



"I'm here," he speaks, rolling his eyes at his mistake. Rarely did he ever converse with the other kids. Not when he could have intelligent conversations with the instructors, all who possessed the ability to hear him, even if through magical means. He signs the words.

"Good. Do you want to play with us?" A glower pulled on the corners of his mouth, and he retreated closer to the tree trunk.

"No." The words would not be heard, but the action was enough for her to get the picture. He hears her whine from below and fights the lecherous thoughts that plague his mind. It made him feel powerful to know his existence could elicit such a sound from one so pure. His mind goes to her request, and he scowls. Those simpletons would play something childish like tag and dare to put their hands on him. When confronted by the instructors, they'll use their so-called game as an excuse.

He hears a huff and his brow furrows, leaning over only to be shocked at how much closer the girl was before. His heart stutters as he stares straight into her eyes and she into his. And then realization overcame him.

"Tahani! What are you doing?" He desperately reaches for her, pulling her the rest of the way and helping her beside him. "You could've fallen." He checks her over, terrified of finding any sort of scrape or blemish against her perfect skin.

"Stop it," she laughs, patting his hands repeatedly. Once he has calmed down enough for her, she signs, "I'm fine. You always worry so much."

"Only about you," he pouts at how she laughs at what he regarded as sentiment. But the unhappiness is swiftly relieved by the sound of her laughter. How sweet it sounds. Yes, her voice would truly be magical.

"Come," she states, nudging his shoulder with her own, "play with us."

"No." He shakes his head.

“Then play with me.” His eyes light up as he glances over at her, afraid to look and see that she had only been kidding.

“Yo-yo-you mean -” He switches to signing the question but his fingers shake just as much as his voice did.

She stops him, “if that’s what’s going to get you out of this tree. Then yes, just me and you.” He nods and with a victorious grin, Tahani taps his nose quickly darting to the other side of the tree.

“Then you’re it.” Realization hits him a while later and he quickly gets to his feet, darting after her. He chases her between trees and near the water, laughing at her antics and enjoying the feeling of being alive. These moments were rare for a young man like himself. Basilisk culture saw those of his age and younger trapped in the monotony of academies. It didn’t bother him as much as most, but doing nothing more than learning and educating oneself on the extensive knowledge of the culture was exhausting.

“Close your eyes and count,” Tahani suddenly exclaims, jumping up and down and making his ability to understand what she was saying difficult.

“Why?”

“Just do it,” she laughs, “I know these childish games don’t intrigue you but please.” There was no way he could say no to such a beautiful creature. He would not admit it aloud, but there was a desire to see her cry. To know that he was the cause for tears to roll down those full cheeks and have the ability to wipe them away. But perhaps those are dark thoughts that he should not entertain, he did not know. Instead, he nods. Willing to entertain her and what she wished.

He could hear her dart away, heading to the area west of where he currently was. She hadn’t explained the game, but he was sure that he would have to go find her once he was done counting. But when did he stop counting? Multiple footsteps catch his attention, bringing the moment of puzzlement to an end. He moves his hand, frowning at the group that approaches.

“Where’s Tahani?” the young man asks. Laurens’ fist tightens. He hated Saabiq for several reasons, the first to come to mind being his so-called claim to Tahani. He believed himself her protector and took advantage of the good-natured and pure-hearted young woman that she was. Of course, Tahani would never contradict him. She is far too kind. All the following reasons simply had to do with the young man’s popularity and ability. One may call it envy, but Laurens’ inability to see it as anything more than irritation made such a claim hard to disagree or agree upon.

“What’s it to you?”

The young man shakes his head, “you know I can not understand what you say.”

“Must be horrible to have such a horrid disability.” Rolling his eyes, Laurens signs his previous words.

“The instructors asked me to keep an eye on everyone. I only ask to make sure she is close.” His entourage frowned down upon Laurens and despite standing as tall as he could, Laurens could not help but feel small under their gazes.

“We’re playing a game. Leave us to it.”

“We will not interfere,” Saabiq states, performing a slight bow, “but I still must learn her whereabouts.” Laurens didn’t bother to answer him, instead choosing to walk off. He had believed Saabiq would follow. The boy was nothing if not dutiful. But when he doesn’t hear footsteps directly behind him, he nods and darts off towards the location he had heard Tahani flee.

Before, he hadn’t realized just how hot he was, far too busy playing and enjoying his time with the fetching young woman. But as soon as he enters the jungle shade, he releases a refreshed sigh. Wishing to do nothing more than lay down and relax for a minute. A giggle reminds him of his purpose and makes his job easier as he glances in the nearby bushes. He searches for her, and when finally uncovering her hiding spot, she screeches in shock. The screams of surprise soon turn to laughter as she pats him on the shoulder.



She stares at him before finally nodding her head, unable to stop the corners of her mouth from rising at the thought of the young man she has devoted so much of herself to.

Laurens nods, his insides settling, “tonight, at the lake meeting. I will forgive you.” A hint of bewilderment appears, but she quickly quells it as she nods, simply glad that she would not lose the Laurens’ friendship. Many described him as strange, but she has always believed such words were stated by those who never bothered to get to know him. He only showed care for her, and she did not wish to lose such a wonderful friendship.

The air between the two grows suffocating, and Tahani takes her leave, telling him that she will meet him there later tonight. Laurens watched her go, pleased.

