassan-style sash and short pants that left very little to the imagination, wearing his favorite Kallistoi sandals with straps that wound up his legs like a knotted rope.

Charon had let his hair grow out, which suited Yves, and he wore a fine red Kallistoi shirt and a half skirt, half trouser affair that he'd picked up in Gerakia.

Yves didn't mind it, because it showed off his muscular thighs when the skirt flew back in the breeze.

He'd been spending most of their travel days on the driving bench with Charon just to admire the view, and now his entire body was spotted in freckles.

Still, Charon seemed to like them, so Yves hadn't bothered to cover them up.

At least they didn't have to slink in like fugitives in the night.

According to Laurent's letters, it was no secret to the king that Charon had killed one of his nobles, but Sabre had convinced him that punishing Charon would likely incite another riot.

The whole affair had been discreetly brushed aside while Yves and Charon were exploring the libraries of Gerakia.

Charon hadn't been too pleased to hear that the law had been bent in his favor, but Yves certainly wasn't about to complain.

From the outside, the House of Onyx looked as though it had been unstuck in time. The walls were the same ominous black, the garden had the same flowers pushing through the gate and crawling up the walls of the laundry shed, and the violet curtains billowed in a light breeze.

It reminded Yves of the first time he'd brought Charon to the farm on their way out of Duciel.

They'd made it before Harriet, but it seemed as though she'd told Yves' parents enough about Charon beforehand, as they were unsurprised to find him with Yves on their new carriage.

They'd welcomed them into their home, and Yves had sat in alarmed silence as his mother had patted his arm in approval.

"Perhaps it isn't what I expected," she'd said, in her usual brusque way. "But you love him, and he certainly loves you. That's enough."

It had been a shock to sit there at the kitchen table, surrounded by the ordinary blue wallpaper and the sounds of the farm outside, with his mother behaving like she didn't want to bite his head off for fleeing the altar and showing up with another man.

Yves felt the same discordant wariness now as he approached the House of Onyx and knocked on the door.

A young woman with a mass of white-blond hair and a cheerful smile led them into the lounge, which also looked like it hadn't changed since Yves and Charon left.

"Are you friends of Lord de Rue?" the woman asked, eyeing Charon with obvious interest.

"Something like that," Yves said, and wound his arm through Charon's.

"And here I thought we'd gotten rid of you," a voice called out from the stairs. Laurent de Rue came down in his usual ostentatious velvet, and Charon broke free of Yves to embrace him. Laurent may have been a tall man, but he was willowy, and Charon practically engulfed him.

He gave Yves a wary look when Yves opened his arms for a hug, and Yves laughed and extended a hand instead. "You're not still sore over the wedding, are you?"

"Only that it took you to the eleventh hour to come to your senses," Laurent said. He turned Yves' hand in his, and the gold ring on Yves' finger glinted in the light. "Did you forget to invite me to something?"

"We had it done in Kallistos," Yves said, a little too innocently. "A matching set."

They hadn't bothered with a proper ceremony.

They'd already been practically married for long enough, and even Yves' penchant

for pageantry wasn't necessary.

They'd commandeered a jeweler's forge in Kallistos, where Charon had melted down the gold coins he'd brought from Arktos.

They made simple rings, nothing glittery or ostentatious, but Yves often found himself staring at them at night, trailing his fingers over the bands.

In Arktos, the coins were supposed to be a symbol of loyalty.

Yves knew what it meant for Charon to have transformed them into wedding bands, and he prized his simple gold ring.

Laurent drew them onto the couches reserved for guests and rang for tea. Another stranger came in with drinks and food from the kitchen, and Yves stared after him as he left. "More new people?"

"We have almost ten now," Laurent said. "Nanette and Simone retired to the harbor last year, though I can't imagine why."

"We met them on the way," Charon said. "Red Harbor seems to be doing well enough." The harbor had recovered since the riots, but the navy had moved, which meant that the harbor had resorted to making deals with merchant ships to resume trade.

Someday, it might become a city to rival Duciel, and Nanette and Simone had been some of the first to see the potential.

