



Kings Rising: Book Three of the Captive Prince Trilogy

By C. S. Pacat

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The worldwide phenomenon continues—from the boldly original author of *Captive Prince* and *Prince's Gambit*.

Damianos of Akielos has returned.

His identity now revealed, Damen must face his master Prince Laurent as Damianos of Akielos, the man Laurent has sworn to kill.

On the brink of a momentous battle, the future of both their countries hangs in the balance. In the south, Kastor's forces are massing. In the north, the Regent's armies are mobilising for war. Damen's only hope of reclaiming his throne is to fight together with Laurent against their usurpers.

Forced into an uneasy alliance the two princes journey deep into Akielos, where they face their most dangerous opposition yet. But even if the fragile trust they have built survives the revelation of Damen's identity—can it stand against the Regents final, deadly play for the throne?

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for C.S. Pacat and the Captive Prince novels

“You will be completely enthralled and on edge.”—*USA Today*

“Have you read *Captive Prince*? If you haven’t, what are you waiting for?”—*HeroesandHeartbreakers.com*

“The cumulative effect of reading them back to back is mind blowing.”—Dear Author

“Pacat’s powerful debut, a blend of intense erotica and political fantasy, is disturbing and intriguing in equal measure...The intricacy of the political entanglements gives depth to the novel’s erotic turmoil...Fans of Jacqueline Carey’s Kushiel series will eat this up with a spoon.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Fans of Pacat’s internet-serial sensation will need no convincing of the merits of this series, but new readers should take note—this book lives up to every word of praise it has garnered. The lush setting, full of intricate historical detail, engaging decadence and ruthless scheming, will draw many, but it’s Pacat’s characters...are the ones who’ll surely keep readers captive. Their tenuous, fractious relationship is the heart and soul of this trilogy, and thankfully, readers will not have long to wait between installments in order to watch it unfold.”—*RT Book Reviews*

About the Author

C. S. Pacat is the author of the Captive Prince trilogy, including *Captive Prince* and *Prince's Gambit*. Born in Australia and educated at the University of Melbourne, she has since lived in a number of different cities, including Tokyo and Perugia. She currently resides and works in Melbourne.

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KINGS RISING

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CHARACTERS

CHAPTER ONE

‘DAMIANOS.’

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

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

'Prince-killer.'

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

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

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

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

'Damianos?' said Huet.

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

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

There were wild shouts now, the thin perimeter breaking down as the crowd swelled with the panicked urge to run. To stampede and get out of the way of the Akielon army. Or to swarm over it. He saw Guymar scan the courtyard, the tense fear in his eyes clear. Soldiers could see what a peasant mob could not: that the Akielon force inside the walls—*inside* the walls—outnumbered the skeletal Veretian garrison fifteen to one.

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

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

Damianos, prince-killer.

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

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

Damen said to Nikandros, 'Take the fort.'

* * *

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

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

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

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

Instant obedience.

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

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

'It's true.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damen said, ‘I made him a promise.’

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

King.

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

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

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

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

‘Rise,’ said Damen. ‘Old friend.’

He wanted to say so much. He felt it welling up inside him, a hundred moments when he had forced back the doubt that he would ever see Akielos, the high cliffs, the opaline sea, and the faces, like this one, of those that he called friend.

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

happened to you?’

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

‘You were right about Kastor,’ Damen said.

It was all he said.

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

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

He said to Nikandros, ‘Tell me.’

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

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

Nikandros said, ‘There’s more.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damen said, 'The south belongs to Kastor.'

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

Nikandros said, 'The north is loyal.'

'And if I call on you to fight?'

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

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

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

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

Damen opened his hand.

The curl of mane, the arc of a tail—Nikandros had given him the golden lion pin worn by the King. Theomedes had passed it on to Damen on his seventeenth birthday to mark him as heir. Damen remembered his father fixing it to his shoulder. Nikandros must have risked execution to find it, to take it and to carry it with him.

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

'You are my King,' said Nikandros.

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

King.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His heart pounding, he tried to stop it, to salvage it. 'Yes,' he said. 'Kastor made me a slave. Laurent freed

me. He gave me command of his fort and his troops, an act of trust for an Akielon he had no reason to elevate. He doesn't know who I am.'

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

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

Makedon stood in the doorway, a growing horror on his face, and behind him Straton, and two of Nikandros's soldiers. Makedon was Nikandros's general, his most powerful bannerman, and he had come to pledge to Damianos as the bannermen had pledged to Damen's father. Damen stood, exposed, before them all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nikandros.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The horns sounded. The standards went up.

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

Not Guymar. But Jord and Huet. Lazar. Scanning their faces, Damen saw who they were. These were the

men of the Prince's Guard, with whom Damen had travelled for months. And there was only one reason why they had been released from confinement. Damen held up a hand, and Jord was allowed through, so that for a moment their horses circled each other.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

Trust me, was the last thing Laurent had said.

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

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

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

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

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

'We are moving to the west.'

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

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

'He'll be here,' said Damen.

From the north, the sound of horns.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He said, 'Fight.'

CHAPTER TWO

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

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

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

'Hello, Princess.'

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

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

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

He understood that he faced his death, before which would come a long, painful interval. A ludicrous boyish hope flared that someone would come to help him, and, carefully, he extinguished it. Since the age of thirteen, there had been no rescuer, for his brother was dead. He wondered if it was going to be possible to salvage some dignity in this situation, and cancelled that thought as soon as it came. This was not going to be dignified. He thought that if things got very bad, it was within his capabilities to precipitate the end. Govart would not be difficult to provoke into lethal violence. At all.

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

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

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

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

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

'How's your shoulder?' said Laurent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Govart smiled, slowly.

‘He said you’d say that.’

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

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

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

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

‘Yeah? What’s that?’

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

* * *

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

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

You had to take pleasure in small victories. The hilt of the knife protruded at an odd angle. It was in his right shoulder, already dislocated, so that breathing was now painful. Victories. He had come this far, he had caused his uncle some small consternation, had checked him, once or twice, forced him to remake his plans. Had not made it easy.

Layers of thick stone stood between him and the outside world. It was impossible to hear anything. It was

impossible to be heard. His only advantage was that he had managed to free his left hand from its bonds. He couldn't let that be discovered, it would gain him nothing. It would gain him a broken arm. It was growing harder to stick to a course of action.

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

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

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

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

'Does he know?' Laurent said.

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

'Know what?'

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

'Shut up,' said Govart.

'What is he talking about?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Let me out!' The words ricocheted off the walls.

'I tried that,' said Laurent, calmly.

Guion said, 'I'll give you anything you want.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘What do you want?’ said Guion.

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If he was aware of anything beyond the fight, it was of an absence, a lack that persisted. The flashes of brilliance, the insouciant sword work, the bright presence at his side was instead a gap, half filled by Nikandros’s steadier, more practical style. He had grown used to something that had been temporary, like the flash of exhilaration in a pair of blue eyes for a moment catching his own. All of that tangled together inside him, and tightened, through the killing, into a single hard knot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damen dismounted and tore the helm off.

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