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The night came swiftly, fireflies gliding through the air, watching the playful basilisks and choosing to provide additional lighting to their evening adventures. Most of the children were in the water, some in their animalistic form, as they splashed one another and competed in various activities. Rarely did they ever receive such a long break, and they had all learned to grasp onto moments such as these. In a few more months, they would choose their assignments and complete the necessary tests. Some will move on, and some will not. After that, well, one’s future was their own as they joined society.

Avoiding one last stray splash, Tahani swims to the banks, preparing to meet Laurens, who, she has noted, has not yet been seen.

“What are you doing?” Saabiq asks, approaching her, but she stops him.

“I will be right back. I must go and meet Laurens.”

His face conveyed neither disgust nor happiness, only curiosity, “for what?”

“I have disrespected him and wish to explain myself for forgiveness,” she glances into the distance in embarrassment, wondering if it would be wise to tell Saabiq what she had done.

He sighs, “would you like me to come?”

“No. No,” she reassures, “it will all be fine.” Leaning in, she kisses his forehead, lingering a moment longer. One last look at Saabiq, and she goes, feeling his eyes on her as she enters the forest.

“Laurens?” she questions, gazing around the dark underbrush, fear pricking her skin. She prepares to turn back when something cuts her, causing her to jump backward as the shadow nears. Her beating heart slows, and she gives the young boy a small smile. “I was terrified. I am glad to see you.” She shakes her head as a bout of dizziness moves in. “I was cut by ...” The sentence never finishes as she falls to the ground, aware of her surroundings but unable to move.

“You played with my heart, you silly little girl. And no one plays with my heart. I am the master here.” He growls, fist tightening as he punches a nearby tree. A tear rolls down her cheek, and Laurens shushes her, wiping it away.

“No. No, don’t be scared. Please don’t be scared. It’s going to be over before you know it. You won’t have to worry about anything, ever again.” He pulls the flint and steel from his pocket, placing them near her clothes and nurturing the growing flames. She squirms, her whimpers just barely making themselves audible to him. But his work continues, sparking a large enough flame that encases her entire leg and then moving to the next.

He closes his eyes, breathing in the smell of smoke and humming along to her whimpers. She had no right. He was freeing her. Yes, that’s what this was. Saabiq had her confused, and these flames would set her free. But his reasoning was a lie. A knowing voice deep inside knew this and questioned why he chose to continue to lie. It had nothing to do with Saabiq, and though his pride was shot, her rejection wasn’t the actual cause. No, he simply wished to see her withering beneath him. To stand over one with a soul like hers and say that she was completely powerless as he did what he wished. It enticed him, made him feel like he was on top of the world, and gazed down at all with an omnipotent grin. He wanted more. No, he craved it.

As the fire grows, Laurens realizes he is not finished despite his yearning. He reluctantly leaves the flames, wishing farewell to the muffled screams from Tahani's prone body. This could go a way he didn't want, but he felt confident it would go directly as he liked. He knew the players all too well, and they weren't nearly as unpredictable as they may wish themselves to be. It only took a few minutes of wandering, allowing himself to be seen among those by the lake, before he raced to the guards.

"Come! Someone is screaming, and I smelled smoke." The guards exchange looks before racing after Laurens, a crowd following that Laurens did not expect. Going back the way he had initially come, he comes across Tahani's body, a smirk resting on his face as Saabiq kneels there, sobbing. He glances up at them, fear and regret palpable in those eyes.

"Look what he has done," Laurens signs, turning to the guards and pointing at Saabiq, "he set her on fire!"

"You!" Saabiq barely signs the lone word before lunging towards Laurens, the guards being the only thing saving the smug basilisk from his wrath. "You did this. Why?!"

"I only came across the body recently," Laurens tells them, "you are the fire basilisk. Does anyone have a breath powerful enough to burn a corpse but you?"

"I will kill you." Saabiq's eyes filled with tears as all energy left his body. He did not need words to convey the feeling he felt deep inside, the grief that would now plague him forever. Laurens straightened, his heart skipping a beat as all eyes rested on him. Even the guards exchanged looks that held more doubt than conviction.

"Both of you will come," a guard tells them, allowing his partner to handle Saabiq as he moves to grab Laurens.

"I have nothing to do with this," Laurens shouts and those in attendance all frown at his choice of communication. They cared little for truth and justice, he realized. He would find himself ostracized and guilty simply due to what he was, or more of what he wasn't. To them, he wasn't one of them,



while Saabiq was. Saabiq was top of his class, a body overbrimming with potential. Laurens is nothing more than the child of nobles who did not want him to begin with. Nobles who claim him simply because of their status and they could do nothing less without being met with ridicule.

His head dips in understanding. He will never win in this world, among those who saw strength and placed that above all else. Tahani was free. He freed her but no one will speak about that. Shooing the growing crowd, the guards looked between the two.

“Do you wish us to contact your parents?”

Laurens' eyes sparkled at their question. Saabiq, like those of the lower levels, had parents, yes. But they held no power. They were both runts, lucky that their genes had once again brought back a Phaizarn blooded individual. Laurens on the other hand ... his father held power. Even more, he knew the Patriarchy. If Saabiq realizes this, he shows no hint of it. His body still shaking as he stares at the partially burned body of his love.

“Yes,” Laurens signs, ripping his arm from the guard's grip as he straightens his clothing with a smirk, “contact my father. He will make this right.” The guard nods, beckoning for him to follow and Laurens gladly follows. He had grown sick of the putrid smell of burning flesh in the air.