With even Percy gone to live out his husband's retirement, Yves wasn't sure what to think of the House of Onyx. It looked the same, but without the courtesans he'd grown used to, it felt like biting into the skin of a peach to find an apple inside.

“Lord de Rue!” Footsteps thumped on the stairs, and a courtesan appeared in a breathless rush.

They were dressed like one of the messengers that ran through the streets of Duciel, down to the simple linen trousers, sturdy shoes, and a cap over their short, curly black hair.

They also had a familiar cat perched on their shoulders, who was fitted with a harness and leash.

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, Olly,” Laurent said. “Don’t run with that cat on your shoulders.”

“He never falls,” Olly said. Yves stared at them in shock.

Without their haughty air and expensive clothes, they looked almost scruffy.

“The boys and I are going to the flower market. Do you...want...” Their voice trailed off as they caught sight of Charon and Yves.

Yves waved, and Olly gripped the edges of their hat. “I thought you were gone!”

“We’re back just for you,” Yves said. Charon nudged him with a foot in a silent warning to behave.

Olly stared at them in open-mouthed shock and outrage, then shoved their cap further over their hair and fled for the door.

“That’s new,” Yves said.

“Olly’s had a bit of a transformation lately,” Laurent said. “So have you, it seems.” He smiled at Charon and gestured to the table. “I bought your favorite tea when I

received your letter. I hope travel hasn't changed your palate too much."

"Only broadened," Charon said. Yves got up to serve the tea without thinking—they'd developed a system over their time on the road to make travel easier, and he'd gotten used to anticipating what Charon needed.

He'd just finished pouring when he looked up to find Laurent staring in much the same way as Olly.

"Yves obeyed an order without questioning it," Laurent said. "An unspoken order."

Yves lowered his voice. "No one will believe you."

Laurent actually laughed. "No, I doubt they would. Don't tell me you've managed to tame him, Charon?"

"I wouldn't call him tame," Charon said, stroking Yves' hair as Yves knelt at his side. "But he knows how to be good when he needs to be."

"Then I salute you," Laurent said, and raised his cup in a toast, "for doing what no other dom in Staria could."

"Excuse you," Yves said. "I'm a picture of demure submission."

Charon leaned in to toast Laurent with a meaningful look, and Yves rolled his eyes. Perhaps he'd never be demure, but Charon was right. He could be good when it counted, and that was what mattered.

They left Laurent with an amethyst brooch they'd received from a former pirate lord in exchange for a favor, and a leather flogger with thin metal chains woven through it for Sabre.

When they emerged from the House of Onyx at last, the sky was cloudless, and the golden tiles of the palace roof gleamed like a second sun.

“So,” Yves said, as Charon helped him onto the driver’s bench of the carriage, “what’s on the map this time? Because I have an idea.”

Charon raised his brows. Yves’ deviations from their travel plans always had a tendency of leading them in circles, but he had a good feeling about it this time.

“Why don’t we get some new clothes?” Yves asked. “Warm ones. Something with fur.”

“It’s almost summer,” Charon said, “and we’re heading for Katoikos next.”

“Yes, but...” Yves pressed close to Charon, and Charon wrapped an arm around him as he urged the horses forward. “What if we went the long way, visited the farm to drop off our things, and stopped at Lukos first?”

Charon glanced at Yves in surprise. “There won’t be any inns in Lukos.”

“I know that.”

“And you’ll have to leave your jewelry. They say it’s too cold to wear metal at night, even in summer.”

“But then we’ll be able to go to the exiles’ cave,” Yves said. “And you can see the mountains.”

Charon slowed the carriage to a stop and turned to look at Yves. “You can simply tell me that you love me, Yves. You don’t need to prove it.”

“I’ll tell you regardless,” Yves said, and wrapped his arms around Charon’s neck to

kiss him. For all that had changed over the years, it still felt like every kiss was the first, bright enough to chase away the shadows. “Let’s see what Lukos has for us.”

Charon kissed him back, and when he drew away at last, his eyes shone with warmth. “All right,” he said, and tucked an errant curl behind Yves’ ear. “Let’s find out together.”